

# HEAVY TRAFFIC





Special Agent Brandon Walter and Rebekah Begay are experts in the underworld of human sex trafficking. They understand its inner workings, from advertising on the internet to body language at truck stops.

## *In the Internet age, teens being forced into prostitution is a problem hiding in plain sight*

BY RUSSELL ROWLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN WARNER

**R**EBEKAH BEGAY AND BRANDON WALTER SHARE a passion, and they also share an interesting personality trait. Begay and Walter like to tell their story beginning to end and the stories they have to tell are fascinating. Appalling, but fascinating.

Begay and Walter work together as part of the Montana Human Trafficking Task Force, a joint project by state and federal law enforcement officials that tries to help young girls caught up in the world of human trafficking. And they come to their passion from very different places—Begay as a survivor of that world, and Walter as an FBI agent. But in the age of the internet and disposable cell phones, the people they are trying to catch have become slippery targets—not to mention perpetrators who are often allowed to go free by law enforcement and prosecutors that are not educated enough to recognize the signs of trafficking.

Brandon Walter looks about how you'd expect an FBI agent to look. Well-groomed, with swept-back dark hair, and the build of someone who probably works out. The kind of man who could walk into any establishment without drawing attention. But he has more warmth than one might expect. An easy smile and a direct gaze.

"I no longer use the word prostitute for these girls," Walter explains. "Because it implies a level of willingness, and for these kids, there is always some form of coercion. They are victims. They either fear for their lives, or they've been brainwashed into thinking that these pimps are the only people they can trust. Most of them haven't been treated well for most of their lives, so they have good reason to believe that these guys are the best thing that's ever happened to them. That's the saddest part."

"You used to drive along Montana Avenue [in Billings] and see a whole line of prostitutes," Walter explains. "Since you don't see that anymore, people think the problem has gone away, but of course, the internet has changed everything. And this is what we really need to educate the public about."



Rebekah Begay revisits the rundown but still operational apartment building in Billings she sold drugs out of at age 13, and which was part of a turbulent adolescent life that led to her being a victim of human trafficking by 14.

**A**FTER HEARING REBEKAH BEGAY'S STORY, it seems miraculous that the only visible indication of her past is a small white scar on her upper lip. She's tiny, fit, and blond, probably just the type that the men who target these girls look for. But she's also surprisingly frank and confident, probably because it's been 16 years since her own personal hell.

Begay's story is a perfect fit for the typical profile of a victim of human trafficking. "I was first molested at the age of 6, by my father, who was also molested when he was a kid. I don't know who molested him ... maybe an uncle. Anyway, he used to come in my room and rub me all over my body. It started once when I had hurt myself, so it seemed natural then, but it progressed from there. My parents divorced right about that time (not because of that ... my mom didn't know)." Then her

dad moved in with a prostitute, "So I was exposed to a lifestyle I didn't understand. I kept the abuse to myself, because that's what abuse victims do."

Begay relates these facts with a surprising degree of detachment, but she is now 32, so it was a long time ago. Still, it's hard to imagine being betrayed by so many people. This is probably why she needs to tell the story all the way through, at a breakneck pace. Because underneath it all, there's a strong feeling that she might just crack open and bleed all over.

"When I was in seventh grade, I became friends with a kid named Jay, the first boy who showed an interest in me. He was a member of the Crips, and when I became his girl, the initiation was a gang rape. But because I had already been conditioned to be abused, I still ran off to California with this guy, where we started dealing drugs." But, when Jay got murdered

by a rival gang, “The cops found me and brought me back to Billings.”

All of this before the ripe old age of 14.

**W**ALTER EXPLAINS, “It’s very hard for some people to understand why these girls would stay in this situation when they often have opportunities to escape. But these pimps are very good at picking these girls out in a crowd. They search for kids looking at the ground, the ones that show signs of being vulnerable. They sometimes send in another young girl to befriend them. But it’s mostly the pimps themselves. They approach the girl, tell her how pretty she is. According to the statistics, a child is likely to be snatched up within the first 48 hours of running away. That’s when they’re most vulnerable. So these guys use a combination of gifts, flattery and violence to gain control of these girls, and because they’re so vulnerable, it usually doesn’t take long for them to become completely pliant.”

