

# From Victim to Advocate: Tackling Sex Trafficking

The moment **Susan Ingram '81** became a sexual assault victim, her purpose changed. “You have a different perspective getting involved in a cause when you experience it.”

**I**n January, Ingram received non-profit status for Walk Her Home, an organization that raises funds and provides support for victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, in the United States. But she earnestly said it wasn't her idea—the concept took some divine intervention.

Ingram served on a committee through her church in Chester County researching sex trafficking. Established in 2010, the committee intended to explore the basic question, “Is there sex trafficking in the US, and where?” They stumbled upon shocking information in their own backyard. This year, Chester County—one of the most affluent counties in the country—filed its first sex trafficking case. The crimes were being committed before, but a 2014 statute that redefined “trafficking” strengthened the ability of law enforcement to prosecute.

After two years of research, she became an advocate for the cause by raising money to designate more safe houses for sex trafficking victims as well as publicizing a

documentary that evolved from their study, titled *From Liberty to Captivity*.

In May 2015, her crusade became personal when she was assaulted during a routine visit to Massage Envy in West Chester. She quickly discovered she was one of several assault victims of this nationwide company and immediately felt a much stronger connection to her cause.

While driving to an event one day to publicize the documentary, Ingram experienced an unusual encounter. “God called me to do more,” she said of her nonprofit. “I asked, ‘What do you want me to call it?’ And I literally heard, ‘Walk Her Home.’”

“I cannot take credit for this.”

Growing up in a home where domestic abuse was prevalent, Ingram said she always has been a champion for women. She said the movement to curb sex trafficking has only gained traction in the last five years. Through her research, advocacy, and newly established charity, she pledged, “We’re going to do for sex trafficking what we did for domestic violence forty years ago.”

Ingram said people still appear uncomfortable when she talks publicly about sex trafficking. Even while speaking at her church, she said her words hit the congregation “like a dentist was drilling their teeth.”

During her talks, two major myths often need to be debunked. First, she said people think sex trafficking is ripped from the script of the movie *Taken*—women are kidnapped and taken away. Second, those unfamiliar with sex trafficking in the United States tend to believe the victims are foreign nationals brought to the states in trucking containers.

“The vast majority of trafficking victims are born in the US,” she said. “It’s astonishing to me, the boldness of these traffickers.”

There’s a misperception that many women choose lives of prostitution, Ingram said. However, a change in legal definition of a “trafficked person” states that force, fraud, or coercion all are considered incentives to selling a person for sex.

According to Ingram, the average age range of girls brought into sex trafficking is eleven to fourteen. “First, we have to teach people how to protect their kids,” she said.

The Internet, social media, and downloaded apps are all easy ways for the “perfect guy” to target and manipulate girls. She said traffickers gain their trust through love, alcohol, or drugs, then threaten these girls if they refuse to be sold for sex.

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Susan Ingram '81, founder of Walk Her Home, speaks with participants of the organization's first 5K fundraiser in October.

**“I had no intention to start this nonprofit until it was literally put on my heart. Anyone who is touched by the despair of a girl dealing with trafficking, try to walk away.”**



Photos courtesy of Steph Oberti

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Ingram's overall goal is to raise money for more safe houses for sex trafficking victims. As of now, there are only about 2,000 beds for 300,000 to 400,000 victims. This October, she held her first fundraiser—a 5K walk, kids' fun run, and fall festival in West Chester. Funds supported residential programs that restore sex trafficking survivors.

With the desire to involve the entire community, she created a family-friendly event that included an expert panel discussion for adolescents and parents as well as fun activities for younger children. Speakers included representatives from Homeland Security, the FBI, the Chester County District Attorney, Villanova Law Institute, and the documentary *From Liberty to Captivity*. Also attending were community advocates, social service agencies, law enforcement, health-care programs, and others.

“We are the boots on the ground,” she said. “I think most people think that women choose prostitution. There's not a sense of compassion. Most likely, these are trafficking victims who turned eighteen and have no where to go.”

The event in October was one step toward changing that perception, increasing advocacy, and raising more funding. About 300 people attended, raising \$50,000 toward their \$100,000 goal.

“It was a success beyond our wildest imagination, and is a launch pad for future plans,” she said.

At the end of the day, Ingram knows she faces an uphill battle, but she also sees the progress that has been made in a few short years. “People would rather give to the arts because it makes them feel good,” she said. “But we are bringing this into the light.”

To learn more, or to make a donation and help Walk Her Home reach its \$100,000 goal, visit [walkherhome.org](http://walkherhome.org).

Bringing human trafficking to light, Susan Ingram '81 stands with participants of Walk Her Home's first event.

