

Nominated Child Rights Hero

Rachel Lloyd

PAGES
66–85

WHY HAS RACHEL BEEN NOMINATED?

Rachel Lloyd has been nominated for the World's Children's Prize for her work spanning over 20 years to tackle domestic trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children, CSEC, in the US.

During her childhood in England, Rachel herself was the victim of mental and physical abuse and was exploited in the sex industry in Germany.

Rachel moved to the USA at the age of 22 and was shocked to see girls as young as 12 being sold on the streets of New York. She founded *Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, GEMS*, at her kitchen table with just 30 dollars and a borrowed computer. Since then, Rachel and GEMS have transformed the lives of thousands of girls by offering love and practical support. They have also pushed through more child-friendly laws and systems, including New York's *Safe Harbor Act* – the first law in the US giving children who have been forced to sell sex the right to support and protection, instead of punishment.

Rachel's fight has brought about a change in society, from treating the girls affected as criminals, to seeing them as victims, and then survivors and leaders. Every year, 400 girls and young women receive direct services from Rachel and GEMS. Some 1,500 girls are reached via preventive programs, and over 1,300 professionals including social workers and police officers receive training about CSEC and girls' rights.



It's a Friday evening. The phone rings just as Rachel is finally heading home after a tough week at work. The police have picked up a girl who appears to have been forced to sell sex. She's refusing to talk to anyone. Maybe Rachel can help?

Rachel waits on a bench at the agency where the police take children who are in trouble. She looks around at the cold strip lighting and the pale green walls and doesn't like what she sees. How can a child who's been through terrible experiences feel welcome here?

After a few minutes, two staff members arrive with Danielle, a girl in a baggy tracksuit, her hair in a ponytail. She looks angry and sits down with her arms crossed.

Rachel comes from GEMS, an agency in New York that helps girls who have been exploited in the child sex trade. She intro-

duces herself and says:

"I'm just here to see how we can support and help you."

Danielle eyes Rachel warily and remains silent.

"I'm not from the cops or child welfare. What you tell me will be confidential. The reason I started GEMS is because I used to be in the life, too, so I wanted to have a place for girls who'd been through the same thing."

'In the life'

Most girls get curious when Rachel tells them that she was also caught up in the sex trade, or 'in the life' as the girls call it here. But Danielle is not easy to talk

to, so after a while Rachel tries a direct question:

"Can I ask how old you are?"

"Eleven."

"I'm sorry, how old?"

"I'm eleven."

Rachel is shocked. She's met many 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds who've been exploited in the child sex trade, but never anyone as young as 11.

Finally, Danielle starts telling Rachel she likes Mexican food and the Harry Potter books. That she wants to be a singer and write poems. And that she has a 29-year-old boyfriend.

DIFFERENT NAMES!

Several of the people featured in the stories on these pages about Rachel have had their names changed and their ages are not included. This is in order to protect their identities.



Most of the girls that Rachel fights to protect were forced into the child sex trade when they were just 13–14 years old. GEMS offers girls and young women between the ages of 12–24 a stepping stone to a better life, providing love and practical support.

Rachel has been fighting for 20 years for girls and young women who have been victims of domestic trafficking in the US. Today, many survivors of abuse become leaders themselves, helping other girls. The photo shows a group of survivors with Rachel and staff members at GEMS.



“Elizabeth’s 14 and Annette’s 16.”

“That must be really tough for you, hon. It seems like you’ve had a lot to deal with in your life.”

“I miss my mom,” says Danielle quietly.

Plenty still to do

Rachel finds it hard to get to sleep that night. As soon as she closes her eyes, she sees Danielle’s face. Rachel and GEMS have helped thousands of girls to a better life, but there are new victims all the time.

But even so, a lot has changed, Rachel reminds herself. Just a few years ago, Danielle could have been arrested. Now she’s entitled to support. GEMS can help Danielle become a survivor, who can support other girls in the future. And they’ll need her, because there’s still plenty more to do. 🌐

Boyfriend is a pimp

The man Danielle calls her ‘boyfriend’ is really her pimp. The man who is forcing her to sell sex to other men. Rachel mentions a hotel that pimps tend to use, and Danielle nods. She’s been there.

“You know how I know that hotel? ... One night, we got a call from a girl ... Her pimp was beating her and she was scared... So me and one of my staff drove down in the middle of the night and ran in and got her out.”

Danielle listens wide-eyed. Now she understands that Rachel knows what she’s talking about.

Misses her mum

Danielle says she met the pimp through her sister.

“Her and my other sister do the same thing that you and me did,” she whispers.

“How old are your sisters, hon?”

Children at risk of being trafficked

Any child can be caught up in **commercial sexual exploitation of children, CSEC**, in the US, but the majority are non-white children who have grown up in poverty, in particular:

- African American and Latino children.
- Children who have run away from home and/or are homeless.
- Children who have been taken into care.
- Children who have been victims of abuse.
- Children who suffer from addiction.
- Children who are differently abled (with disabilities).
- Children from the LGBTQ community.
- Children who come to the US as refugees or migrants and who do not speak English.



Rachel with her mum in England, before the problems started.



Rachel, 9, in her school uniform.



Rachel, 14, working as a model.