Penny Ronning, the founder of the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force (which is separate from Walter’s FBI task force) explains further. “The first hour with a girl who is underage can bring \$900, and the pimps often give that first hour’s wage to the girl so she builds up some hope that there will be more where that came from.”

By the time Begay lost the boy she thought she loved, she had become addicted to drugs, and fell into a pattern of running away, dealing drugs to get by. When her mother couldn’t take it anymore, Begay’s sister offered her a place, living with her just outside Atlanta.

“On the plane ride to Atlanta, my sister told me that she was pregnant, but not by her husband, and I was so surprised that I didn’t tell her I was pregnant too. When I got there, I found out that her husband was also dealing drugs. He came on to me all the time, but I kept putting him off. Things finally blew up when he found out my sister’s baby wasn’t his, and she told him it was my idea to keep it from him. So he beat the shit out of me. I was so mad that I ended up punching myself over and over in the stomach until I lost the baby.”

Begay found a job at Applebee’s, about the same time she met a suave and smooth-talking guy on a dating website. He called himself Bo. “He’d come and visit me at work, and eventually he asked me out, and he treated me like nobody ever had. He took me to nice restaurants, taught me how to act in places like that. Took me to fancy parties, sometimes on yachts. He came from a well-to-do family and was studying at Georgia Tech, so as crazy as it sounds now, I didn’t think anything was suspicious. I totally fell for this guy ... saw no warning signs at all.

“One night he called and said he really needed to see



**During a visit to a Billings skate park, Rebekah Begay and Brandon Walter discuss how easily a girl can be manipulated into trafficking.**

me, so I asked my friend David to drive me down to Atlanta. David told me he had a bad feeling about the whole thing, but I insisted. “Bo gave me a single rose. He’d never given me roses so I was really touched. He said he needed to make a stop. The house where we stopped wasn’t as nice as the places we usually went, so that made me a little nervous. And I noticed there were a lot of very young girls, a lot of people I’d never seen before. One of the girls offered me some ecstasy, and I was like, ‘No, I’m good.’ The girl looked at me and said, ‘You’re going to need something to get through this.’ That scared me a little.”

But soon Bo took her to a room and told her, “Baby, you know all those nice things I’ve done for you all these months? You know I love you, and you love me, right? So you have to do something for me tonight. I’ve got some guys out there who paid good money and you’re going to go out there and make them happy.”

“I was shocked. And I was like, ‘No way!’ but he told me he

would kill my sister's kids if I didn't do what he said, so I didn't think I had a choice. I took on seven guys that night."

Since Walter took over the Montana Human Trafficking Task Force about three years ago, it has met with "about 40 or 50" young girls to try and help them escape, but the number of possible cases they could file in Billings alone runs to one almost every day. Walter is only one of three agents assigned to human trafficking in the state, so they must narrow their focus. They utilize the same methods they've used for decades, setting up a meeting with an undercover agent posing as a john. What's changed is the avenue for contact.

And one particular website has become the main source for men looking for companionship, especially underage companions. The documentary film *I Am Jane Doe* is a compelling account of how Backpage.com has become the main source for trafficking in America. Created to compete with Craigslist in classified advertising, the site branched out into dating services that use carefully coded ads using emojis or hints, like "fresh or "off the boat," for young children.

Backpage.com developed such a strong following that it became a multimillion-dollar enterprise (\$134 million in 2016), though most of its offerings are legitimate. Several lawsuits have sought to prevent Backpage.com from listing ads featuring underage children, but an obscure clause (Section 230) in the Communications Decency Act, which protects information posted by third parties, has given almost every court reason to dismiss the charges.

