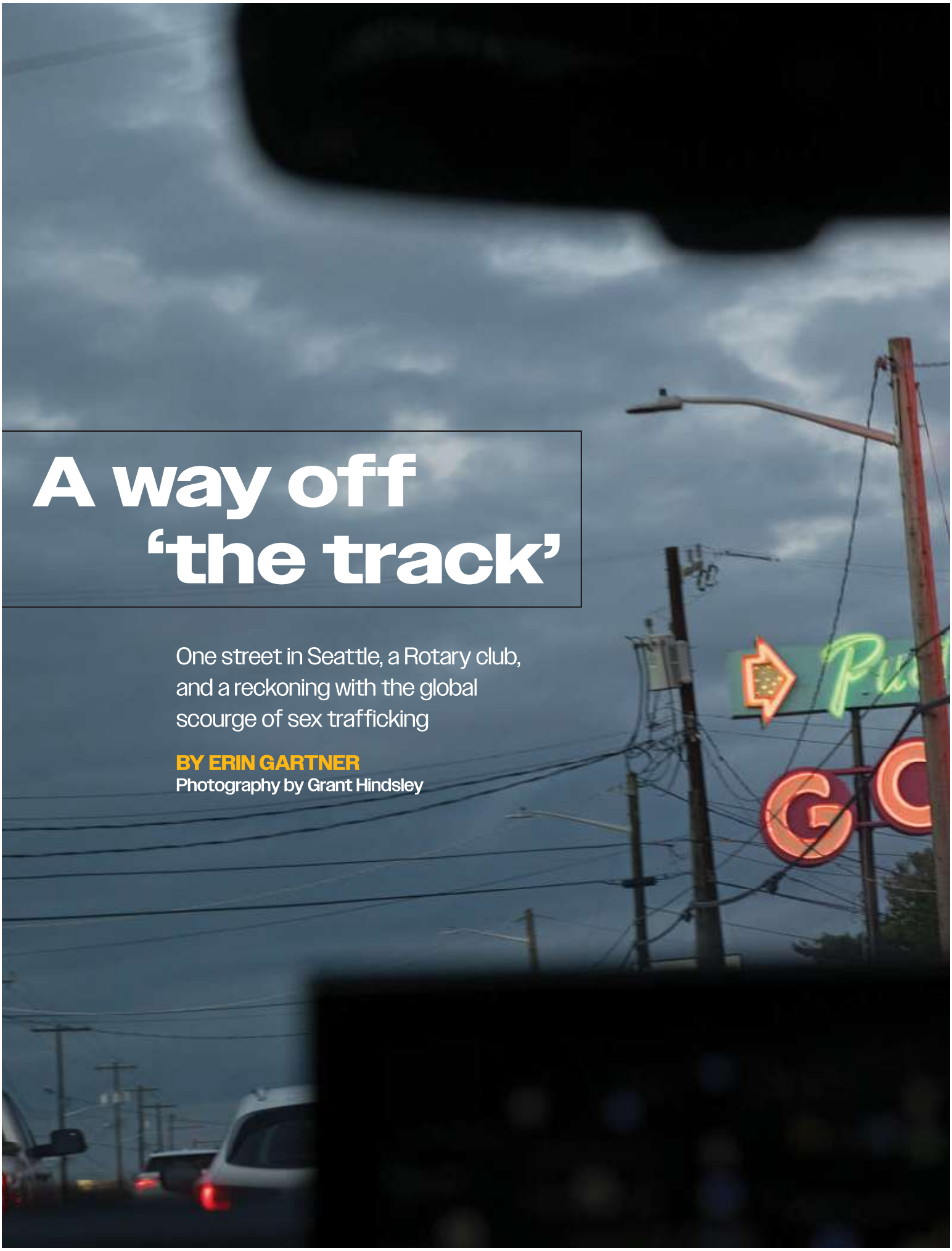


A way off ‘the track’

One street in Seattle, a Rotary club, and a reckoning with the global scourge of sex trafficking

BY ERIN GARTNER
Photography by Grant Hindsley


Nites
Inn
MOTEL
NO VACANCY
FREE WI FI HBO
LOW DAILY
REMODELED
LOW
RATE
BUSES
ONLY

Dozens of gunshots pierce the quiet, jarring me awake at 3:30 a.m.