Rachel grows up

Rachel doesn't think twice about the fact that her dad isn't around until she starts school, and hears everyone else talking about their dads. She wonders where her dad is, and whether he thinks about her sometimes.

Rachel has a vague memory of Robert, a man who lived with her mum for a while and who she called 'dad'. She's happy when he suddenly comes back.

Mum is happy too. She and Robert had split up because he drank too much. Now she's desperate to give Rachel a stable family and perhaps she thinks true love true will conquer all. That's not what happens.

Mean and violent

Rachel's stepfather gets mean when he drinks. One evening he hits her and drags her up a long flight of stairs by the hair. After that she keeps away from him when he's drunk. Except when he hits mum. Then she gets in between them, jumps up on a chair and screams at him to

stop. But no one listens. Instead mum starts drinking too, so it'll hurt less. When Rachel begs her to throw Robert out, she says:

"I just need to try not to make him so angry."

Rachel doesn't want to stay at home any longer. She hangs around town with her friends and when she's 12, she starts drinking too.



Tired of life

By the time Robert finally leaves the family, it's too late. Rachel's mum is drinking day and night. Most of the time she just stares blankly in front of her. She often threatens to take her own life. Rachel tries to comfort her. But in the end, she doesn't want to carry on living either. She takes one of the bottles of wine her mum has hidden and mixes it with all the tablets she can find at home.

Rachel survives, but is rushed to a hospital, where she is kept in isolation for three weeks. A social worker wants Rachel to move in with a foster family, but she refuses. Her mum wouldn't be able to cope on her own. In the end, despite everything, Rachel is sent home to her mum. For a while she meets

with a psychiatrist once a week. He doesn't think things are going to work out well for her.

"By the time you reach 16 you'll either be dead, in prison or pregnant, or a combination of all those things," he guesses.

Factory job

Rachel drops out of school and takes a job at a factory to help pay for food and rent. At 14, she's too young really, but she lies about her age. In the evenings she goes out to bars, drinks and takes drugs. Sometimes she meets her mum when she's out. Her friends think it's fun. Rachel doesn't.

She dreams of something better, like becoming a lawyer or a journalist. She gets



As a 17-year-old, Rachel took a job at a sex club in order to survive.

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the chance to work as a model for a teenage magazine, but the modelling agency says she's too short for the best modelling jobs. They suggest she poses for 'sexy' images instead. It's illegal to take those kinds of photos of a 14-year-old. Rachel uses make-up to look older.

Rachel runs away

When Rachel is 17, she can't take it at home anymore. Her mother has become violent and flies into constant rages. Rachel runs away to Germany with some girls she's only known for a day. After three weeks her money runs out and her new mates have moved on. Rachel has tried getting restaurant jobs all over town, but she's been turned down everywhere. She finds herself in an area where there are dodgy bars and sex clubs. A red neon sign flashes 'Girls, girls, girls'. Rachel thinks: "I'm a girl", and goes down some stairs into the murky building. A few min-

utes and yet another lie about her age later, and she can start straight away.

A nightmare

At the club, Rachel's job is to dance and sit on clients' laps, drunken men who pull on her clothes. In the evenings she spends a long time in the shower, scrubbing herself until it feels like she's going to lose a layer of skin. She often wonders how she ended up here. It's like a nightmare that she can't wake up from.

Falls in love

Rachel meets a guy in Germany, JP. He has big beautiful eyes and she falls in love. JP seems nice at first, but he takes all the money she earns to buy drugs. If she doesn't earn enough one evening, he beats her. Sometimes he regrets it later. "You just need to try a bit harder, bring in more money," he explains. Rachel doesn't think there's anything odd about JP saying he

loves her while at the same time he beats her and says horrible things. She's used to that from home.

Escape!

It's not until JP almost kills her that Rachel seeks help at a church. She finally leaves him and the club, and starts working as a nanny for an American family.

For a long time, Rachel wakes up at night in a cold sweat, petrified. She has nightmares and her whole body aches from everything JP has done to her. But the family she's working for gives her lots of love and in the end she starts feeling better.

Rachel decides to help others and gets more involved in church. When she gets the opportunity to travel to the US and work in New York, helping women who sell sex to move on to a better life, she jumps at the chance. 🌐

Rachel's job as a nanny helped her recover. When she talks about her recovery today, she says: "They loved me back to life."



Rachel gives something back

For the first few days in New York, Rachel spends most of her time gazing up at the tops of the shimmering skyscrapers. But she soon discovers a darker side to the famous city.

Rachel's new job takes her across New York. During the day she visits shelters and prisons. At night she walks the streets where women are sold.

"Hi, I'm Rachel... Can I get you a coffee or hot chocolate? Do you need any help?"

No one wants to talk at first. The pimps are lurking in the shadows and get angry if she keeps the women from work. It's easier on quiet evenings. The women laugh at Rachel's English accent and teach her American slang expressions. Like that the street is called the *track*, and that women in the sex trade are *in the life*. The men who sell them are called *pimps*, the clients *Johns* or *tricks*.

Most of them have been 'in the life' since the age of 13 or 14. Almost all of them grew up poor, with little or no family support. Some ran away from home, lived in foster homes or were kicked out of their homes.

"But don't talk to us," says one woman. "It's the younger

ones who need the most help."

