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Speaker: There are a few things that make people successful. Taking a step forward to change their lives is one successful trait, but it takes some time to get there. How do you move forward to greet the success that awaits you? Welcome to *Next Steps Forward* with host Chris Meek. Each week, Chris brings on another guest who has successfully taken the next steps forward. Now, here is Chris Meek.

Chris Meek: Hello, I'm Chris Meek, [unintelligible 00:00:34] this week's episode of *Next Steps Forward*. As always, it's a pleasure to have you with us. Our special guest today is Bishop Donna L. Hubbard.

Donna is the daughter of the late author and committee activist Barbara Nayo Watkins, and Charles Charlie Hubbard, who are graduates of Atlanta's historic Booker T. Washington High School. Bishop Hubbard was raised by her mother and civil rights icon, Hollis Watkins, who took great pride in cultivating Donna's social awareness and creative spirit.

She was married at age 16 and became a wife and mother. By age 18, she was a single mother. After a violent sexual assault, her life became a series of abandonment, abuse, addiction, exploitation, and violence. She became the property of a pimp who sold her to a gang, who trafficked, gang raped, and threatened to exploit her children. Going to prison was her only way out. Waiting to be transferred, she met Minister Lynette Higgins, who introduced her to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Prison is where Donna surrendered to a greater destiny and purpose. Donna was paroled in 1993 to Atlanta, Georgia. In 1994, she founded Woman at the Well Transition Center. Bishop Hubbard holds a BA, MS, NACC certification, and Honorary PhD.

She's a flight attendant for American Airlines. She's a mother, grandmother, and a great-grandmother. Bishop Hubbard, welcome to *Next Steps Forward*.

Bishop Donna L. Hubbard: Thank you so much, Chris, for having me. Every time I hear somebody read that about me, I'm like, "Wow, all of that? Who are they talking about? I did all of that?"

I'm tired just listening to it, but I'm so grateful to be here today. Thank you so much for the invitation. For all of those who are your regular listeners, thanks so much for supporting Chris and the work that he's doing. Thank you for logging on today to experience this journey with us today.

Chris: A journey it's going to be, Donna. We'll get into that momentarily. Your personal story is so riveting that I want to do something I don't believe I've done in the three and a half years I've been hosting *Next Steps Forward*. I'd like to save that for the second half of our conversation so that you can share it in detail.

Donna: Absolutely.

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Chris: That said, let's talk about the big picture of human trafficking. You've worked to educate people that human trafficking is so much more than sexual exploitation. Would you explain how broad the crisis is and discuss the mental health issues and trauma that's involved?

Donna: Absolutely. Thank you for having this discussion, Chris. It's so vital that everyone is educated and informed. Those are two different things. A lot of people are educated, but they're not informed about human trafficking.

As you said, when people hear human trafficking, they specifically think of sexual exploitation. Human trafficking is so much more. Human trafficking is the exploitation of another human being or group of individuals for personal gain or revenue. It doesn't matter what color, what age, what nationality, what culture, what gender you are, it can affect anyone.

Specifically, when you look at the ILO, International Labor Organization, their statistics and their data confirms that the majority of people who are trafficked worldwide are, number one, people of color and, number two, it's labor trafficking, it's not sexual exploitation. I think that sexual exploitation is the one that gets the most media attention and especially when it includes children. The reality is, labor exploitation takes up about 22 million people of the 42 million individuals that are trapped in human trafficking and exploitation. Over 20 million of them are involved in labor trafficking. That includes things like agricultural labor trafficking, where they bring people in from different countries to do labor work, agricultural work, and they lose their identity. Basically, they literally lose their identity. They lose their documents and they are stuck. While some of them may have been smuggled, they end up being trafficked. The difference is, smuggling is destination-based, whereas trafficking is exploitation-based. That's labor trafficking.

Then there's also child soldiers and child brides. When we hear that, we think of something that happens somewhere else to someone else.

Well, we know of the cases here in the US where young girls have literally been married off to someone older who was a celebrity or was wealthy and they paid the parents to be able to marry this young girl who is underage. Yes, it is legal now in the US that parents can sign over the documents and a 12-year-old can marry a man who is old enough to be her great-grandfather.

You have child brides and we have child soldiers. We see these pictures of children from other countries, the South America, Africa, the Middle East, where that's the picture we get of child soldiers.

The reality is, if a drug dealer gives a kid in that neighborhood a package of drugs, a weapon, and tells them to bring me back my money and let me know if the police are coming, that's a child soldier. He just recruited a child soldier. He put a weapon in their hand, he told them what to do with it, and he told them who the enemy is. That's basically how we train soldiers. You got to have a weapon, you got to know how to use it, and you got to know who your enemy is.