"We find most of the girls we meet with through Backpage.com," Walter says.

**P**ENNY RONNING AND STEPHANIE BAUCUS FOUNDED the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force with a meeting in September of 2016, and 100 people attended. They then organized a conference in May 2017, and more than 450 people attended. Begay and Walter were among the speakers, as were the Billings police chief, the Yellowstone County sheriff, Montana Attorney General Tim Fox, and Senator Jon Tester.

Before this conference, the relevant groups were aware of



**Penny Ronning, right, and Stephanie Baucus founded the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force in September 2016. They organized a conference six months later that drew 450 people, bringing together relevant professionals to coordinate efforts to tackle trafficking.**

the trafficking problem, but working independently left a lot of holes in the process. Ronning and Baucus (whose husband Zeno, son of former Senator Max Baucus, works as a federal prosecutor) wanted to create a more coordinated effort.

"When we first met, the Billings Police Department was hesitant to even admit how widespread trafficking has become, so we've come a long way in just a year," Ronning says.

One challenge is there is nowhere to put these girls, even if Walter and Begay can convince them to accept help. There are several programs that offer housing for homeless youth, but there are restrictions on how long they can stay. There is one safe house in western Montana for victims of human trafficking but none in eastern Montana, though organizations are starting to step forward to offer help. So it's hard to offer anything substantial. Because of that, of the 50 girls they've reached out to, they've only been able to meet with about 30 percent. And only a handful have responded to the offer of help.

"These girls don't trust anyone," Walter says. "They know their lives are in danger, but more importantly, the pimps have convinced them that the cops are the enemy, that they will end up in prison. So part of our job is to convince them that we are not the enemy. That they are not criminals."

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So who are they targeting, if not the girls? “We have to make choices about how to best utilize our resources,” Walter says. “We’ve chosen to target the pimps. The Mann Act has always been another option, where we can charge them with transporting women across state lines for sex, but we try to aim for a tougher sentence. But with the internet, these guys are hard to track down.

“We have managed to get a few convictions, but the results so far have been disappointing,” Walter admits. But he’s hopeful that the awareness being raised by the Yellowstone County Task Force will help increase these numbers. “We are already seeing more cooperation from both law enforcement and the prosecutors.”

“AFTER BO SOLD ME TO THOSE GUYS, it became a routine for about the next four months,” Begay says.

“I ended up living with him and some of the other girls. He set me up with a cop one night, and this guy was the worst ever ... he bought me for several hours, and he burned me with cigarettes, raped me with his gun. I was earning as much as \$1,200 a day, all of which went to Bo. I stole from him once and he locked me in a closet for three days.

“Finally, Bo sold me to some Russians. I was supposed to stay with these guys for a week, and I’ve never been so scared. I remember sitting in a bathroom, knowing that if I didn’t escape there was a good chance I wouldn’t survive. I could tell one of these guys was new ... he was nervous, looking around a lot. So I asked him if he wanted to go outside for a cigarette. And while we were sitting on the deck, something distracted him, and I just took off running. It was pure luck from there. I ran across a highway, and

the cars just happened to come along and block the way long enough for me to run to a Chinese restaurant, where I crawled into a dumpster and covered myself with garbage bags. They even looked in the dumpster. I was incredibly lucky.”

Begay called her friend David, the one who warned her not to go with Bo, and he took her in for the next two weeks. “I couldn’t even talk. I didn’t want anyone near me. I didn’t want to look at anyone. I was a mess.”

Begay was still only 16 years old when she escaped from these men. She came back to Billings but was still drawn to life on the streets, and she ended up getting arrested for drugs, which earned her a three-year sentence to Job Corps in Ogden, Utah. It was there that she met a quiet young man who was so shy that she couldn’t help teasing him about hiding in the corner. They ended up getting married and having three children.