Rachel is shocked when she realises that there are girls as young as 12 on the street. She gets angry when they are arrested by the police and given prison sentences.

"You're children!" she says. "You need help, not punishment."

Rachel discovers that the laws in New York only protect children from the sex trade if they've been brought to the US from other countries by human traffickers. But most of the girls she meets were born and grew up in New York.

GEMS is born

When Rachel realises that there's no one helping the younger girls, she decides to do something about it. One year after moving to the US, she resigns from her job and starts her own organization at her kitchen table, with 30 dollars and a borrowed computer. She calls her organization GEMS (Girls Educational and Mentoring

The child sex trade has changed since Rachel's arrival in the US. Most girls are no longer sold on the street but online.



Services). Today, 20 years on, even Rachel herself finds it hard to understand how she went about it.

"I had no idea how to run an organization," she says. "But had to do something."

At first, all Rachel had to offer was love and sanctuary in her tiny flat in a deprived neighbourhood.

"The girls slept on my sofa, borrowed my clothes and cleaned out my fridge!"

Sometimes a pimp came round looking for a girl who'd escaped, and tried to break down the door. "But I was never really scared. I was

probably too inexperienced to be afraid."

One girl told Rachel that her pimp had warned her about GEMS.

"He said you'd try and brainwash me," she told Rachel.

"Why do you think he says that?" asked Rachel. The girl thought for a while before saying:

"Maybe because he's brainwashing me."

Love and education

As GEMS began to grow and attract more resources, Rachel opened a drop-in cen-





GEMS supports girls in their escape from the child sex trade. They become young leaders and identify as survivors, a word that some have even tattooed on their bodies.

tre with comfy sofas and cheerfully painted walls. Rachel wanted a place where everyone would feel safe, with rooms for private conversations, boxing and yoga, and to provide services such as counseling and workshops. She established safe housing for girls who were particularly vulnerable and had nowhere to go when they left their pimps.

Survivors become leaders

Many of the girls Rachel helped in the beginning have become survivors and leaders who inspire others.

“I started a group at GEMS, where we talked about everything from life on the street, to racism, law and politics. We learned a lot from one another. Now we’re working together as advocates against CSEC and we’re looking at the root causes. It’s

about tackling inequality, poverty, racism, sexism and discrimination, which particularly affects children of colour.” Lack of housing, inequality in health care and unemployment are also important factors.

Meeting presidents

GEMS’ young survivors and Rachel travel around and demand change.

“We meet legislators and politicians, presidents, artists and movie stars. And it’s the girls’ own stories that get people listening, that really make a difference,” says Rachel, who herself has given speeches at both the White House and the UN.

Program with impact

GEMS has grown to become one of the main organizations in the US supporting girls and young women who



Rachel and GEMS help vulnerable girls by providing secure accommodation.



The word ‘gem’ of course has another meaning in English. For Rachel, all the broken girls she meets on the street are beautiful gems. They just need a little help to shine and discover their true value.

GEMS’ drop-in centre is always packed with teenage girls and everyone loves Rachel’s cooking!



Many stars, like Beyoncé here, support Rachel and the work of GEMS.



are victims of domestic trafficking and Commercial Sexual exploitation of children. But Rachel dreams of a world where GEMS isn’t needed; a world where girls and women are not treated as property and are valued equally with boys and men.

“I want all children to have the chance to grow up in a safe environment with all the support they have a right to, at home, in school and from society.” 🌐

How Rachel & GEMS work

Rachel and GEMS support girls and young women aged between 12–24, who have survived domestic trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation in the US, through:

- Leadership training.
- Counseling, workshops, creative activities, sports and health activities like yoga and art therapy.
- Help with and advice about education.
- Safe housing for vulnerable girls.
- Guidance to independent living
- Preventive work.
- Legal assistance and alternatives to serving prison time.
- Campaigning *against* the child sex trade, *for* girls’ rights, justice, child-friendly laws and systems.



Shaquana took control

of her life

Shaquana opens her eyes. Where is she? Her head is pounding and her face feels tight and stings. Her whole body aches. She looks around, at the white walls and plastic wristband on her wrist. Her arms are covered with sores and bruises.

Shaquana is 15 when she is found unconscious in a ditch. Her upper lip is split in two; her jaw is broken, her nose as well. Most of her teeth are gone. When a nurse hands her a mirror, Shaquana looks at her broken face and thinks she's lucky to be alive.

The last thing Shaquana remembers is getting into a car on a dark street.

Beaten and yelled at

When Shaquana is little, she doesn't understand why her mum is always angry and

beats her. "Maybe it's because I'm doing something wrong?" she wonders. "Or because I'm ugly?" Her siblings often tease Shaquana for being darker than they are, and for her short hair. That's why she prays every night.

"Please God, make me look better. Please make my hair grow long."

No one has explained to Shaquana that her mum has a mental illness. The illness makes her afraid of almost everything, she yells and is sometimes violent.

The 'boy' who said he was 17 and wanted to be Shaquana's boyfriend was actually 29, twice her age.

He forced her to sell sex to other men.



When Shaquana wanted to leave the streets, she was locked in by her pimp and only allowed out to work.

Shaquana's parents split up when she is five years old. Her dad moves to another part of the US, while the children stay with their troubled mother in New York.