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We have child soldiers, child brides, labor trafficking. Sexual exploitation we know is not just about selling someone on a corner, but it includes pornography. People who are engaging in child porn on the internet and they think it's not harming anyone, those children are being victimized, some of them unknowingly.

Then finally, the form of trafficking that is the fastest growing form of trafficking is organ harvesting. Organs are being harvest all over the world and sold. We have to look at the cases where young people especially who are found dead, unfortunately, but they never talk about the fact that their organs are missing because no one wants to start a panic.

In many cases that we have heard publicized nationwide and even worldwide, in some of those cases, those young people's organs were missing.

Then I also have to note that in many cultures, Chris, trafficking or human trafficking as it is, enslavement, indentured servitude has been a common practice in many cultures. Basically what I mean is, if a family owed a debt, those individuals will exploit that debt by telling that father or the head of the family, "Either give us your son or your daughter, or we'll either kill the whole family or we're going to take them. That will settle the debt." When a person is confronted with, "Give me a son or a daughter, or we kill the whole family," what would anyone do? How do you even answer that question?

We need to understand that human trafficking does not just affect other people, other places. It is our number one human rights issue in our generation. That's number one. Number two, it can affect anyone anywhere.

Chris: To that point, anyone anywhere, so many people think that human trafficking involves only a certain demographic, specifically young, low-income females of color. They may say, "How does this affect me?" Does that make them blind to the greater threat of human trafficking which is that anyone can be trafficked?

Donna: Absolutely. Let me say this. You and I talked before, and I will start by saying the trafficking of women and people of color did not just begin with this movement against human trafficking, but the trafficking and the exploitation of people of color began centuries ago. It was practiced as a common practice. It was acceptable in many places. It is still enslavement and it is a crime. It is our human rights issue of our generation.

Today, human trafficking does not discriminate against color, age, gender, ethnicity, or economic status. It can happen to anyone. It can happen to an older individual who is labor trafficked by answering an ad. An elderly person who's trying to make ends meet answers an ad to be a nanny or an au pair.

That doesn't mean every case is that kind of case, but they answer an ad to be a nanny or an au pair or to just clean houses and end up being trafficked. By that, I mean they are not paid what they were promised. They are not given livable wages.

They do not have livable conditions. They are treated like property. They lose their documents, their ID.

The other thing is it doesn't just happen to young girls of color. Yes, my concern is that when young girls of color have gone missing, there has not been as much attention paid by the media or the authorities on young girls of color who go missing as it is when young girls who are White or perhaps Latino or Asian. I hate to say it that way, but it is **[inaudible 00:09:44]** When young White girls go missing, it's a media frenzy. Young Black girls go missing every week and sometimes we don't even know their names. There's not that much attention paid to it, and too often the social stigma that this is a common practice.

The first thing that many law enforcement officers who are our friends, let me tell you, we need them, we need them to help look for our children, but quite often when they're not educated about the issue of human trafficking, the first thing they'll ask this family is, "Has she run away before?" Has nothing to do with it because we know that traffickers start grooming these young girls long before they actually take them, long before they're actually kidnapped.

Let me specify, it's not just girls. Boys are trafficked equally. Young men and boys are trafficked equally around the world, especially when you're runaways. Runaways fall into that category of people who are approached by traffickers within 24 hours after they run away. This is young boys and young girls. It can happen to anyone, and it's not specifically young girls of color.

However, when young girls of color are taken, we don't put as much emphasis on making sure that we find them.

Chris: When you and I spoke last week, it was a day or two after a major bust in Polk County, Florida. Military service members, coaches, and a teacher were among the 228 people arrested in human trafficking stings. The sting, which was dubbed Operation March Sadness after the NCAA Tournament 2024, also identified 13 victims. These are the people we're supposed to have faith in and trust yourself and your children with. How often is a trafficker someone that others trust? How do we protect ourselves and our children if anyone around could be a trafficker?

Donna: More often than we would like to admit. In a case that was a notable case many years ago, a very dear friend of mine, Alicia, I'll just give her first name, Alicia, at 13 years old, was groomed on the internet by a man she thought was 17 years old. She ended up being kidnapped. He had groomed her for months before she was taken, and so too often we forget that traffickers are as adaptable as we are. The minute that we upgrade our sources, the minute that we educate more people, they also upgrade their tactics.