It's a warm night in early July, must just be fireworks, I say to myself before falling back to sleep. Later, I learn about the 30-plus cartridge casings that police found at the intersection three blocks from my home in north Seattle. A neighbor's security camera captured what I had missed while sleeping: the explosion of gunfire, muzzle flashes, wisps of debris blasted off a wall, a group of hooded shooters emerging from a dark alley firing handguns without pause: tat, tat. Tat, tat, tat.

Seconds earlier, a man had approached a woman dressed in a top, panties, and stilettos. Another man confronted him, pulled a gun, and the firefight ensued, with the targeted man leaping almost comically as if to avoid being hit. Police said at least one woman was shot and injured during the melee, one of several shootings last summer at the corner of Aurora and 101st.

Police attribute much of the violence to sex traffickers jockeying for turf. Girls, some not even teenagers, have been forced into the commercial sex trade here. The roadway has for decades been associated with the city's seedier elements, like drugs and prostitution, but sex trafficking has flourished and become far more conspicuous in recent years. The city accused two of the motels along the strip of facilitating prostitution and forced them to close over the summer of 2023. Not long after, the activity moved south along Aurora Avenue North. It landed in the surrounding neighborhoods, including mine. All out in the open. The streets and the parked cars — the neighborhood itself — became the new motel.

"It was insane how quickly it erupted," says Andrew Steelsmith, another neighbor whose security camera footage of the disturbances that year seemed to touch a nerve in the city. The former Coast Guard law enforcement officer and his family have lived here since 2016. At least one bullet has hit the fence behind his house. The videos he's posted over the years track the accelerating chaos. What started as one or two cars passing each night when he moved in turned into more than 100. "There were five, six, or seven women standing in the road, and a line of traffic waiting like a drive-through," he says.

Frustrated by the spike in violence and his now weekly walks with neighbors to pick up fast-food wrappers, used condoms, and other trash, Steelsmith began piecing together his dashcam and security video, including a time-lapse sequence showing the astonishing number of cars rolling through. He posted it online, and it quickly sounded a wake-up call, grabbing the attention of the community and local officials. "I released that video, which really showed what everyone was missing when they were sleeping," he says.

It showed me, too, what I was missing when my eyes were closed.

Just a few miles north of Seattle's glittering downtown, home to some of the world's richest tech companies, this turbulent section of Aurora Avenue North burrows through block after block of drab urban terrain, auto body shops, nondescript shopping centers, restaurants. The roadway is completely different from the days when it was part of U.S. Highway 99, or the Pacific Highway, a celebrated road-trip route that ran from Mexico to Canada in the early 20th century.

Walk a couple of blocks west, though, toward Puget Sound, and you enter another world, a neighborhood of 1920s bungalows, newly built townhomes, and large single-family houses, some near collapse and others selling for over $1 million. On a typical Saturday afternoon, children run and bounce around well-kept playgrounds, dogs excitedly play fetch in adjacent parks, and soil-smudged neighbors tend to their plots in community gardens billowing with flowers and leafy vegetables. Couples push strollers as they walk home from coffee shops, breweries, and grocery stores.

My husband and I moved to the area three years ago. After more than a decade working in journalism in Chicago, I was looking for a career change and found a role in corporate communications with Amazon in Seattle. We canvassed the city for months looking for a home in the city's pricey housing market and landed in a neighborhood bordering Aurora Avenue North.