Sent away

The mum can't cope with looking after the children on her own. She sends Shaquana and two older siblings to their grandparents who live in the countryside, over 700 km away. Shaquana doesn't dare ask how long they are going to stay, but when she starts school she understands that it could be a long time. Shaquana wants to make her mum proud and studies hard. She gets good grades, despite the fact that she's almost always the last to finish her assignments. She's so afraid of doing something wrong.

Long wait

Several years pass. Sometimes her mum calls and says she's

coming soon. Then Shaquana is so happy, she cleans the house from top to bottom before running out onto the grass to look for four-leaf clovers for her mum, because they bring good luck. There's just one four-leaf clover for every 10,000 three-leaf clovers, but Shaquana never gives up. She spends hours on all fours in the grass, searching. And waiting. Because mum doesn't come, even though she promised.

After six years, when her mum remarries, she wants the children back. They move to east New York, a poor and violent area with drug dealers on the street corners and buildings covered in graffiti. Shaquana isn't used to all the people and noise in the big city, but she's happy that the family is back together again. They live in a large brown apartment block with small windows, surrounded by other similar brown buildings.

On her first day at school, Shaquana is a bit nervous about finding her way home again.

Tough school

The school is run-down and overcrowded. Some of the children curse at the teacher in the classroom, and the teacher swears back! Shaquana has never experienced anything like it.

In high school, Shaquana is one of the school's top learners. She wants to be her mother's pride and joy but her mum only seems to be able to see the bad things. When she isn't yelling and hitting her, she cries like a baby and wants comfort. Sometimes Shaquana feels so low, she wants to kill herself. But then who would look after mother?

Butterflies

Shaquana doesn't like asking her mum for money, so she

starts working in a shop. Instead of going straight home after school like she did before, she walks through the neighbourhood in the evenings after work. It feels different from during the day. It's full of people out playing music and hanging out on the street corners. A guy shouts out to her.

"Hi cutie! Come over here."

Shaquana quickly walks past. She's not used to talking to boys. But soon she runs into him again.

"Hey! Can't we just talk?"

The boy is always standing in the same spot. He calls to her every evening until Shaquana stops.

"You're pretty!" he says.

"How old are you? I'm 17."

"I'm 15," answers Shaquana, although she's actually only 14. She doesn't want to seem childish. They exchange phone numbers and she carries on home with butterflies in her tummy. No one



has called her pretty before.

Shaquana and the boy start meeting every day. It's a completely new feeling, having someone to talk to about everything. He says he'll take care of her always.

"Can't you skip school today? I miss you too much," he says sometimes. No one has missed Shaquana before. She starts cutting classes and the teachers are concerned and disappointed. What's happened to their top pupil?

Pressure

One evening, the boy wants to have sex, but Shaquana says no. Her mum is very religious and has told her that sex before marriage is a sin. The boy looks disappointed.

"If you love me you would want to be with me," he says.

He goes on about it every day and in the end, Shaquana gives in. She thinks that after all they're going to be together forever. But afterwards, the boy stops talking to her. When they meet on the street, he completely ignores her.

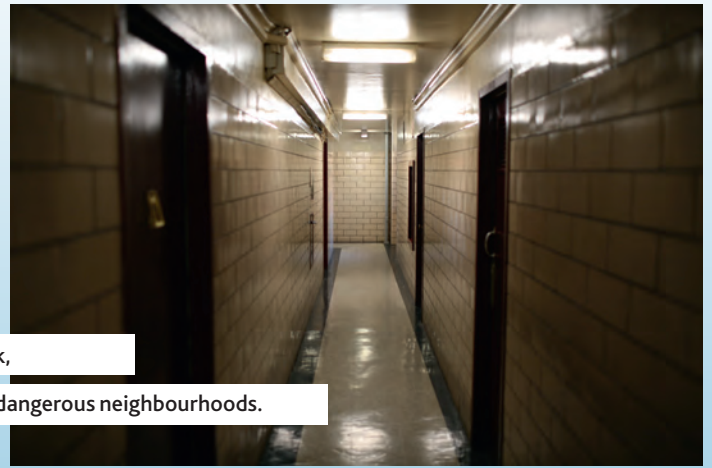
Shaquana is so unhappy that she can't eat or sleep. Thoughts whirl around her head. What did she do wrong? Why doesn't he like

her anymore? She doesn't have any friends to talk to about it. Talking to her mum or siblings is not an option.

She goes to his home. She cries, prays and begs, but he just looks at her coldly.

"I don't have time for little

Shaquana grew up in east New York, one of the city's poorest and most dangerous neighbourhoods.



girls. I'm a grown man."

Shaquana now discovers that like her, he's lied about his age. He isn't 17, he's 29, twice her age.

"I'm a pimp," he says. "If you want to be with me you have to work for me."

Shaquana doesn't know what a pimp does, but she's desperate.

"I'll do anything," she says. "Just take me back."

Sold to men

Things move quickly, because the pimp has had a plan from the first moment he saw Shaquana. He gives her high-heeled shoes and tiny, tight clothes. He explains that the job means she has to go with

other men for money.

Shaquana doesn't understand. She starts crying and the pimp gets angry.

"If you love me, you'll do anything for me," he says.

