

## Shared Hope:

# Repairing the damage of nation's sex trafficking

Saturday, September  
19, 2009

**By Cheryll A.  
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For more than a decade, Linda Smith's Shared Hope International organization has rescued thousands of women and children around the world from the sordid world of prostitution. But the discovery of the extent of the sexual



Linda Smith, former Republican congresswoman and founder of Shared hope International, will be the guest speaker for the "One Person Can Make A Difference" dinner and celebration on Oct. 24, sponsored by Lower Columbia CAP. Roger Werth / The Daily News

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exploitation of teen and preteen girls in the United States almost made her walk away.

"I was shocked and then thought, 'Oh my gosh, I can't do this. They look too much like my granddaughters,'" Smith said Tuesday. "It's too hard, but yet, it's helped me see how others might see it. I was having a hard time believing it, and I was seeing it."

In 2006, Shared Hope International received a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to research the sex trafficking of American children. Investigation was made in 10 targeted locations — Dallas; San Antonio, Texas; Fort Worth, Texas; Salt Lake City; Buffalo, N.Y.; New Orleans, Independence, Mo.; Las Vegas, Clearwater, Fla.; and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory.

A private grant allowed further investigation in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. Smith presented the results, "The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking:

America's Prostituted Children," to Congress in July. She also wrote a book, "Renting Lacy," which was published last month.

Shared Hope's investigation revealed there are at least 100,000 American children being sexually exploited by pimps and traffickers and the "johns" who pay for them. The average "recruitment" age for the girls is 12 to 13 years of age.

"By the time we got done, between undercover footage and interviews, we pretty well had the nation," Smith said. "What we found is I can go to craigslist or a strip club or an adult shop anywhere and find a minor for sex. There's no town, I don't care where; if there's buyers, there's sellers. Pornography is driving the sex train for younger and younger girls."

Shared Hope's national report found that too often, the trafficked children were treated more like criminals than victims.

Pimps and traffickers, while grooming their girls for sexual acts, teach them to lie about their identity, their age and information about who they work for if the police pick them up for prostitution, Smith said.

"These girls have so little trust because nearly every adult in their lives has been untrustworthy, and her pimp tells her that if she gets picked up by law enforcement then she will go to jail. And that is often what happens" Smith says in the report. "So, as far as this child sees it, the only adult who has told her the truth is the pimp."

But those arrests and rap sheets also are making it easier for organizations like Shared Hope to identify the children to possibly get them away from their traffickers, Smith said.

"That's how we figure out where they are," she said. "In Las Vegas, we were able to pull up records and find out where the kids came from. There were three from Vancouver and at least one from Longview they had brought down there. And most likely these girls had been moved all around the country at one time or another."

Smith said traffickers look for girls they identify as being vulnerable, either luring them with flattery, buying them presents or outright kidnapping them. About half are in the foster care system and have fallen through the cracks, Smith said.

"If no one is looking for them, they're going to stay in the system," she said. "One girl finally was able to get to a phone, then she realized she had no one to call."

While federal law says a minor can't be charged with prostitution, state laws aren't quite so clear, Smith said.

“We didn’t know it was here until about five or six years ago. Now that I’ve done the research, we’re taking a look at key states, looking at everything we can to make it work,” she said. “Once communities know, they’ll take action. They’re taking it serious and looking at the law. We found the most common thing was we go ahead when we realize what is in front of us.”

### **Smith to speak at CAP dinner**

Linda Smith, former Republican congresswoman and founder of Shared hope International, will be the guest speaker for the “One Person Can Make A Difference” dinner and celebration, sponsored by Lower Columbia CAP. Smith will speak about her new book, “Renting Lacy” and the national report she presented to Congress on sexual exploitation of children in the United States.

The event will be held at 6 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24, at the Red Lion Hotel in Kelso. Cost is \$50 per person, which includes dinner. Tickets are available online at [www.LowerColumbiaCAP.org](http://www.LowerColumbiaCAP.org) or at the CAP office, 1526 Commerce Ave., Longview. All proceeds go to the CAP Foundation.

### **Learn more**

To learn more about Shared Hope International’s work as well as the report on the sex trafficking of children in the United States, go to [www.sharedhope.org](http://www.sharedhope.org)