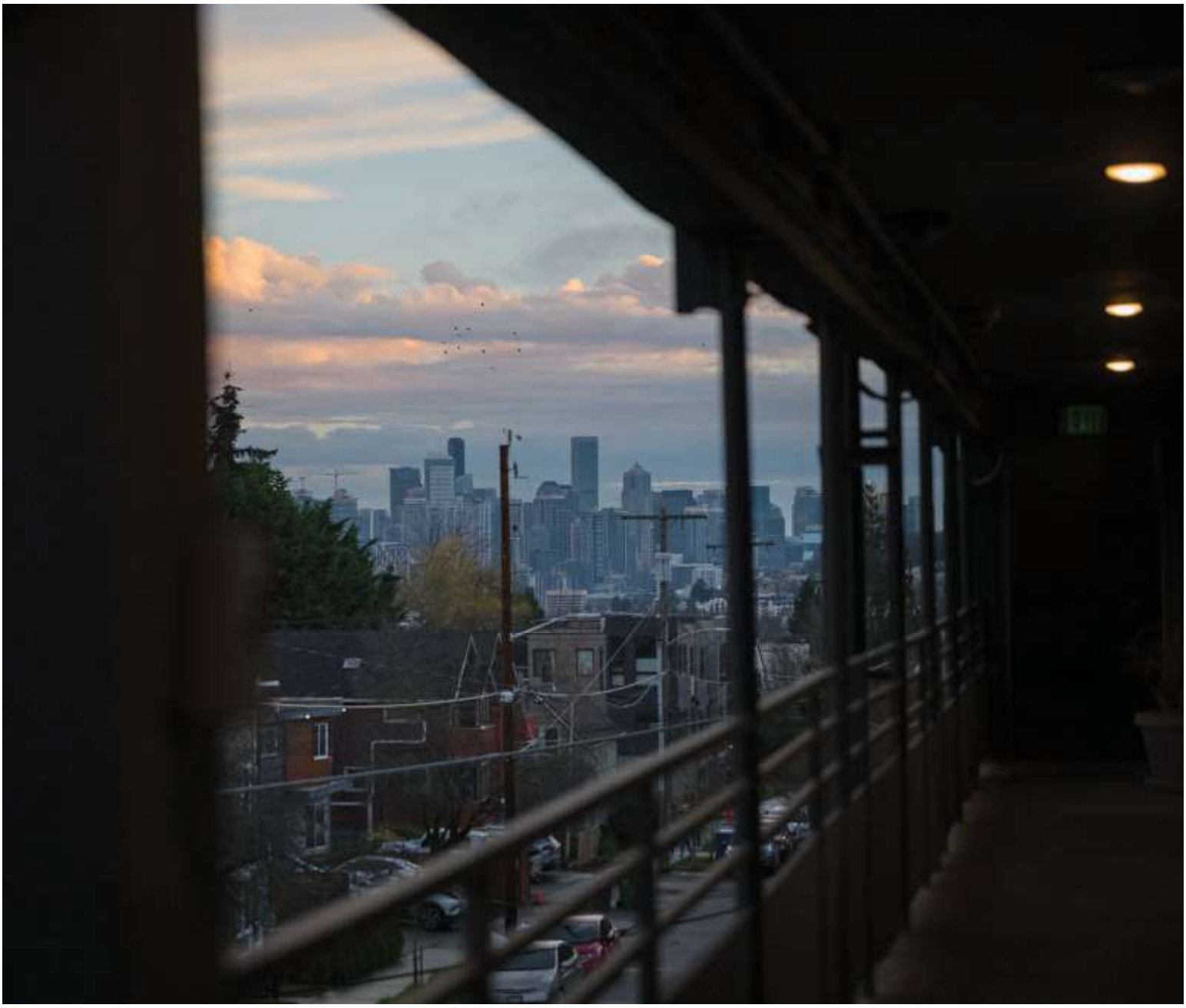
Like many neighbors, I didn't know how deeply some of the area's problems ran or how they'd shifted in recent years. Then luxury cars with tinted windows began slowly circling day and night, dropping off young women in tight, short dresses or other scant clothing. Gunfire became a nightly occurrence. We no longer felt safe walking in the evenings.

One chilly fall morning, as I walked to a bus stop along Aurora on my way to work, I rounded a corner and came face to face with a girl who looked no older than 15. She was balancing on red stilettos and wearing a red lace negligee. It was 7 a.m. on a Thursday. I boarded the bus stunned and watched her slowly cross the street. I looked for resources online but felt helpless as I read warnings about how violent sex traffickers were often watching the women from nearby vehicles.

A couple of months later, in early 2024, a bullet went through my neighbor's home in the middle of the night, barely missing his father-in-law as he slept in a guest bedroom. Nearby homeowners gathered later that week to share information, and I met Steelsmith. He had just left a meeting organized by Virginia McKenzie, an executive recruiter and longtime Rotarian who helped charter the Rotary Club of the Pacific Northwest Ending Sex Trafficking in 2021. The club grew out of a project within the Rotary Club of Seattle and, I was surprised to learn, is among a handful of cause-based Rotary clubs in the U.S. focused on human trafficking.