From then on, Shaquana only cries quietly, when the pimp sleeps. "I must be the only 14-year-old girl in the world doing this," she thinks.

At first, the pimp arranges 'dates' with various men. But after a while Shaquana has to stand on the street with other girls. They call it 'working the track'. There's a stream of cars driving slowly along the street. Shaquana tries to smile and wave, because her pimp is always nearby, watching. When a car stops,

Shaquana has to ask the man at the wheel what he wants. Some customers ask how old she is. She says what the pimp has told her to say.

"19."

"No you're not, you look 13," say some. But they still buy her.

Punishment

One night, Shaquana is arrested by police. In New York, it's illegal to sell sex. It's also a crime to have sex with someone under the age of 15. That automatically counts as rape. But the law doesn't seem to apply to girls like Shaquana. She is sentenced to juvenile detention, a prison for kids. No one asks about



To earn some extra money, Shaquana started

working in a shop like this one at the age of 14.

It was on her way home in the evenings that she met

the man who would become her pimp.

the men who sold her, or about the men who raped her.

In prison, everyone looks down on girls who've been sold on the street, both the guards and girls who have been convicted of crimes like theft or assault. They tell Shaquana she should be ashamed for allowing herself to sink so low. She is so stressed her hair falls out in great clumps.

Visit from GEMS

After a few months, Shaquana gets a visit from a young woman called Hailey, an outreach worker from the organization GEMS. She visits juvenile detention centres to look for girls who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

"What's happened to you? Who sold you? How are you feeling?" she asks Shaquana.

No adult has asked her these kinds of questions before; they've only judged her. Hailey says that

Shaquana hasn't done anything wrong.

"You're a victim, a child who needs support."

Shaquana has six months left to serve, but Hailey explains that she can be released earlier, provided she comes to GEMS and accepts help.

Early release

Mum lets Shaquana move back home and she starts school again. It's hard, she feels different. What if someone finds out where she has been?

It's a relief to go to GEMS every day after school, because she gets to meet other girls who've been through the same thing. She gets to know Rachel, who started GEMS, and never misses 'Rachel's group'. One evening a week, Rachel meets up with the girls, they share stories, cry, laugh and support one another.

"You are victims, but you can fight and become survi-

vors, have a good life," says Rachel.

Shaquana can hardly believe that Rachel, who seems so strong and professional, has also been 'in the life'. It gives her hope. But that hope doesn't last long.

Homeless

Shaquana's siblings have always picked on her, but now they call her dirty, cheap, a bad girl. But her mother yells the most.

"Slut! You'll never amount to anything. You'll end up back on the streets!"

Maybe her family is right and Rachel is wrong, thinks Shaquana. She feels broken inside. Maybe she can't be fixed?

One evening she comes home late and her mother throws her out.

"Don't ever come back," she yells, slamming the door.

Shaquana is alone on the street in the middle of the night. She's ashamed and

doesn't want to ask for help, not even from GEMS. She only knows one way of surviving: find a pimp who can give her a roof over her head and food in exchange for sex.

Dangerous work

Shaquana's new pimp has lots of girls living with him and he forces them to sell drugs and sex. He locks Shaquana in and only lets her out when she is going to work. One evening, Shaquana is kidnapped by a gang of men and abused for hours. But she doesn't go to the police as she's scared of being sent to prison again. Her pimp gets angry because she comes home late without any money.

One rainy evening, he sends Shaquana out onto the street:

"Don't come back with less than 500 dollars," he tells her menacingly.

The street is empty. Shaquana waits under a street light. She's afraid, because





Shaquana runs workshops and meetings

with girls, who are inspired by her.

She is living proof that girls can take control

over their own lives.



Shaquana

Lives in: New York City.

Busy with: Studying at university and working for GEMS.

Loves: My poodle Cherry.

Doesn't like: Human trafficking. CSEC. Racism.

Trusts: Rachel and the rest of my GEMS family.

Wants to be: A social worker and a role model for other girls.

she knows it's impossible to earn 500 dollars on a night like this. A car pulls up, but the man doesn't want to buy sex. He's a pimp.

"Come and work for me," he says. Shaquana, who doesn't dare go home, gets in the car. They drive for a long time in the dark, across the border, into another state.

Wakes in hospital

A few days later, Shaquana wakes up broken and bloody in hospital. The last thing she remembers is the new pimp forcing her out to work the streets. And that she prayed for a situation to happen, anything, so that she'd be able to go home.

A car stopped and she climbed in. Then everything went black.

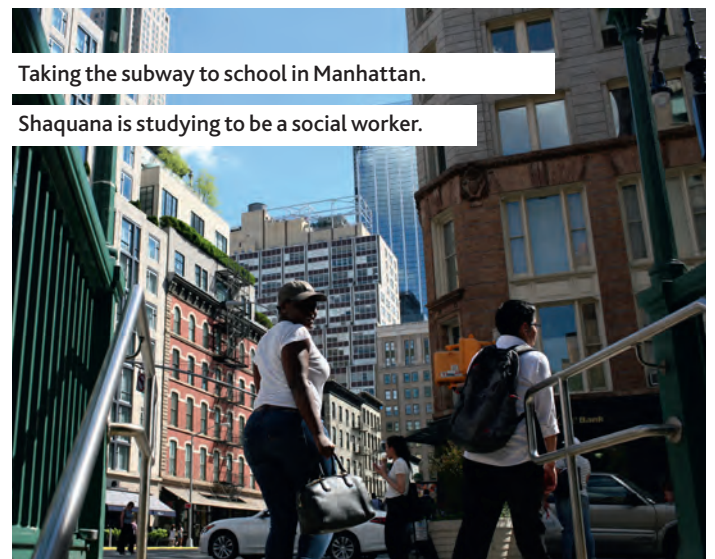
Graduation

Shaquana slowly recovers and goes back to GEMS, who help her with accommodation and

school. After three years she's standing on stage in a white gown and cap. Her friends from GEMS, her therapist, mum and sister are in the audience. The principle says:

"And now... graduating senior and class valedictorian: Shaquana!"