Unfortunately, when you start talking about traffickers being people that we have grown up trusting, my own personal experience too often were people who I thought I could go to if I was injured, and I ended up being exploited because of my

vulnerability. It has happened in every community, in every religious background. It has happened in every ethnic and economic culture.

Quite often we don't look at-- We think of it as a victimless crime. We're looking at pornography. We're not looking at what that's doing to that individual that's being trafficked, that individual who's being filmed. What is the threat on their lives?

People will say, "Well, I did it willingly," but I don't know any young girl who grows up, or boy who comes to their adolescence and says, "When I grow up, I want to be exploited. When I grow up, I want to be a porn star. When I grow up, I want someone to take advantage of me."

Especially in the cases of children, because they are so vulnerable, because they are so trusting, it's unfortunate that their vulnerability has been taken advantage of by people who know that they are in a position to exploit that child's innocence.

I have so much respect for teachers, law enforcement officers, people of faith, I myself as a bishop, but I have to admit that in the past and historically, those are the same people, many of them have been accused, as you said, and convicted of exploiting.

I don't say just trafficking because exploitation gives a much broader sense of what's really happening. We're exploiting someone who is vulnerable.

Chris: I know you've talked about the dangers of the knockoff Gucci or other expensive bags, but really, what's the harm in buying a knockoff when the real thing can be just so outrageously expensive?

Donna: They are expensive, and that is not to minimize the designers at all and their art and their work, but traffickers, remember, their whole business is about exploitation. If they know people are hungry for a designer bag, I won't call names, but if they know people are hungry for a designer bag, they want it because it gives them status, it gives them notoriety, it makes them look like they're better off than someone else, they're going to use whatever tactics they can to get that money. If that means hiring-- Not even hiring, but if that means exploiting children and individuals to work in sweatshops, then we have to understand that when we buy that knockoff bag, somebody's blood, sweat, and perhaps life went into that.

We have cases that we have looked at in Nepal on the fishing boats where young people have been recruited to go out on those fishing boats and they don't come back. When their bodies are broken, when their bodies become infected, when they become sick and they can no longer work, they just toss them overboard. We don't think about those things when we are buying a knockoff bag or when we are buying something out on the back of a truck. That doesn't necessarily mean that personal entrepreneurs are not worthy of their work, but we do have to begin to look at-- Just like we look at an environmental footprint across the world because of climate change, we've got to look at a human trafficking footprint. We've got to look at these companies, these large corporations that are using sweat labor, sweatshops, in

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countries that are vulnerable because they have greater economic needs, greater poverty levels, less education, and opportunities for the people to become prosperous. They exploit that in a sweatshop where some of these children work from 4:00 AM to 8:00 AM before they even get to go to school. They're exhausted while they're in school. When they come home, they go back to the sweatshop because sometimes there is no father. The father's been killed, the father has passed away, the mother's the only one there. She has to care for other children and so many young people are taking on that responsibility of earning a living for their entire family. It doesn't just happen in other places, Chris. It happens right here in America.

Chris: As I said, we'll get to your personal experience later, but I'd like to discuss the history of the human trafficking movement from your perspective as the great-granddaughter of a former slave. Does trafficking have a different kind of meaning and a different kind of pain for you?

Donna: Yes. It seems to me that after all of these years, literally decades and centuries, we still do not have an appreciation for human life. As people, as human beings, we have forgotten how to care about one another.

My great-grandfather was a slave. My great-great-grandmother was a slave. It was predominant in our family. We do know that our family came from Guinea-Bissau and that my great-great-great grandfather came as a 13-year-old boy with no name. We had to name him, but because of DNA now and ancestry.com and africanancestry.com, and my cousin, Dishon Gandy, who I'm so grateful for, we were able to trace our DNA using the oldest male member of our family back to Guinea-Bissau and learned that my great-great-great grandfather came from Guinea-Bissau.

He was 13 years old, and here we are today, I'm looking at 13-year-old boys on the streets in our inner cities who only have one way, who only think that they have one opportunity to make money enough to buy that expensive pair of tennis shoes and they have to sell drugs on the street.

We have so many young girls that think that their whole purpose is being exploited, that their body is the only thing that they have to offer. Unfortunately, the entertainment industry has made much so money off of glamorizing that exploitation.

I don't have to mention movies, but I'm sure any one of us could think of a movie where prostitution was glamorized. It wasn't just in the Black community or the White community. In the Asian community, in the Latina community, in all of these communities, Yellow, Black, Brown, and Red, and White, we can think of times where the media has glamorized this. Movies that made people famous because they were exploiting another human being. Being the descendant of a slave in a country that is supposed to have equal rights, we know in many cases still does not exist today because we as human beings have forgotten that we come from one God. We come from one God, and we are one people, and all of us bleed red. All of us bleed red.