McKenzie had seen Steelsmith's video and asked him to attend the community meeting. There, he discovered an ecosystem of nonprofits, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, and others who were working to address the issue — and to help survivors of sex trafficking. I connected with McKenzie, too, and became a member of the young club. Thus began my journey of trying to understand this dark side of Seattle and many other cities across the U.S., along with the strength of survivors and the healing power of community. Or as McKenzie put it: "When you bring awesome people together, something awesome is going to happen."

Opposite top: The Seattle skyline is seen from a hotel that serves as a temporary shelter for sex trafficking survivors. **Bottom:** A security camera captured a gunfight likely sparked by the sex trafficking trade on Aurora Avenue North.



VIDEO STILL: COURTESY OF I. JORDAN

The troubled Aurora Avenue North corridor is known as "the track," an epithet earned over decades. But particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, the signs of forced sex work have become more visible. Dozens of the women walk the corners day and night in the summers. Nightly violence has followed, with pimps clashing over turf and high-speed chases between luxury cars. Police suspect most of the shooters are from outside of Seattle, and many of the women officers encounter were brought here from other states.

Seattle Police Detective Maurice Washington works in the department's human

“I didn’t know what to do [about Seattle sex trafficking]. … I just tried to figure out who’s working on this, and how can I be helpful and bring my Rotarian friends with me.”

Above: Virginia McKenzie is a founder and charter president of the Rotary Club of the Pacific Northwest Ending Sex Trafficking.

trafficking vice unit and is a 16-year member of the local FBI office’s Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking Task Force. He says a de facto sex trafficking corridor runs through Washington state, Oregon, California, and Nevada, largely along Interstate 5, which replaced the old Pacific Highway and is just a few blocks east of Aurora Avenue North.

Washington says Aurora Avenue has earned a national reputation as a place where prostitution goes largely unchecked, in part because of Seattle’s historically lax enforcement policies. He also notes a cultural shift toward people being more accepting of some aspects of the sex trade. “The difference we’re seeing now is in the volumes of younger and younger persons involved,” Washington says. “And people doing the trafficking crimes know it’s very difficult to investigate without cooperation from a victim.”

Alex Voorhees often works with detective Washington as the lead prosecutor for cases involving human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children, through the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. She says trauma runs deep with trafficking victims, many of whom have been subjected to physical and psychological abuse for years. As a result, many are hesitant or scared to testify against their traffickers. “We’re often dealing with people with a considerable amount of trauma,” Voorhees says. “It’s important to understand that even when we deal with adult victims, they’ve often been exploited since they were 13, 14, or 15 years old.”

Washington and other experts stress that any child is at risk, especially from traffickers online who promise lavish gifts, money, and affection, but that the children most targeted are often from foster care and households with significant troubles.

Together, Black, Asian, and Hispanic girls make up more than half of underage victims in King County, with Black girls dramatically overrepresented, according to a report from prosecutors. Their data shows that from about 2013 to 2022, white men made up 73 percent of defendants accused of buying or attempting to buy minors for sex in King County, and over a similar period of time, 44 percent of the victims in all commercial sexual exploitation of children cases were Black. (In King County, Black residents make up 7 percent of the population.) Young men and boys are also trafficked, though most cases involve female victims.

“The buyer pool is pretty much the flip side of our victims. These are men of affluence, of means, and have the disposable income to buy a human being for their sexual gratification,” says Voorhees, who has over 20 years of experience as a prosecutor.

She notes that even most adult victims are young, nearly all between the ages of 18 and 25. “There’s a narrative in some communities that says there’s no harm in this, that the woman wants to be doing this. But if you look back into the history of where our survivors come from, this wasn’t a choice. Who at the age 13 says, ‘I want to drop out of high school, prostitute, and give all my money to a man who wants me to do this’?”

Debra Boyer is a cultural anthropology researcher whose work has focused

for decades on sexual exploitation and how to help victims in Washington state. She says the Seattle and King County data aligns with national trends and that sex trafficking is an issue in metropolitan areas across the U.S. "You don't find anyone in this industry who wasn't groomed or sexually abused in some way. People involved in prostitution are coerced and have been the victim of a lot of violence," says Boyer, an affiliate faculty member at the University of Washington.