Rachel and the others leap out of their seats, cheering and clapping wildly. In her speech, Shaquana compares herself with a lotus flower. "Lotus flowers grow in muddy water and rise above the surface to bloom with remarkable beauty."



Taking the subway to school in Manhattan.

Shaquana is studying to be a social worker.

Her poodle Cherry is Shaquana's best friend!



Shaquana has given speeches in front of all kinds of people, from politicians to movie stars, and inspired them to campaign against the sex trade.



I can breathe

Shaquana is now 26. She says that after graduation, everything seemed great at first. She started college and took GEMS' leadership course. But something didn't feel right.

"I had no energy, I was always tired," recalls Shaquana. "The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with me, until I saw a psychiatrist who said I was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD."

PTSD affects people who have been through such terrible experiences that they get stuck in the body itself. Shaquana was given treatment and slowly but surely, she began to feel better.

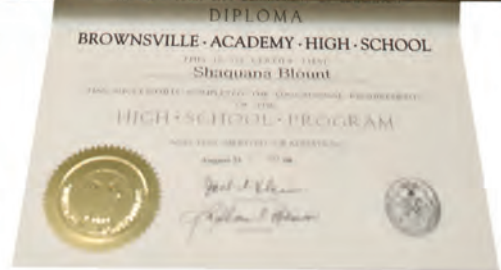
"I'll never forget the first time I felt: 'I can breathe!'"

A role model

Now Shaquana is at university and is an outreach worker

at GEMS. She visits shelters, schools, group homes and juvenile detention centres and tells the girls there about her life, about the child sex trade and GEMS.

"I want to help others, because I don't know where I would be today if it hadn't been for Rachel and GEMS," says Shaquana. "When you're in the life, you feel so isolated and alone. You think no one can understand what you're going through. But Rachel understood, because she'd been through it too. The fact that she managed to survive and turn around and help others, gave me strength and hope. Now it's my turn. I'm living proof to other girls that we can take control of our own lives." 🌍



When Shaquana gave her speech on high school graduation day, she ended by sharing ten rules for the future with her classmates.

Shaquana's Life lessons

- Always respect yourself!
- Never look down on anyone.
- When you make it in life, remember the journey you have traveled.
- Know the people around you.
- Never be afraid to admit when you are wrong.
- Live each day as if it were your last.
- Honor the greats before you.
- Never be afraid to ask for help.
- When you fall down know how to get back up.
- Remember that you are the best!



Safe harbour for young people



Girls from GEMS fighting for child-friendly laws together with Rachel.

When Rachel took up the fight against New York's unfair laws, she asked the girls who had been affected by them to help her.

One evening, Rachel looks at Nikki, who is in the middle of writing her speech. She knows that Nikki has a large, ragged scar that runs almost the length of her right thigh, from when a pimp stabbed her with a knife. And that Nikki has been locked up many times from the age of thirteen in an adult jail.

Tomorrow, Rachel and Nikki and a few other girls will travel to Albany, the political capital of the state of New York. That's where laws are written and approved. It's the first time ever that young survivors of the child sex trade will get their voices heard by those with power, decision-makers.

GEMS and the girls are demanding that American children be granted the same protection and support as children get who have been

brought to the US from other countries to be exploited in the child sex trade.

But opponents of a new law don't view the girls as children. One opponent claims that they are "...young adults who are very streetwise and who do not obey rules and are not willingly compliant with authority."

The girls learned early on to follow the pimps' rules. If only the politicians could see how good Nikki and others have been at listening to adults, maybe they'd stop saying such stupid things, thinks Rachel.

The tears flow

When the girls give their speeches in a dreary conference room, there is utter silence apart from the sound of people sniffing. Shaquana ends by asking them to change the law, for the sake of

Speak plainly!

"When we were fighting for a change in the law, we practised using the right words, although it was hard sometimes," explains Shaquana. "Many people look down on us girls and use language to make us feel worthless. So it's important that we use words and expressions that enable us and others to understand what we've been through, and that it's happening to others as well, all over the world."

What is the commercial sexual exploitation of children?

CSEC, Commercial Exploitation of Children, is when a child under the age of 18 is kidnapped, sold or tricked into having sex, or exchanging sex for money, food, drugs or a place to sleep. Some of us have felt that sex in exchange for money or food is our only way of surviving. But a world where we are forced to sell sex in order to survive, eat or get a roof over our heads is not OK.

What do these words mean?

Commercial means buying and selling, like in a shop. That children are treated as goods that someone advertises and sells.