I'm very proud of my Scottish, English, Catawba, Muscogee (Creek), Bissau, and Nigerian background. That covers, I think, most of my background and all of mine has been legitimized. Just so you know, all of mine has been legitimized and so many of us don't know where we come from.

Because so many of us don't know where we come from, it's hard to know how to decide where you're going. We live in a wonderful country where, in spite of the limitations that so many of us face, we do have opportunities that don't even exist in other countries, in countries where all they know is slavery, in countries where there has always been a caste system, there has always been a discrimination by color or economic status.

As a descendant of a slave in a country where we now have a female vice president and we've had a Black president, it hurts me to think that we still have not progressed beyond discriminating against women and people of color.

Chris: You said something last week when we spoke about the scope of human trafficking before that is so profound. It really stuck with me, and so much so that I wrote it down so I could read it back to you. You said, "I learned a long time ago, anything that everybody's doing and nobody's talking about is considered acceptable behavior. In every community 40 years ago, domestic violence was very prevalent. Everyone knew it, but no one was talking about it." How does it apply to human trafficking today?

Donna: That statement, I think I told you, Chris, I learned the hard way because I've watched domestic violence in our community. It was happening in families next door to me, down the street from me, in my own families, and my own relatives. It was something that was prevalent, but nobody was talking about the damage that was being done.

As I said, anything that everybody's doing and nobody's talking about is acceptable behavior. When it comes to human trafficking, we have accepted that it's okay to traffic people of color. I don't know if people know this, but I went to Brazil myself, and up until 1987, slavery was legal in Brazil. Even in Brazil.

When it comes to human trafficking, there are still people, and I would say people of a certain economic status, people of a certain ethnic status who feel that slavery and exploitation is acceptable because it's always been that way. It's always been that way and yet we know that exploitation and trauma has not happened to only one group of people. Exploitation and trauma have happened to people of color, but it has also happened to other people around the world who may not be people of color. It has happened because people who have the same mindset that it's okay to mistreat someone, that's the way it's always been done. That doesn't make it right. You've got to have a conscience at some point that makes you say, "If me hurting someone else puts me in a better position, what does that say about me? If me exploiting someone else because of their vulnerability puts me in a better position, what does that say about me? What does that say about the family members that I

am teaching and training? What does that say about what I'm teaching them as well? That it's okay?"

We know of cases even now where men think it's a big deal to take their young son at a certain age out to get his first prostitute because, "I'mma make a man out of him." Then we end up raising people who think nothing of physically, emotionally, and spiritually demeaning another human being because that's how we were taught, that's how it was always done. That doesn't make it right.

When you truly believe that there is a God, it's going to come full circle at some point. Where will that put us as human beings? Looking at the damage that we've done, not just to our planet, but to one another. Really that is the value of a character of a person, I think, is how we treat each other.

Chris: I don't want to get too far ahead of the story, but share with us the work that you do at the Woman at the Well Transition Center, how is it funded, what services you offer, and maybe most importantly, how can people in the audience support your mission?

Donna: Absolutely. I knew that the only way to escape my traffickers was to end up in prison. They were not going to let me go. They were going to kill me. I ended up going to prison. I found out in prison that I wasn't the only one, that there were other women whose stories were very similar to mine, and yet we weren't talking about it.

When that happened to me, nobody was talking about trafficking. You were either a prostitute or a whore, excuse my language, and there was nothing in the middle. I learned in prison that I had to learn to be accountable, committed, and consistent, because those three things, accountability, commitment, and consistency is what helped me to regain my self-esteem, my self-respect and my self-confidence. Those were the principles that I felt I had to have in order to rebuild my life and to rebuild myself, my integrity and really be able to step out and be an example to my children later on, that you can overcome, but you have to work on it. You have to have principles, you have to have standards.

These are the things that I began to really fine-tune when I went to prison. I went to prison because that was the only way I was going to be able to escape the people who were trafficking me. I knew that if I talked at that time, I would put my family, especially my children and my mother, in danger. I kept my mouth shut for a long time. Then when I was able to talk about it, and I talked about it to a counselor in the prison, it started the ball rolling and started them looking at, this was more than pimping and prostitution. Now we're looking at, number one, organized crime.

I was exploited and trafficked by gang members. When society thinks about gang members, we think about guns and drugs, but we never think about where they got the money to purchase those guns and those drugs. The truth is they got it from exploiting human beings one way or another.

