

In the spring of 2010, she was a free-spirited 15-year-old honour student who loved playing the violin and running on her high-school athletics team, but she was already imagining a life outside her suburban Seattle home. So one afternoon the high-school student skipped training and ran away to the city to “find herself.” She met a 32-year-old man who offered her a place to stay and won her trust with gifts and long, late-night conversations in which he listened to stories about her hopes and dreams.

Within days those teenage dreams became a nightmare. He beat and raped her and posted explicit photographs of her in an ad on classified advertising site backpage.com, forcing her to have sex for money. The phone rang off the hook as he took her to meet men in hotel rooms around the clock. “At one point, I finally accepted this was my fate and

this was what I was going to be doing for the rest of my life,” says J.S., who agreed to tell WHO her story, but requested that her name not be used. “I just kind of gave up.”

Instead J.S., now 22, found the strength to be a survivor. Rescued during a sting operation after police saw her photo on backpage.com, J.S. has since filed a lawsuit against the classified website, arguing that backpage.com CEO Carl Ferrer and former owners Michael Lacey and James Larkin knowingly permit the sale of underage girls for sex. Her story—and those of other young girls who became trapped in the multimillion-dollar sex-trafficking industry—was the focus of the documentary *I Am Jane Doe* (streaming on Netflix). “Child sex trafficking in America today is a corporate enterprise,” says Yiota Souras, general counsel for the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, who appears in the film. NCMEC has lent its support to J.S.’s case and other lawsuits against backpage.com in places such as Texas and Alabama. “Child sex trafficking happens in every state, in every community, in every jurisdiction,” says Souras. “It’s big business and it’s one of the worst crimes imaginable.”

Meanwhile, the state of California has charged Ferrer, Lacey and Larkin with money laundering and conspiracy to commit pimping. (All have pleaded not guilty and are free on bail awaiting trial.) And last month the US Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations released a blistering bipartisan report alleging “Backpage has knowingly concealed evidence of criminality by systematically editing” its ads to disguise the fact that they involve prostitution and child sex trafficking. “The profit they were making was obscene and the fact they were comfortable making that profit on the backs of children that were being sold for sex,” says Senator Claire McCaskill, who co-authored the report. “It’s hard to contemplate that kind of evil.”



Backpage.com executives (from left) Carl Ferrer, James Larkin, Andrew Padilla and Michael Lacey appeared but declined to testify at a Jan. 10 Senate subcommittee hearing investigating whether backpage.com knowingly facilitated child sex trafficking.

J.S. and her family have been trying to put their lives back together. “We’re trying to figure out a new normal,” says J.S.’s mother, Nacole. J.S.’s pimp—he was convicted of promoting commercial sex abuse of a minor, third-degree child rape and second-degree assault—was sentenced to 26 years in prison, but “we’re not the same family we were in

2010,” says Nacole. When J.S. was rescued, she says, “I didn’t know if I was going to be in trouble or if my parents were going to be mad”—an admission that brings tears to her parents’ eyes. “I can’t imagine how overwhelming it must have been for her,” says her father, Tom.

J.S. has moved from Seattle to start a new life. A single mother of two—she has a 6-month-old son and 3-year-old

“It doesn’t matter if you’re in a big city or rural community, your child is at risk”

—J.S.’s mother, Nacole

daughter—she got her driver’s licence and is preparing to train as a beautician. “I am happy,” she says. “My kids are a big part of my healing.” And she is prepared to fight. “I want to see Backpage ads completely shut down and for them to finally be held accountable for what they’ve done,” she says. “I want to be a voice not just for me, but for all girls.”

■ By Elaine Aradillas



Parents Nacole and Tom point to statistics that say the sex industry probably enslaves one in six of the 18,500 runaways in the US each year.

THE FIGHT AGAINST ONLINE CHILD TRAFFICKING

SOLD FOR

"I didn't know if anybody would ever find me or rescue me," says J.S. "I didn't have hope when I was gone."

ENDING TRAUMA

"These children are traumatised," says Mary Mazzio, director of the documentary *I Am Jane Doe*. "This is not *Pretty Woman*." J.S.'s dad Tom adds, "We need the stigma of what she suffered to go away so these kids are not victimised again."

RSEX

Forced into sexual slavery as a teen, a Seattle woman takes on the owners of the website where she was advertised