Sexual means that it's something to do with sex; it could be anything from having sex to being filmed in sexual situations.

Exploitation is where someone with power, like an adult with money, takes advantage of or uses someone who is powerless, such as a girl living in poverty.

the children. An older man dries his tears and says:

"You are all to be commended. I promise you that I will do whatever I have to do to ensure this bill passes."

Long wait

It took four and half years to get the new law finally approved in New York in 2010. It's called The Safe Harbor for Exploited Children Act, the first state law in the country that recognised that children and youth were the victims,

not the criminals. Twelve states have followed suit since then.

"Now all we need to do is make sure that all girls really get the support they're entitled to," says Rachel. 🌐





Ginger

Lives: At GEMS safe house.
Likes: Music. Be with my little godsons.
Makes her cross: Lies and gossip.
Sad: When I feel lonely.
Wants to be: A midwife.
Looks up to: Rachel.

Finally home

“When I woke up for the first time in my room in the GEMS house, it felt different. ‘This can’t be true’, I was thinking, because I felt so safe.”

Ginger was born in Jamaica. “My mother died when I was three and my godmother took me in. I loved playing in the sun with all my friends. I thought I was gold.”

New life in the US

“I came to the US at 12 and was adopted by my aunt. It was exciting, but hard to leave everything I was used to.”

Ginger got good grades in school, but she was bullied.

“One girl cut my hair! But the worst thing was that my adoptive mom beat me. She used whatever she could lay her hands on, a shoe or a belt, and she used to say: ‘I’ll send you back to Jamaica’. I finally snapped and told a counselor. Everyone in the family got mad and stopped talking to me.”

Ginger lived with her friends and at a crisis shelter, but eventually tried to be reunited with her family.

“My adoptive mom didn’t want me there. She called the cops and said I was

suicidal, to come and get me. They took me to a hospital and put me in a box room for two weeks, even though I kept saying I definitely wanted to live. When I came out, my adoptive mom said she wouldn’t take me back. I felt broken.”

Accommodation for sex

Ginger put an ad out saying she needed somewhere to sleep, and it wasn’t long before she got a response.

“A 40-year-old man came and picked me up. He promised to fix somewhere for me to stay, food and clothes, and to help me go back into school. In exchange, he wanted sex. I felt like I had no choice. After a month, he wanted me to have sex with his friend. I couldn’t do it. One morning I got up really early and snuck out. He tried to find me, but I managed to get away. If I hadn’t gone to GEMS’ safe house, I don’t know where I’d be now.”



7:00 a.m. Good morning

“I wake up and go to sleep with my phone! I do everything on it: Talk to friends, read the news, watch movies, listen to music and play games.”



7:30 a.m. Breakfast together

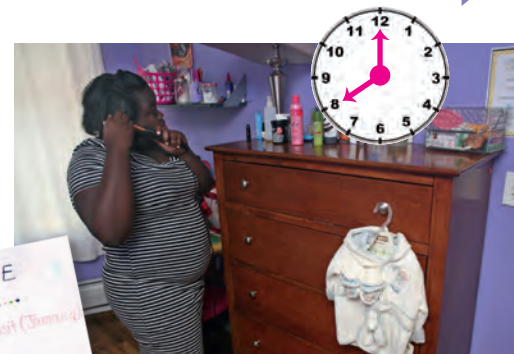
“We have a shared kitchen where we can make breakfast, eat and talk with our manager. It wasn’t like that in my adoptive family. They acted like I was invisible.”



8:00 a.m. Dreams for the future

“I love my room. I’ve put up pictures and a poster that I made at GEMS, about why I want to save money. Because I want:

- To visit my home in Jamaica.
- To get my own place.
- To open a day care, because I love kids.
- To open a hair salon.”





7:30 a.m.
Hair stylist
 "I'm good at hair styling and I often fix the other girls' hair, from plaits to curling and straightening hair."



8:45 a.m. Quick clean up
 "Everyone in the house helps take care of the cleaning. We have a schedule saying what we need to do every day!"

Ginger and her friends at GEMS style one another's hair!



"There's no sign on our building and we have to keep our address top secret. It's for everyone's safety, because what if the guy you were with decides to pop up and do something crazy."



9:00 a.m. Time to get out!
 "The only thing I don't like is that we always have to be out of the house by nine and we can't come back until early evening. But I keep busy! Studying, working and going to GEMS of course."





10:30 a.m. Full steam ahead at GEMS

"I love GEMS! I've made so many new friends here, we just get each other. During school I only come in the afternoon, but now it's the holidays and we're celebrating the annual 'Stop the child sex trade week'. We have workshops and fun activities every day. My favourite is a group where we talk about politics and current events."

"Rachel is someone you can count on. You can call her at any time. Last night she came to the safe house at midnight and stayed until morning, because one of the girls was going through a bad time. Rachel is like a best friend and she is very resourceful. And she's a great cook!"



8:00 p.m. Evening chat

"The safe house manager is always there to listen and support me if I feel sad or lonely!"



Need a safe home

New York is one of the most expensive cities in the world to live in. At least 70,000 homeless people live on the streets and in shelters. Some 30,000 of them are children. Most homeless people are with their families. Many of the parents have jobs, but they earn too little to afford the city's high rents.