While I was in prison, I started doing the research. I started looking at other women, talking to other women, looking at the challenges that we were going to face when we got out of prison. I started looking at how many of us were going to lose our children, how many of us are not going to be able to return to the jobs that we once had, how many of us didn't even have families to go back to.

That really did begin the process of Woman at the Well Transition Center. I met women like Bishop Margaret Reynolds, Lynette Higgins, who helped me literally put my life back together again. They helped me. They believed in me more than I believed in myself and I think that's the most powerful thing that you can do in life. Those five words, I believe in you. I believe in you. That's four words, but I think those are the most powerful words that you can say to another human being is, "I believe in you," because it encouraged me as well. If they believe in me, maybe there is something in me that I need to look at. I really started putting together the foundation of Woman at the Well Transition Center.

When I got out of prison, I got out on parole. Just nine days before mandatory minimums became constitutional, I got out of prison. That was amazing. In and of itself, it was already a miracle. The miracle was that while I was incarcerated, I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ. I gave my life to a man who they told me would not judge me for what I had done.

You see, Chris, I had been touched by many men, but I was only moved to do something better with my life by one man, and his name was Jesus. I had to believe in him the way other people were believing in me. That caused me to really begin to put a standard to my life.

When I got out, I went to Sandra Barnhill here in Atlanta. At that time, they were called Aid to Imprisoned Mothers. There was no other organization doing that kind of work in the country with women who had been formally incarcerated, never mind trafficked, because I still couldn't bring myself to talk about it.

I got out of prison, I went because I had heard about this organization in Atlanta. I sat down in her office and for one hour, Chris, I cried. That's all I could do was cry, because I realized I had survived. I had survived what most people couldn't even imagine or think about happening to them, but I survived it. I knew that because I survived it, I was supposed to do something.

All the scriptures that I read in the Bible, I could understand, but more than anything, I related to that woman at the well. I related to that woman that was scorned, that was looked at differently, that met a man who did not judge her for what she had done, but told her how she could be a better person.

He didn't tell her about all the things that other people had done to her. I didn't learn in prison about all the things that other people had done to me. I learned about Donna, and I learned about what Donna was capable of, and I learned that Donna is worthy.

I truly believe that because I came to understand that that's what I did and not who I am, that who I am is an overcomer, who I am is a survivor, who I am has a destiny and a purpose that is actually tied to other people that need to hear my story, because they need to believe that if God could do this for Donna, maybe he could do it for me. Maybe he could do it for my daughter, my mother, my sister, my aunt, my son. That really was the beginning of Woman at the Well Transition Center here in Atlanta and I started by telling my story. They let me go back into jails and prisons to tell my story, to encourage people to do something different.

We started our transitional program, literally, with a grant. I wrote what I thought was this wonderful grant because my mother, Nayo, was a wonderful, phenomenal grant writer.

I wrote this, what I thought was a great grant to George Soros Foundation, and asked them for the money to start a program for women like myself getting out of prison.

When I did that, I said, "Okay, I'm going to trust that I could write this grant." I sent him what I thought was really a great grant. No, it wasn't. He sent me back this letter on some yellow legal paper, no joke, that said, "Donna, this sounds great, but could you just tell me--" I said, "Great? No, this is good." He said, "Could you just tell me, how did you go from where you were to where you are today? How did you change your life like that? How did that for you?" I thought about what was it he really needed to know about me. I wrote it on two sheets of legal paper, and he sent me a substantial check to help get us started.

Since then, we have received funding from individual donors, from private foundations, contracts with the state agencies to do the work that we're doing, working with women and girls who are getting out of prison or whose background includes trafficking or they've been impacted by the criminal justice system.

It has not been easy. It has not been popular work. It has not been work that is, how shall we say it, mediaworthy in many cases. For a long time, nobody wanted to touch what I was doing because nobody wanted to be connected to prisoners. Nobody wanted to be connected to women who were getting out of prison. Nobody wanted to even talk about it.

I began to really look for people who could understand and relate to what we were dealing with, the challenges of finding housing, of getting our children back, of getting a job, just getting a job, places that would hire people who were formerly incarcerated. That in and of itself was a huge challenge.

I began working with people who I thought believed in us and would give us a shot, give us a chance. Our funding started from, like I said, individual donors, foundations, private foundations, public foundations.

I didn't do a lot of government funding because, to be honest, they didn't want to fund us. They didn't want to fund anything that had to do with people in prison or coming home from prison. That was part of the travesty, but it is also a reality.

