



COVER STORY

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Survivor of child prostitution aims to change lives



By Janet Kornblum, USA TODAY

FRESNO — In the chilly winter evening in Central Valley, the agricultural heart of California, Carissa Phelps is driving down a street known as Motel Drive, tucked between a park and railroad tracks in the shadow of Highway 99.

A few women — some looking more like teens — stand on street corners, eyeing potential customers, preparing for the night ahead. Not much has changed since Phelps stood on these very same corners 19 years ago, a girl with nowhere to go but the streets.

Carissa Phelps, 31, talks with friend Alfonzo Williams, a homeless man in Fresno. She keeps in touch with people living on the streets so she knows what's happening as a community organizer

Phelps looks at the run-down, faded buildings and points to a tall turquoise sign with white and yellow lettering. The Villa Motel.



She was 12, hungry and alone when a man three times her age picked her up, bought her a hot dog and Pepsi, then brought her here.

It was the beginning of a life she never thought she'd survive.

But now she is 31, a law and business school graduate of the University of California-Los Angeles, a star in an upcoming documentary about her life and a spokeswoman for teenagers forced to turn to prostitution when they have no other way to survive.

It was at this hotel where Carissa Phelps was taken when she was 12.

She is a fundraiser who rubs elbows with California's business and political elite, and she is a neighborhood organizer who is just as comfortable with people living on the margins.

She's a "meteor," who has a passion not just to change this neighborhood but to create a blueprint to transform dangerous, marginal neighborhoods into places of light, culture and safety, says local investor Lee Ayers.

"People get on and off the freeway and get what they want," Phelps says. "Nobody understands about the lives of people here. They don't realize there are kids out there."

Children being forced into prostitution is "America's dirty little secret," says Lois Lee, founder of Children of the Night, a Los Angeles non-profit that houses and counsels children who want to get off the streets.

Phelps wants to put the spotlight on prostituted children (calling them "child prostitutes" puts the blame on the wrong person, she says) by sharing her story, which is decidedly unglamorous and all too common: a story of a girl from a broken home with no place to go.



Carissa Phelps in
grade school

Handout
Tenth Street Films

How it all began

For Phelps, life in the streets began when her mother dropped her off at Fresno County Juvenile Hall 70 miles from their Coalinga home.

Sharol Macleod, Phelps' mother, says she doesn't remember much from that time; the incident is a "blur." But she does remember feeling helpless. Her daughter was repeatedly running away from home and seemed out of control.

"I was just desperate for her to be somewhere safe and not to run away anymore," Macleod says in a quiet voice over the phone.

Phelps remembers her childhood rebelliousness, a product, she says, of a dysfunctional family. But "I'm 12 years old. I can't be that bad at 12 years old. I had no criminal record — a common girl."

The county couldn't take her; she had broken no law. It couldn't turn her away, either. Phelps slept in the lobby for three days until she was taken to a group home. She disliked it instantly and ran away.

This was a pattern she repeated over the next few years, running from group homes, hanging out, sometimes babysitting, eventually turning to the streets.

For Phelps and many others, prostitution "wasn't Heidi Fleiss," Lee says. "She wasn't some attractive, sexy call girl. She wasn't having sex with movie stars."

When she ran away, she fell into the same trap as many young girls: "men who befriended her, forced her to have sex with other adult men and took money from her," Lee says. "She is the face and the voice of kids who have been forced into prostitution."

No one has accurate statistics on how many children turn to prostitution for survival, largely because street kids remain hidden. Some estimates range from 100,000 to 300,000 in the USA. But even those numbers are unreliable, says David Finkelhor of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire.

The numbers are higher than most people realize, says Ernie Allen of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

"The only way not to find this in any American city is simply not to look for it," Allen says. "This is not a problem that only happens in New York and Los Angeles and San Francisco. This happens in smaller communities."

What makes Phelps' story worthy of a documentary, now in its final stages, was not just that she survived but that she thrived, says filmmaker David Sauvage, who met Phelps in business school.

When he began making Carissa, he just wanted to make a great debut as a filmmaker.

"I wasn't thinking that much about the social implications of it," he says. "But over the course of making it, I saw that there really is a pretty powerful need for a story about a girl who made it out of that situation into a much better one."

In addition to her new life as a community organizer, Phelps also is a newlywed. On Feb. 21, she married her best friend from 15 years ago, Cole Clement, and has an 8-year-old stepdaughter.

The way back

Phelps' journey off the streets began when she stole a car at 13. She had been through short stints in county juvenile facilities, but this time she was sentenced to six months and placed in an experimental program that included group therapy.

There she met counselor Ron Jenkins, who now is a youth correctional officer and recruiter. He recognized her intelligence and gift for academics.

Phelps says it was the first time she felt adults really cared about her, and it made a difference.

Jenkins could see "a lot of hurt and pain" in Phelps, and he encouraged her to go back to school.

"Here's a young woman who pretty much had her childhood stolen away from her," he says. "But yet she had a desire to continue her education, to continue caring enough about herself to not only turn her life around, but to spend the rest of her life turning other people's lives around."

Phelps realized things needed to change even as a child of 12.

"I was walking down McKinley Avenue really late at night feeling totally invisible, scared out of my wits. There were bushes on the side of the street, and I didn't know if someone was going to jump out from them, or if there were monsters. I was freaked out. And I got mad. I was like, why isn't there any place for me to go? Why? I wanted to change it."

'Enlightenment' and action

It wasn't until much later, until business school, that she realized she wanted to come back and change that very neighborhood. She took a course on women and leadership taught by Jamie McCourt, president of the Los Angeles Dodgers. (The Dodgers Dream Foundation is helping pay for the documentary.)

Phelps says McCourt convinced her "that earning a degree meant that certain economic, social and civic callings awaited all of us as members of an elite class of business school grads."

After graduating in June, Phelps took a lucrative job working as a private equity analyst in Los Angeles. She had planned to save money for a while and learn more about community investment to pay off her \$150,000 in student loans and then return in a few years armed with knowledge and money.

But a desk job wasn't for her. And there was something more. "Me coming back to Fresno is about my own enlightenment," she says. "There's no other way I would want to live my life. I wanted to help. I want this junk, this crap that happened to me to be useful somehow. And this is how it could be useful."

And it was after she returned that she reunited with Clement.

Working on the dream

Phelps can almost taste how the neighborhood could change. "I see a beautiful area with open space, organic farming — grocery stores."

But those are only dreams. Her plan is to organize neighborhood leaders who will help develop



the specifics.

Phelps already has begun. She started a fund to buy abandoned buildings, like the old Kmart on Olive Avenue. She spends her days fundraising, talking to community officials and organizing neighbors. She recently received attention for her fight against a proposal to put a halfway house in the neighborhood for returning female convicts.

"I try to think about where I can do the most," she says. Even if she doesn't raise the money herself but can inspire others, "I shine a light on the problem. If that's all that I do, it's worth it."

Phelps, on whom the documentary *Carissa* is based, continues to network via cell phone at the home she shares with husband Cole Klement, 28, who's helping in the kitchen.

But is she ever too haunted by the past to move forward?

"Only when I'm not working on and trying to fix it," she says. "I want to somehow change the situation that I came from so that if there was another Carissa following 30 years behind me, something different would happen for them."

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