She says that Washington state has been at the forefront of anti-trafficking efforts. In 2003, the state became the first in the U.S. to criminalize human trafficking on the state level. State courts, including the Washington Supreme Court, were the first to rule against backpage.com in lawsuits filed in several states that took aim at the website, which the U.S. Department of Justice described as the internet's leading forum for prostitution ads, including ones featuring minors, when it was finally shut down in 2018. And under a new state law, all school districts must offer students instruction in sex trafficking awareness and prevention by the 2025-26 school year.

Seattle had repealed its anti-loitering laws in 2020, after criticism that they had long been misused by police to target minorities and harass people experiencing homelessness. Police, however, said the prostitution loitering law was one of the few tools they had left to approach potential victims of sex trafficking after a shift away from charging women with prostitution starting around 2012.

In mid-2024, amid the spike in violence along Aurora Avenue North, business owners and residents successfully pushed the Seattle City Council to adopt a reworked anti-loitering ordinance that shifted enforcement efforts toward traffickers and buyers. The revised loitering law took effect in October, but its impact remains to be seen. And survivor-focused nonprofits and government agencies say funding is still needed for additional services to help women trying to exit the sex trade.

Ultimately, Boyer says, it comes down to deterring demand. "The pipeline is always full of victims because there are always customers. That's why you have to go after sex buyers. They're the cause," Boyer says. "We protect the men here. Look how long it has taken to get rape taken seriously, or domestic violence. Prostitution is another form of this gender violence."

MAP: MADISON WISSE

A troubled corridor

A Ingraham High School
Seattle City Councilmember Cathy Moore, who represents the area, said in August that students at Ingraham High School and Robert Eagle Staff Middle School (**K**), some as young as 12, had been the targets of solicitation and recruitment near their schools.

B 117th–127th streets
Most of the trafficking has occurred along this 10-block span.

C Shuttered motels
Two motels were forced to close by the city in summer 2023 after being accused of facilitating prostitution.

D UW Medical Center–Northwest

E Evergreen Washelli Funeral Home & Cemetery
The streets around the cemetery have been high-traffic areas for the sex trade.

F Viewlands Elementary School

G Aurora Avenue North and 101st Street
Scene of the July shootout between groups apparently competing for control of the corner

H 95th–109th streets
Violence shifted here after the two motels were shut down.

I Seattle Police Department North Precinct station

J Aurora Commons
This drop-in day center serves people experiencing poverty and homelessness. The organization is also well aware of the trafficking and can help people find resources.

K Robert Eagle Staff Middle School

L Cascadia Elementary School

The Rotary Club of the Pacific Northwest Ending Sex Trafficking has become a hub of information and action. The list of members is a who's who of experts and others personally and professionally connected to the issue — some with specialties I was shocked to learn even existed, like a doctor who removes branding tattoos that traffickers use to mark women.

And there are people like Jessie Tallent, a past president of the club, who is a crisis clinician working with marginalized people. She now works with families in acute crisis with behavioral concerns for their kids, particularly cases where sexual abuse or sexualized behaviors have occurred, including sex trafficking.

Tallent engages with youth at a clinic that provides behavioral health services through a state program, but she also visits youth centers, juvenile detention facilities, and even jails to be a consistent, trustworthy face in environments where she could encounter victims. She says traffickers can be relatives, or they can be strangers who target victims online or by infiltrating their family or social circle.

"These girls are singled out at parties, at the mall, walking home from school. Traffickers know what to look for: the wounded bird — the person who's either really trying to hide in a group or pushing themselves to the front for attention," Tallent says. "These are kids seeking validation. They're vulnerable, maybe in foster care or with a single parent who is never home, so they tend to double down on people who do pay attention to them."

That's when the grooming begins, she says. "Your new 'boyfriend,' who is much older, is giving you praise. He's scary sometimes, but he tells you you're special and more mature than your friends. This will be interspersed with fun things — a party where there's alcohol, there's pot. Getting kids addicted to something early on is a big draw for traffickers."