Now, of course, we can see that there is public funding, there's private funding, there's government funding for issues dealing with women who are incarcerated, because we found out the damage that is done to families and communities when you incarcerate women. Yes, men are incarcerated. We know that. However, only 23% of the men who are incarcerated have been primary caregivers of their children.

For women, we're looking at over 70% of the women who had been primary caregivers of their children when they were arrested.

I started really tapping into funding that was available for all of the issues that overlapped with human trafficking and incarceration of women. It included human trafficking, domestic violence, neglected health care, PTSD, mental health issues, substance abuse. That really did help me to tie down the funding chain I needed. Excuse me.

Chris: Donna, you've touched a little--

Donna: I'm sorry.

Chris: That's okay. You touched a little bit there about your past, talked about being incarcerated. We've got about 15, 17 minutes left for the show. I'll make sure you have enough time to tell your story. You said your story really starts as, "A girl looking for love in all the wrong places." Take it from there, please.

Donna: That was me. I was raised in a wonderful family. As I said, we have some historical members of our family. My uncle, Benjamin Malcolm, was the first African American to be appointed to the Federal Parole Commission by President Jimmy Carter.

The story that I was a young girl looking for love in all the wrong places was real. I had witnessed domestic violence, as I said. I myself had been married off at a very young age, and it was, for lack of a better word, an arranged marriage.

Even though I didn't know how to do anything different, I knew that I had to make some decisions about how I was going to live my life. I was married off, and I was divorced at a very young age. Before I turned 20, I had three kids, Chris. Three children, a high school education, going to college.

I ended up getting a job in Washington, DC, at a bookstore, at just a little shop. That was when Reagan National was about this big, and I got a job as a flight attendant.

Unbelievable because nobody was doing that. Nobody was hiring women who had all these kids to work as a flight attendant. You couldn't even [inaudible 00:36:53] but I was able to do that.

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I met a man that I thought loved me. I thought this man-- He told me I was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. He dressed me up, made me feel like I was just everything. I met this guy and he told me I was just this wonderful girl. I wanted to believe that because I wanted to be loved. I was looking for that kind of love. I had grown up in a community where I thought, if a man didn't beat me, he didn't love me. Remember, it goes back to that domestic violence issue.

I also realized that we attract what we think we deserve. The men I attracted in my life after I divorced my husband said something about how I felt about myself, but I didn't realize it at that time. He dressed me up and we went to a party in a penthouse, and I was drinking champagne, Chris. I was living large. At least I thought I was.

I woke up with a man on top of me having sex with me that wasn't the man I came there with, the man I thought loved me. I was in shock. I was scared. I looked and there were men standing along the wall laughing at what was happening to me and waiting for their turn. I didn't know how long it lasted because I passed out. When I woke up, I was alone in that room. I didn't know what had happened or what I had done, where anybody was. He never answered my phone calls again. I never saw him again.

I didn't know what to say to anybody because I knew that if I said, "This is what happened," the first thing someone was going to say, I shouldn't have been up there. That's what I get for traveling with those kind of circles. I began to anesthetize what happened to me with drugs and alcohol. I would go out to nightclubs, Chris, to try to forget what happened to me. There were men that would lean over and whisper in my ear what they had done to me. I didn't know who they were, but they knew who I was.

When I couldn't take it any longer, and I had been raped again in the bathroom of a nightclub by one of those men who told me if I said anything again, he would kill me, I believed him because the torture I had just experienced couldn't be any worse than death.

I took my children and I went to the West Coast. I moved as far away from where I was as I could. I left my job, I left everything, and I went to the West Coast.

I moved into one of the seediest neighborhoods down the hall from a man and his wife and her sister who helped me with my children and helped me find food and helped me watch the children when I had to get a job. Two months after I got there, he told me he's a pimp, and now I owed him. I had to do what I was told or he would take one of my daughters. I was more afraid of what he would do to one of my daughters. I was more afraid than what he would do to me. I saw what he did to the women that were around him that I thought were his wife and sister-in-law. Of course, I found out later they weren't. I was more afraid of what they would do to my children than what he would do to me.

I made him a lot of money. I was sold for AK-47s. I was sold for weapons, for drugs, if they lost a bet, for Super Bowl tickets, you name it. I did what I had to do to stay alive. All I could think of every day was my children. I wanted to come home and know that they were okay. Even though the environment they were living in was not okay, I just knew that if they knew any more than what they saw, then their lives would be in danger as well. I let them think that I was just this terrible mother because it was safer for them.

