

## UNDER LOCK AND KEY

NONPROFIT FIGHTS TO END HUMAN TRAFFICKING BY INFLUENCING POLICY, TRAINING RESPONDERS, EMPOWERING SURVIVORS AND MORE

July 19, 2018

By Matt Watson

It wasn't until Mary Landerholm took a college course on human trafficking that she came to a startling realization about her own life.

She was a trafficking survivor.

In her mid-20s, Landerholm became vulnerable to trafficking as she battled homelessness and struggled with basic survival needs. She endured relationships out of necessity and was taken across state lines unwillingly at one point.

After escaping that situation, she found herself living with a couple who were taking in homeless women and exploiting them for labor. When she fled that house with a cross-country bus ticket from her home state of Illinois to Denver to reunite with her mother, she left behind 13 other women like her.

"I had no language or knowledge that this was what I had experienced, because in 1999 we weren't talking about this in this realm," says Landerholm, a 2014 Master of Social Work graduate from Metropolitan State University of Denver. "When I encountered law enforcement, I was given a very different description of what my experience was."

The United States didn't have a working definition of human trafficking until Congress passed the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#). The federal act describes trafficking in two categories: trafficking, which commonly makes the news and states our worst fears as

## OUR EXPERTS



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in two parts: sex trafficking, which commonly makes the news and stokes our worst fears as a society, and labor trafficking, which is essentially modern slavery.

"When I started to hear concrete examples of what this looked like, I could slot stuff from my life into that. There were elements where I couldn't leave; there was sleep deprivation, lack of food, physical threats and my own experience with domestic violence," Landerholm says. "The shame and guilt that I'd just made bad decisions started to fall apart.

*"I was sitting in this human-trafficking class, looking up at this presentation and thinking, 'This is what happened to me.' My whole entire world had shifted."*

After class, she chased her professor down the hallway to explain what had happened to her.

"I came to Colorado in 2005, about dead, not only from my own trauma but also having been given a different language and knowledge of what had happened to me," Landerholm says. "I was just trying to move on with my life. I got here, and education was my way of healing in some sense. I knew I wanted to be a social worker, but I had no intentions of working in this. I didn't even know what 'this' was."



Mary Landerholm sits under a bridge in the Globeville neighborhood where she used to do outreach to street-based youth and young adults with the nonprofit Prax(us). Prax(us) conducted street outreach four times a week to connect with young people in the community were highly vulnerable to exploitation. Photo by Alyson McClaran

Landerholm has no interest in sitting on the sidelines in the fight against the abuse she experienced. Her "story" is not the end of the story. She works about 60 hours a week actively advocating to stop it.

As the action-plan manager for the nonprofit [Laboratory to Combat Human Trafficking](#), she engages with community stakeholders and leaders to implement anti-trafficking efforts. She's active in empowering other survivors to share not just their stories but their expertise in combating a crime they know better than anyone else.

As a member of the Training Standards and Curriculum Task Force of the [Colorado Human Trafficking Council](#), established by Gov. John Hickenlooper in 2014, she helps inform training for law enforcement and service providers. She also consults on training for the Human Trafficking Training and Technical Center and the Office of Victims of Crime in Washington.

And as an affiliate faculty member at MSU Denver, she has taught the same human-trafficking course that once reframed her entire life. The course is cross-listed in several departments - Criminal Justice, Gender and Women's Studies, Social Work and more - representative of the interdisciplinary approach needed to grasp a complex crime and combat it in the real world.

"I don't share my personal experience in my class until the very end, because it changes the way people see me," Landerholm says. "Being able to teach from not only my own experience but also my academic background and what I've learned in the professional realm as a social worker has really positioned me well to be able to deliver this in a way that is different from someone who hasn't had this experience, in a way that's very authentic and respectful."

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## Trafficking in Colorado

Colorado's geography creates unique opportunities for trafficking to occur. Denver has the only international airport in a nearly 800-mile radius. Interstates 25 and 70 intersect in Denver as they crisscross the country, making the city both remote and easy to get to.

Certain large industries in the state are also magnets for trafficking. The agriculture, oil and gas, and construction trades draw large numbers of seasonal or migrant workers, who are often vulnerable to labor trafficking because of a lack of knowledge of local laws. The hospitality and tourism industries are susceptible to sex trafficking by tourists and labor trafficking of back-of-the-house employees.

Denver's homeless population is also at risk of being exploited.

AnnJanette Alejano-Steele has been an anti-trafficking advocate in Colorado for more than a decade. She co-founded LCHT and created the human-trafficking course at MSU Denver. She came to the University through a joint appointment in psychology and gender studies, has chaired the Department of Social Work and serves as associate dean of the College of Professional Studies.

*"I am the person who has expertise in teaching the things no one wants to talk about," Alejano-Steele says.*

Her work speaks for itself.

Colorado's coordinated anti-trafficking efforts began in 2005, when the U.S. Department of Justice started funding victim services and the training of law enforcement and the Colorado Network to End Human Trafficking, or CoNEHT, was formed as a statewide collaborative of organizations to serve trafficked persons. But the laws in place lacked the enforcement to be effective.