She says the signs of grooming often come out as defensiveness among teens, especially about new friends or a new love interest. To a parent or guardian, it may just look like teenage rebelliousness but with an unclear source influencing the new behavior. "Traffickers want these kids to lead double lives — to go to school, to have dinner with their parents — so nothing seems out of the ordinary," Tallent says. "But to hide the new shoes, the expensive gifts, and their new phone."

Once that grooming takes hold, girls can quickly lose control. "Traffickers will, for example, ask for nude pictures early in the relationship," Tallent explains. "So these kids get trapped real quick, and that's the goal of traffickers."

She says a cultural shift needs to happen, where the girls aren't the ones bearing the shame and blame. "We need to stop saying it's the oldest profession," she says. "It's the oldest form of exploitation."

Prosecuting traffickers and obtaining justice for victims in criminal courts poses many challenges. Attorney Susanna Southworth is taking another approach. She files civil cases on behalf of survivors of online exploitation, child sexual abuse, child pornography, and sex trafficking. Working with other lawyers, she has sued online platforms and hotel franchisors and franchisees that, her cases argued, benefited financially from participating in a venture that they knew, or should have known, was engaged in sex trafficking. She, too, is a past president of the Pacific Northwest club.

She says after larger websites including backpage.com were shut down, some traffickers turned to the dark web to advertise services. Many still use dating or escort sites and social media to advertise, but with coded language or emojis to indicate expected payment for sex acts. Traffickers treat it as a business and the young women as a reusable commodity.

Her work has uncovered details of how the traffickers maintain systems of control. The girls have to meet quotas, say $1,000 a night, requiring 10 or more customers over a 12-hour period, Southworth says. The girls must make those numbers to receive food or shelter, for example. "Traffickers will also use drugs to keep the women awake and get them addicted. Then they withhold drugs or beat the girl if they don't meet the quota, and do it in front of the other girls to set the tone, a warning to everyone else that the trafficker is in charge."

During the grooming stage, a dynamic known as "trauma bonding" can develop in which a trafficker looks to fill the holes in a vulnerable victim's turbulent life: the need for a friend, a boyfriend, or a father-figure. "It's so strong that a survivor — despite having possibly been beaten to near death by their trafficker and enduring psychological abuse — will still go to great lengths not to testify against them," Southworth says.

The trauma that follows, especially from a long grooming period that can last months, can cause memory suppression and mental disorders that impact a person's ability to recall the abuse, she says.

Southworth co-founded the law firm Restore the Child PLLC to help trafficking survivors and victims of child sexual abuse material. Through the civil suits, survivors are awarded financial damages and achieve, she hopes, a measure of justice. She is district secretary for Rotary District 5030, which encompasses the Seattle metropolitan area, and serves on the boards of the Rotary Action Group Against Slavery and the nonprofit Child USA, a think tank devoted to ending child abuse with a focus on statute of limitations reform.

Those limits on the amount of time a person has to file a legal case are a major hurdle given that it can take years for survivors trafficked and exploited as children to come forward, if they ever do, Southworth says. Providing support for them to do so is about more than just building a case, says Washington, the Seattle police detective. "You're plucking them from a dysfunctional family structure, so to speak, where housing and food are often provided. If they're going to step forward and cooperate with law enforcement, they have to give all that up," he says.

"All of those structures have to be put back into place: housing, education, medical, therapists and counseling," he adds.

51%

Share of reported U.S. sex trafficking victims under age 18

Opposite: An attorney who works with trafficking survivors, Susanna Southworth is a member and past president of the club that is trying to stop the forced sex trade.

Traffickers “withhold drugs or beat the girl if they don’t meet the [nightly] quota, and do it in front of the other girls to set the tone, a warning to everyone else that the trafficker is in charge.”

One night about 20 years ago, Kristine Moreland and her fellow volunteers walked through a homeless encampment of about 15 tents in a wooded area under a Seattle bridge, offering food and wellness checks around 1 a.m. The night started off like most others. Then, from inside one of the tents, Moreland heard someone whispering: "Help. Help." Moreland bent down and, peering through the opening, saw a naked woman. The woman asked Moreland to take her someplace safe. After getting her to a hotel room, Moreland saw that the woman was covered in bruises. She listened as the woman told of being repeatedly raped by multiple men over several days while being forced to stay in the tent. "It was then that I understood the vulnerability," Moreland says.