I ended up leaving California to get away from them and I moved to the Midwest. I don't know how or why, but I ended up back in the same thing because someone from California where they were coming-- Those gang members were moving from California into the Midwest with drugs. Crack cocaine became the number one form of drug, and they were moving it into Midwest. One of those people from California saw me in Minnesota. The next thing I knew, I got a knock on the door, and the people I had run from were confronting me. I knew at that point I had to do whatever I had to do to stay alive.

In the end, I lost my children. I lost custody of my children. I lost everything and my freedom because I ended up getting arrested. I kept my mouth shut. I got sentenced with these gang members to two 12-year sentences in federal maximum security prison.

Chris, I went to prison to get free. It was in prison that I started looking at myself in the mirror and I knew that if I did not treat that girl I was looking at in the mirror right from that day forward, that there was nothing else to live for. The reality is, if you can't treat yourself, that person that you look at in the mirror every day with dignity and respect, you're not going to treat anybody, not your children, your family, you're not even going to respect God until you can respect the person that you look at in the mirror. Michael Jackson made that song famous, the *Man in the Mirror*, but it's real, if you understand that the value we have as human beings is the one thing that God gave us, and that is our life, the very breath in our body.

I made a commitment when I looked at myself in the mirror that, from that day forward, I was going to do everything I could to be a better person. In order to have better, I had to do better and be better. That's really where my journey began.

Most people, when they heard that I had been arrested, thought, "That's the end of Donna. Her life is over. She's going to prison." I had a \$1,000-a-day crack cocaine habit, I had been beaten and left for dead three times, I was sentenced to two 12-year sentences in federal maximum security, but God had a greater plan for my life.

There were people that believed in me. My counselor, Ms. Jackson, one of the officers, Ms. Harris. There were people that believed in me. Lynette Higgins, Margaret Reynolds, [inaudible 00:43:38] Wright, the R&B legend, Betty Wright, Betty Oates, my mother, Nayo, believed in me enough that I had to fight my way back, but it was worth it. I knew that if I didn't do that, if I didn't fight my way back,

what would my children grow up thinking about themselves? Never mind me. What about themselves?

I think that that has been my motivation, because God took a chance and saved me. It reminded me, as I told you, and I'll finish my sentence, when I asked God, "Why?" he said, "Why not--" When I said, "Why me?" he said, "Why not you?" I asked God, "How am I supposed to do this?" I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't have a clue. I knew that I needed money to do it. I needed money to help women get out and live a better life, but I didn't know how to do this.

He reminded me of the story of the people of Israel when they left Egypt and they were bitten by this serpent. God told the prophet, "If you find that serpent that bit them, that made them sick, and put it on a staff in front of them and let them look upon it, and if they look upon it, they can be healed." He said, "I want them to see what I've done for you to believe it for themselves, to believe it for their daughters, their mothers, their aunt, their sister." I truly am grateful for my life every day. I'm grateful that American Airlines took the chance of hiring me because of who I am and not what I did. I'm truly grateful for that.

I'm so thankful that you've had this conversation today because so many people hear about human trafficking, but they don't have a face to it. Well, this is what it looks like. There are so many other women that may not look identical to me, but our stories have a common thread. That really is what America and what this movement is about. It's that common thread that binds us together that means I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper, and I can make a difference. I can make a difference and that's really what I want to leave with people.

I tell my children when I'm gone one day, there'll be two dates on my headstone. The day I came in here, I had nothing to do with, and the day I leave here, I have nothing to do with. All I can do is use that dash in the middle to make a difference. If somebody said, "Why you?" my answer, Chris, is very simple, "Because I was meant to be." I was meant to be.

Chris: Donna, thank you for sharing that. I know how difficult it is.

Donna: It gives me just a little bit more freedom, Chris, every time I tell it.

Chris: One of the things that you learned from your experience was that human trafficking is an organized crime. You touched on that in terms of selling drugs and weapons. Obviously, organized crime is a massive machine. What will it take to shut it down?

Donna: If organized crime is prosperous because it's organized, then an organized strategy to confront it is what it's going to take to shut it down. People like the Marines are not afraid. Those are the boots on the ground, right out front. People like the Air Force that look at this issue from a different level and a different perspective. People like the Army who goes in with a strategy to defeat the enemy, but they make

sure they know who their enemy is and it's not each other. The Air Force, the Marines, the Army, the Navy.

I always think of the Navy because my family and my children are in the Navy. I think of the Navy because they have to approach every issue from a different perspective in an environment that's not always stable.

It's going to take an organized effort of everyone, not just our religious leaders, not just our celebrities, not just our legislators, not just law enforcement, not just victims who become survivor leaders. It's going to take all of us and it has to be organized.

