

The day her daughter disappeared, she began to learn the incredible truth that every mother in America needs to confront...

# “I Just Didn’t Know”

by Linda Smith

**S**he didn’t know anything about sex trafficking. So she didn’t know how to protect her child.

She was just a mom named Robyn, living in a normal, happy family in rural Washington State.

Their faces were fixed on the future. Her youngest daughter, Brianna, was just six months away from high school graduation. Robyn always allowed her to “fly.” And she did. Brianna was excellent in academics, already taking second-year college courses in her senior year in high school. She was great in sports, too — a gymnast from the age of 6, and nationally competitive — and active in clubs. Brianna was independent and strong; she succeeded at whatever she put her mind to.



*Brianna with her Mom and Dad*

She was “planning the next big steps in her life” Robyn remembers, preparing to apply to nursing school. Which made Robyn happy: she’s an R.N., and Brianna’s great grandmother was a nurse as well.

**She turned 18**, but Robyn knew her daughter. Like many 18-year-olds, “she still had some growing up to do,” Robyn says. For all the freedom they had given her to excel and achieve, Brianna had never been out on her own.

When she called to say she was going to stay overnight at a girlfriend’s house, Robyn didn’t think twice. But the Brianna didn’t come home. When Robyn tried to phone, there was no answer.

**With mounting panic**, between repeated attempts to phone and text, Robyn quizzed Brianna’s sisters and brother. They had no insights. Brianna had never done anything like this.

“All Dad and I want is for you to come home,” Robyn texted in desperation. But there was only silence in return.

When someone finally picked up the phone, Robyn had a moment of relief — but then she heard a man’s voice. “Sounds like her parents,” he said to someone else. He chuckled. “If they only knew where she was!” He laughed again.

Robyn's blood ran cold. For the first time, there was no doubt: Her daughter was in serious trouble.

She made frantic calculations. Brianna had just turned 18; she had a legal right to leave, to do anything she wanted. She had one of the family's cars; she could go wherever she wanted. And she had accumulated her own savings account; she had money to burn.

### **But why? WHY?**

What Robyn couldn't know was that for months, sex-traffickers had been posing as ordinary customers in the restaurant where Brianna worked. They had wormed their way into her confidence, convinced her that it was time to do something daring. The "daring move"? Taking off on her own for a Christmas vacation in Phoenix. They were even going to buy her plane tickets.

But by the grace of God, someone made a small but fateful decision: to return the family car. Maybe the traffickers, deciding that a car reported stolen would put them at too much risk of the law. Brianna contacted a buddy named Evan and told him she was going to bring the car to him; then it would be off to Phoenix! Evan, she said, should return the car to her family.

And Evan – knowing of Brianna's mysterious disappearance, and smelling trouble – called his dad, who called the police. Just a few months before his dad had taught him the signs of trafficking learned at a Rotary meeting.

From that moment, things seemed to happen quickly and slowly at the same time. Robyn got the word and rushed to Evan's place. the police had already placed a call to "someone named Linda" who knew something about this type of situation.

I was that Linda.

**I arrived in the dark and the rain**, and found Brianna distraught and impatient. I tried to explain what might actually have happened. She might be involved with traffickers, who often engage in sophisticated deception strategies, trapping even the smartest of pretty girls.

**For months, sex-traffickers had been posing as ordinary customers in the restaurant where Brianna worked.**

I knew she could bolt, and Robyn might never see her again. So I reached out to her as gently as possible, and invited her to go with me to a restaurant nearby, just to talk. Maybe she'd like to learn more about how traffickers work? We left together (as I silently thanked God for giving me favor with the girl), leaving Robyn to wait – for several hours, as it turned out – to see what Brianna would do next.

It was the middle of the night when I finally brought her back to her mother – in the parking lot of a local store, where I felt they would be safe for the moment. Brianna wanted to go home. Robyn wilted with relief.

I explained to them that the traffickers had Brianna's ID, so they knew where she lived – which meant they might come after her. At the very least, they needed to store her car someplace else, so visitors wouldn't know she was home. Robyn arranged to park the car in the garage t the hospital where she worked.

Later that same night, a car crawled onto the family's property, headlights off, not seeing her car they turned around and left. Law enforcement officers speculated that Brianna had become too high a risk, so the traffickers were moving on to other targets. Robyn likes to think it's because she has family and friends who will fight for her! In any case, phone records revealed that the traffickers had several other girls in the

**“ Sounds like her parents. He chuckled. If they only knew where she was! ”**



Brianna with Linda

deception process.