In the two decades since, Moreland, a former mortgage broker, has volunteered to help sex trafficking survivors and people without homes, a population where service providers are likely to intercept trafficking, she says.

Moreland is also a survivor. She was trafficked when she was 8 years old by a neighbor who'd been entrusted to watch her as her mother worked long hours. Moreland shared the story for the first time publicly in 2024, speaking through tears to about 500 people gathered for the annual luncheon for the nonprofit StolenYouth.

Moreland, who joined the Pacific Northwest club not long after, recently took another leap: She let her mortgage license expire and devoted herself full time to the nonprofit she founded. The organization, called The More We Love, provides hotel stays and other immediate emergency services to vulnerable youth and adults, including those trying to exit the sex industry. She runs the organization with a fellow survivor, Sarah Ann Hamilton, who was trafficked along Aurora Avenue North starting at 12 years old.

Moreland's mantra is to "be someone's constant," a regular source of support. She's built connections with people she's helped, including the survivor she discovered in that tent two decades ago: "We walked together for many, many years."

Above left: A trafficking survivor, club member Kristine Moreland founded The More We Love, which helps sex industry survivors. **Below left:** Sarah Ann Hamilton, another survivor, is director of survivor services at The More We Love. **Opposite:** An inspiring new mural adorns Aurora Avenue.

PHOTOGRAPH: ANNAH KIM NELSON-FEENEY

Virginia McKenzie describes it as a bolt of lightning, a particular moment during a panel on human trafficking that her former Rotary club hosted in 2015. One of the presenters told about a local sting operation in which a fake advertisement was posted online offering sexual services, purportedly from a 15-year-old girl. Within two hours, the ad attracted 250 calls. Another presenter revealed that many of the people who bought sex from children in King County worked at local businesses and that the peak time when people solicit sex online is during the workday, at 2 p.m.

"I couldn't believe it. I just kept thinking, 'Do I sit next to someone who looked at this? Do I work with them?'" McKenzie remembers. "I didn't know what to do, so I started looking at all the service providers in Seattle. I went to their trainings, their galas, their talks — everything. And I just tried to figure out who's working on this, and how can I be helpful and bring my Rotarian friends with me."

She connected with the peacebuilders committee in the Rotary Club of Seattle, where she helped organize a project to train over 1,000 firefighters, EMTs, and other health care workers how to recognize and respond to signs of trafficking.

That work led her to form the Pacific Northwest club. Its signature effort today is to provide similar education to students, teachers, and caregivers in partnership with 3Strands Global Foundation. Together, they recruit other Rotary clubs to apply for $300 grants to help provide the training in their communities. "Education is sustainable, low-cost, and high impact," McKenzie says. "With education, these young people are less likely to grow up to be exploited, or to be exploiters, and they're watchdogs for their friends."

The club is also exploring the creation of a public awareness campaign to install anti-trafficking ads on billboards and city transit ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup games hosted by Seattle and more than a dozen other cities in North America.

The club works in collaboration with the larger, global Rotary Action Group Against Slavery. Together, they provide a forum for discussing solutions to trafficking and the other social challenges — from homelessness to domestic violence — that make people vulnerable. Alongside those with deep knowledge and others, like me, who had little background beyond a desire to help, I've found a place and purpose here too, helping tell the story.

Amid last summer's gunbattles, the city closed off the entrance to 101st Street from Aurora Avenue North to vehicle traffic using concrete barriers, a move meant to disrupt the sex trade there and associated violence. Whether that and the revised loitering law have long-term effects remains unclear, though traffic has slowed and much of the gunfire has quieted since.

On a recent walk, I adjust my route to wander through the intersection. I notice something new: a mural of swirling color has appeared covering the corner building that had been scarred by bullet holes. On one side, keeping watch over Aurora Avenue, is the face of a girl blowing bright yellow stars from her hands. ■

If you are in the U.S. and suspect someone is being trafficked, please call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-373-7888. In Canada, call the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline at 1-833-900-1010. To learn more about how to protect children and teens from traffickers and identify signs of grooming, visit 3Strands Global Foundation at **3sgf.org.** To find out more about the Rotary Club of the Pacific Northwest Ending Sex Trafficking, visit **rotarypnw.org.**