

Christopher Lange

It is 3:00 am when you are awoken and forced into a taxi. You are on your way to be raped by strangers at a local Holiday Inn. You came to this country four weeks earlier with the hope of starting a better life and gaining an education. Then, you realized your aunt has tricked you into prostitution. For the next three weeks, your body will be sold for money; you will be forced to perform sexual acts.

Then, one day, someone finally hears your cries, and reaches out a hand, and helps you.

Based in Los Angeles, Tom O'Brien, Assistant U.S. Chief Attorney, deals with these types of cases every week. In his briefing, O'Brien discussed in great detail how these traffickers get their victims to stay in this destructive lifestyle. When a delegate asked during the briefing what makes a pimp—the urban word for a trafficker—want to live their life this way, O'Brien concisely explained, "Money."

Money is what motivated Jonathan Williams and his wife Shanay Campell to kidnap 17-year-old Layla and 14-year-old Christine. Williams and Campell picked up Layla at a Carl's Junior on the California coast. Soon, she was forced into prostitution. The trio soon picked up Christine and it was not long that both the girls were put to work on the "track," the slang term for street. The girls were forced to give the money they made from sexual acts to their pimp. When O'Brien later asked these girls what they got out of the deal, they replied that their pimp would buy them hamburgers from McDonalds and sexy clothes for the streets. They also added these things were enough for them.

Why would anyone want to live the life of a trafficking victim? O'Brien explained that it is not a choice a person makes. Many of the victims who try to reach out for help fail to find anyone who is willing to assist them. Others start to crave the attention they get from their pimps. O'Brien first felt disbelief when he heard victims say it was the ultimate honor for their pimp to have sex with them. This comes from girls who have been beaten, raped, and sold for profit. Yet, these cases are not unique.

However, there is hope for victims. O'Brien's job includes tracking traffickers, prosecuting them, and helping relocate their victims. He smiles when he talks about past cases in which the traffickers received harsh sentences and the victims started over with a better life. He gives Karen Holland as an example of a trafficking victim who was forced to work on the streets for her pimp. After her pimp was caught and sent to jail, Karen regained control of her life and is now attending college. Unfortunately, the downside of O'Brien's job is that cases like Karen's do not happen often enough.

Trafficking is a major problem in America. Federal prosecutors like Tom O'Brien help to fix this problem, but they can only do so much. The temptation of lucrative profits is strong and compels traffickers to continue victimizing vulnerable people.

When we act out of our desire for peace instead of money, and are motivated by compassion rather than greed, we become closer to a world where trafficking does not exist.