No one entity has all the answers. No one entity can do it all, but together, we can stop it. We can stop human trafficking. Pope Francis has made it his mandate by 2030 to end human trafficking. I truly believe that if we all decide, "I'm going to do my part," if that means educating my children, if that means educating my community, my church, my school, my sorority, my fraternity. There's a movement right now to ID children, the National Child ID Program, that allows us to ID our children and keep this information so that if one of our children ends up being missing, it's not going to take them 72 hours to start looking for them.

The National Organization of Black Law Enforcement, the NFL alumni, the Hall of Famers have all come together and said, "We want to make a difference."

If we can keep ID for these children so that when they come up missing, we can immediately start looking for them, if we can do that as family, as communities, in our schools, in our churches, corporations begin to say, "We're not going to tolerate it." The hospitality industry can say, "We're not going to tolerate it anymore. We have a zero tolerance now. We're not going to look the other way," aviation and airlines, "We're not going to look the other way," entertainers and athletes, "We're not going to look the other way. We're going to be accountable, we're going to be committed, and we're going to be consistent."

If those three principles helped Donna Hubbard change her life, I believe we can confront and defeat human trafficking in our time.

Chris: Well, when you and I spoke last week, I told you I've made that a major focus of the show. It's heroes and survivors like yourself, Brian Searcy, Alina Donahue, Brittany Dunn from the Safe House Project, our dear friend, Andi Buerger, at Voices Against Trafficking.

Donna: Yes.

Chris: It takes everybody.

Donna: There are so many survivor leaders around the country that are doing some phenomenal things. Kathryn Griffin in Houston, Texas, and her program, Kelly Dore, her program, Alicia Kozakiewicz, Dorsey Jones. There are so many survivor leaders that are truly making a difference around the world. Shandra Woworuntu who speaks

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from an Asian perspective and ways that other people hadn't even considered. I truly believe that when you start an organization, and I always go back to Ryan Hope with cancer. When we started looking at cancer was because we saw survivors who were willing to talk about what they experienced in order for people to get a true understanding and put a face to the issue. That's what's happening with human trafficking. Survivor leaders have to begin to be the center of the projects, the programs, the legislation that comes in front of everyone so that they can put a face to it, but also because it is time for people to do things with us and not for us.

Chris: Donna, we have about two minutes left. I like to have our guests always have the final word. Please take us to the end of our conversation with advice that helps our audience become less stressed, more resilient, and more empowered.

Donna: Chris, first, I want to thank you so much. You and your team have made this a comfortable discussion to have and a trusting because we don't always trust everybody. Too often, even after we were rescued, we continue to be exploited. I want to thank you first, Chris Meek and *Next Steps Forward*, for taking the time to have this conversation.

I want to thank the law enforcement officers who began to look at human trafficking not as a victimless crime, but as one that has so many different layers that they have to uncover it to really get to the source of it.

To families who are looking for their loved ones, I want to tell you, don't stop looking for us. The one thing I remember more than anything is I wanted someone to see me.

Traffickers count on us being too busy with our own lives to see what we're looking at. Most people will see something that doesn't look right, but they're not sure who to tell and they're not sure what to tell. What I will say is this. Most people don't report it because they don't want to get involved and they don't want to be wrong. Leave that up to the law enforcement officers. If you see something, your first line of contact is to dial 911 wherever you are. If it doesn't look right, let the authorities decide, but if we don't make those reports, if we don't begin to see what we're looking at in our own communities, then traffickers will continue to exploit even our own vulnerability to be caught up in our own lives.

I tell people, take the time to look and see what you're looking at. Take the time to ask your children who their best friend is in school. Who's their best friend? Do you have friends that maybe don't come back to school after lunch that look like they're on drugs, that look like they have too much money, that dress too sexually provocative, whose boyfriend is much older than they are, who leave school at lunchtime?

People that disappear don't just disappear, they're somewhere, and it's up to us to find them. We can't empower another human being, but we can give people the tools that help them to empower themselves. I want to thank you so much for that.



Chris: Bishop Donna L. Hubbard, thank you so much for being with us today.

Donna: Thank you. God bless you, Chris, and the work that you're doing.

Chris: Thank you. I'm Chris Meek. We're out of time. We'll see you next week, same time, same place. Until then, stay safe and keep taking your next steps forward.

[music]

Speaker: Thanks for tuning in to *Next Steps Forward*. Be sure to join Chris Meek for another great show next Tuesday at 10:00 AM Pacific Time and 1:00 PM Eastern Time on the VoiceAmerica Empowerment Channel. This week, make things happen in your life.

[music]

[00:54:31] [END OF AUDIO]