“It has not been easy. I had to get high to have sex for many

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**Calley and Trent Hicke enjoy some family banter with daughter Chy, right, at their Billings home. The Hickees endured a weeklong nightmare trying to find Chy after she ran away from home with another girl believed to have been involved in trafficking and who saw Chy (and her car) as a chance to return to the lifestyle in Las Vegas.**

years after all this—using either coke or pot. We separated several times, but each time I’d find out I was pregnant again.”

The couple is currently in the process of divorcing.

Begay’s story took a dramatic turn when she started attending church and found two mentors who listened to her story and offered the kind of guidance and support she’d never gotten from her family. “Today, because of women like them, I have made it my life’s work to reach out to other girls and try and offer the same kind of support they’ve given me.”

Montana, like most places, has a mixed history with sex for money. People here tended to have a wink-and-a-nod attitude toward prostitution. Bordellos were easy to find.

But the idea that women have chosen this lifestyle often led the more high-minded members of their communities to believe that whatever price they pay for their choice is justified. Walter doesn’t see it that way.

“Young girls don’t dream of becoming prostitutes,” Walter says. “There are almost always circumstances that lead them to this place. That’s the main thing many people don’t understand.”

In *I Am Jane Doe*, it’s also striking how many of the survivors continue to blame themselves for years after they escape.

Many people would look at a story like Rebekah Begay’s and say that she made a lot of bad choices that led to where she ended up, and she would be the first to acknowledge that. But of the thousands who end up in the world of trafficking (estimates are hard to come by, but they range from 150,000 to 300,000 in the United States) many are like M.A., one of the girls featured in *I Am Jane Doe*, who went to a party with some friends when she was 13 and ended up being approached by some men in a car. One of her friends went with them, but she refused to get in the car. A woman nearby, seemingly a good Samaritan, offered to give her a ride home. It turned out she was part of the same group. So in the course of an afternoon, M.A. went from a teenage girl worried about acne and parents who don’t understand to being sold repeatedly to strangers.

**A**

NOTHER LOCAL FAMILY KNOWS FROM PERSONAL experience how quickly things can change.

“One of the messages we want to get across is that this can happen to anyone,” Calley Hicke explains.

Calley's husband Trent adds, "One of the interesting things I've heard is that some of these kids are running away from something, and some of them are running toward something."

Calley agrees. "Our daughter Chy (pronounced shy) was not the type that anyone would expect to run away. She was an all-American kid, going to a Christian school. There was a young girl there who had been involved in trafficking before, so her parents had put her in this school to help her get back on track. But she had been presented with an opportunity to get back into the life, and she saw Chy as someone who could help her get there. Chy had a car and a little money, and when this girl presented her with the adventure of running off to Las Vegas, she made a snap decision."

For the next six days, Trent and Calley spent every waking hour trying to find their daughter, reporting her missing to the authorities, getting a missing persons report out on the news, and putting up flyers. Their work paid off when a security guard in a hotel in Vegas recognized Chy from the photo and contacted police, who snatched her up.

The Hickeses immediately flew to Vegas and retrieved Chy and brought her home. (She's an overseas missionary now.)

Both of the Hickeses work in the health care field, and they

were shocked to learn that at least 80 percent of the rescued kids have seen some kind of health care provider during their captivity. "So health care professionals are not being educated about the warning signs," Calley says. "That's one area where we really think we can help."

The Hickeses have become involved in the Yellowstone County Area Human Trafficking Task Force, and like everyone else involved, their goal is educating the public. Ronning and Baucus are working closely with the Montana Office of Public Instruction to create a curriculum that will teach how to recognize and prevent trafficking. They are also working with a federal prosecutor in Missoula to create a statewide information system and training for the leaders of the various task forces throughout the state.

Ultimately, the goal is to establish a system that is coordinated and focused on providing the help these kids need as well as the knowledge that there is help available.

Because one of the saddest parts about the whole situation is how often these kids become forgotten, how distant any kind of help can seem.

Or, as Rebekah Begay said, "One of the most painful things after I escaped was finding out that not one person in my family was looking for me." ❏

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