We learned later that Brianna had already been shown like property to prospective buyers, and her airline tickets had already been purchased; she was being moved to Phoenix for New Year's Eve parties there. There, finally, she would learn the real reason she was in Phoenix.

**"There is much we still don't know** about those who preyed on our child and nearly stole her future," Robyn says today. "What we do know, though, is that *we were not prepared to protect her*. We had not told her about trafficking, and how the traffickers work, because we didn't know ourselves. If this could happen to us, it could happen to any family."

Brianna came home traumatized. "I still have moments when I see that frightened child," Robyn says. "After we got her back, she would often enter a room angry and accusing. We learned later that the trauma caused by trafficking, including the feeling of never being safe, needs a specific kind of counseling."

**The evidence of trauma was clear.** She could not seem to get over the fact that she had been chosen – and stalked by those traffickers coming into the restaurant over several months," Robyn says. For a long time, Brianna was

frightened of going out in public. Having been duped by supposedly friendly customers in a local restaurant, she is still fearful of many seemingly innocuous public situations.

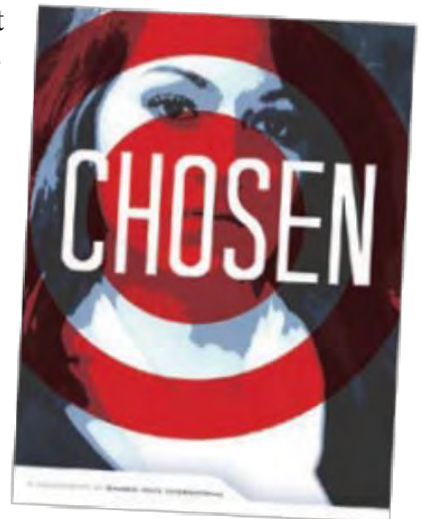
We've had the privilege of working with Brianna, helping her along the path of restoration. "Without you, Shared Hope," Robyn says today, "she wouldn't have healed." As she grew stronger, Brianna came to the realization that she could use what happened to her to make a difference for others – even save lives.

"She was determined to tell her story," Robyn says, "so it didn't happen to someone else. We supported her decision to be a voice because we were at such a loss on how to deal with the fact that someone can come into your child's life with such an evil agenda, calculated and practiced. Brianna wanted to fight back. She was not just afraid for herself, but with all she learned from Shared Hope, when she realized what could have happened to her, she was afraid for every young girl in the world."

The result was ***Chosen***, a powerful Shared Hope video teaching tool that tells Brianna's story, among other, and gives children, parents, educators, law enforcers, and other the information and resourced to protect themselves from sex-traffickers. Many thousands – in schools, churches, and other community settings – have seen the video. And it continues to make a powerful impact.

Brianna now looks back on her experience through eyes of awareness. Her "friends" had girls' clothing available in many different sizes; it was obvious to her, after her escape, that these clothes had belonged to various girls who had been taken before her. "She was so sad and afraid for them," Robyn says. It made her worry about whether they found their way home, or they were living in the hell that had been waiting for her."

Robyn can only imagine the agony it would have been for her and Brianna's father as well. "It would have destroyed us. We would have spent every waking moment and every single dime we could scrape together to search for her. It would have consumed us. It makes me so sad for those families who still have no idea



what happened to their child, and have no resources to find them. All we can do is speak out, and educate, to save the children yet to be targeted, and stop the evil from succeeding.”

Not long ago, Brianna’s family attended the “pinning” ceremony commemorating her graduation from nursing school; she’s a registered nurse now!

**I thank God.** The story could have turned out very differently. Brianna’s parents were not prepared, and nearly lost their youngest child. Countless other parents are still not prepared. They have no idea of the threat. Or they simply believe “it can’t happen here...not to this smart child of mine.” But Brianna’s story proves otherwise. And ***Chosen*** is a crucial corrective.

Brianna is eager to move into forensic nursing, helping victims of rape and sex trafficking. She is a living example of hope restored.



*Registered Nurse Brianna*



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and on Facebook and Twitter**

**If you suspect a human trafficking case, call the National  
Center for Missing and Exploited Children Hotline at  
1-800-The-Lost (1-800-843-5678.)  
It's secure and anonymous and accessible  
24 hours a day, 7 days per week.**