From 2005 to 2014, there were only a handful of trafficking convictions in the state. In 2014, LCHT completed a three-year research effort called [The Colorado Project](#). That helped pave the way for Colorado [House Bill 1273](#), which strengthened anti-trafficking statutes and created the governor's council on trafficking.

"In 2014, we rewrote these laws with a lot more teeth, a lot more funding and a lot more focus," Alejano-Steele says. "There have been 93 convictions since 2014. That speaks to the strength of the laws, and our study really contributed to that legislation being passed."

The council's [2017 annual report](#) showed that while federal human-trafficking prosecutions have decreased recently, the number of Colorado criminal cases using the 2014 statutes increased for a third straight year. The average state prison sentence for someone convicted of human trafficking is nearly 50 years.





Colorado's geography creates unique opportunities for trafficking to occur. Denver has the only international airport in a nearly 800-mile radius. Interstates 25 and 70 intersect in Denver as they crisscross the country, making the city both remote and easy to get to. Photo illustration by Alyson McClaran

Alejano-Steele has served on five national task forces in addition to the governor's council. Conversations in Washington inform coordination in Colorado, including in classrooms at MSU Denver and beyond.

The University's Human Trafficking Academic Response Team works with survivors to consider and complete a college education. HTART is an informal, cross-campus collection of departments and individuals that has worked with more than 70 survivors in the past decade. Many are referred by law enforcement and attend classes while participating in the criminal-justice process, which often takes about two years in trafficking cases.

One of the advisees was a sous chef whose father was being trafficked by a restaurant owner. The father was forced to pick which of his three kids he was going to traffic with him. She's now a dentist. Other survivors have graduated and gone on to work in social work or law enforcement.

"MSU Denver is ideal because when you learn about the demographics of our university, you're not going to stick out," Alejano-Steele says.

Last fall, the average age of undergraduates was 25, with 42 percent students of color.

"If you're a foreign national or if you're undocumented, we have resources," she says. "Or if you were trafficked between the ages of 13 to 24 in the sex industry, and you're 26 now, you won't stick out here."

### How can I help?

That's the question Violet Gorrell, a 2018 criminal-justice and criminology graduate, considered after reading the book "Runaway Girl" by Carissa Phelps as a freshman. Phelps' story of being trafficked as a child was the selection for MSU Denver's [1 Book/1 Project/2 Transform](#) program.

Gorrell was a [Puksta Scholar](#), part of a multiyear scholarship program that requires students to work on a civic issue in the community. The more Gorrell learned about human trafficking, the more she got involved in trying to stop it.

She presented on the topic on campus. She took Landerholm's human-trafficking course, then served as her teaching assistant the next semester. She took a study-abroad trip to the Hague in the Netherlands, where she got to meet U.S. officials working with Europol on international anti-trafficking efforts.

Gorrell did fundraising and advocacy work for [Extended Hands of Hope](#), an organization that provides emergency relief and long-term shelter to underage sex-trafficking survivors. She volunteered for a year on the statewide CoNEHT human-trafficking hotline, which takes calls from survivors and law-enforcement referrals.

"I chose trafficking, this big, broad issue, as part of my scholar program," Gorrell says. "It started as a spark of curiosity and ended up as a passion. I know that I want to turn the work that I'm doing into a career. I would love to make it more on the criminal-justice side of things and really connect and home in on my degree."



When Violet Gorrell took MSU Denver's human-trafficking course, the more she learned the more she wanted to help. Gorrell did fundraising and advocacy work for the organization Extended Hands of Hope and volunteered for a year on the statewide CoNEHT human-trafficking hotline, which takes calls from survivors and law-enforcement referrals. Photo by Alyson McClaran

For those who can't dedicate their careers to the issue but want to help, the [CoNEHT hotline](#) is staffed 24/7, all year long, primarily by volunteers. The hotline received nearly 400 calls in 2017.

The hotline is supervised by LCHT in partnership with Colorado Legal Services and the Rocky Mountain Immigration Advocacy Network. Volunteers go through 65 hours of training, have calls forwarded to the phone of their choice during designated on-call shifts and provide callers with the proper resources and services.

LCHT also offers education presentations to community groups. Program specialist Kara Napolitano says the nonprofit has educated 27,000 people, including first responders, law enforcement, health-care workers, child-welfare workers, church groups and school employees.

*"Everyone wants to help, but how do you help? Awareness is the biggest thing - educate yourself and your family or community. Invite us into your community, whether that's a church or a school or wherever, to do a training," Napolitano says.*

Awareness of trafficking means paying attention to who's working in restaurants, cleaning your office or grooming the slopes during ski season. Landerholm suggests [examining your consumer habits](#), such as finding out who brews your coffee or grows the beans.

At a fundamental level, combating human trafficking means addressing the problems that incite traffickers and eliminating the vulnerabilities that put people at risk.

"Most people just want to combat the crime at the moment it happens, and we're trying to say, 'It's bigger than that.' We're not going to arrest our way out of it," Landerholm says. "Why do we exploit each other? What are the root causes? If we're not having conversations around gender inequality, racism and oppression, we won't ever get at this."

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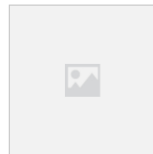
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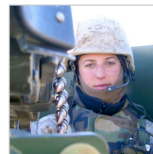
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