Many girls are drawn into, or find it hard to leave the streets because they have nowhere to go. Girls over 16 can live in GEMS' safe house and get help to prepare themselves for an independent life. Younger girls often live in foster homes. Rachel and GEMS provide training for both the girls and the staff there, so that the staff understand what the girls have gone through and what they need and are entitled to in order to thrive.

10:00 p.m. Best blanket

"I loved the blanket I got the first time I came to the house. Then I ran away one time, but I came back after a while. They tried to give me a different blanket, but I wanted mine! It makes me feel safe."



The courage to leave

It's difficult to leave life in the commercial sex trade. Many girls are afraid of their pimp, that he'll kill them or hurt their families. But they're also afraid of the unknown. Rachel encourages the girls.

"Give it time, and your life will be so much better."

The life I deserve

"Leaving the life, leaving him, was one of the hardest things I've ever done. But as difficult as it was, it was the best thing I could have ever done for myself, because it was only then that I could finally live the life that I deserved all along."

Yeseni

Don't run from the future

"Sometimes you need to run away from things or situations when they are not good, but then if you get used to running, then you will run away from all the good things too. When I can find a good person to keep me focused with a reason to keep going and believing in myself, then I will not keep running away."

Jordan

Force of nature

"One of my favourite things to do is taking long walks in the park and clearing my mind. Tell myself over and over, it's going to get better, staying positive, staying away from negativity and from negative people."

Sondrah

Like a different planet

"The square life was like another planet to me, so it was like how am I gonna do this? ... I was scared because it felt like there was no escape. My pimp knew where my family lived, where my little brother went to school and where all my close friends lived. Every time I ran away he would know exactly where to find me ... It took me 5 attempts to finally leave the life but I went to a shelter and they referred me to a program [GEMS] ... I'm not scared anymore. And now I have the strength and wisdom to do bigger and better things."

Kristina

Think positive

"I am grateful for all the people in my life that saw the good in me, and loved me through the times that I didn't love myself. Keep going and keep trying, because you have already survived, you will survive and you are a survivor."

Sheila

Starting over

"Spending most of my life in foster care ... I dreaded starting all over again. In youth leadership class I began to understand that I wasn't alone in my experience ... Once I got into a program [GEMS] where other girls had similar experiences and were in leadership roles, I realized that starting over was just the beginning and it was possible. I was still young and I had a lot to look forward to."

Cynthia

Not worth dying for

"It was hard to leave my pimp, in my mind he gave me love, affection and security. This was all I knew... After getting locked up numerous times, raped and abused by tricks, I wondered was he REALLY protecting me ... I ask myself, is this love worth dying for ... I wanted change... from the abuse and from all the false promises... I just knew that if I can survive all of that, I can survive leaving him too."

Lakisha

Leave it behind you

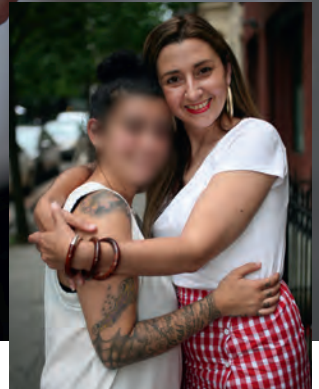
"Leaving the life is difficult ... especially if it's all you know... I'm 18 and I been in the life since I was 14 years old... Being square and living life regularly... It's overwhelming, it's confusing, it hurts and at the same time, it doesn't. You just gotta leave it ... just suck it up and keep it pushin."

Yvonne

Missed stuffed animal

"Leaving was thinking too far ahead for me, because sometimes I felt like lucky to get to the next day. So when I finally left I felt so vulnerable, without anything to comfort me, like my old clothes or a stuffed animal I really loved ... Looking back now, I have pride in my actions. Remember everyone has a past and it's not where you came from, it's where you're going."

Leslie



Life leaves its mark

Many of the girls at GEMS have tattoos all over their bodies. Faith is one of them. The worst thing anyone can say is that they look nice, because they weren't her choice. Her various pimps marked her with her name or symbols to claim that she belonged to them.

I got into the life when I was 12," says Faith, who was sexually abused by her stepdad from the age of four.

"I didn't tell anyone, I felt no one would believe me. I ran away instead."

A pimp did Faith's first tattoo when she was 15.

"Since then I was branded by different pimps who wanted to prove that they owned me. I hate the tattoos because they remind me of everything I've been through: had guns pulled on me, raped and taken across state lines."

Left the life

"I decided to leave the life when I found out I was pregnant. But what really stopped me from going back was I found God. Girls leave for lots of different reasons. For me, when God found me I found hope.

"I'm not in the life anymore, but the tattoos will be there forever. But they are not me; I'm a different person now. I'm tired of being judged and looked at. Without the tattoos I'd have more opportunities. Now,

people think I'm a gang member. I want to get rid of them but it's very expensive."

Looks like a victim

"Many programs [that campaign against the sex trade] revictimize you. They don't want you to remove your tattoos, they like it, think you look tough and like a victim. So they can put you on stage and get publicity. Use you to raise money, just like the pimps did. But Rachel and GEMS are different.

I have never met a social worker or therapist that really could understand what I have gone through. But Rachel knows how it is. She can understand and relate. She would never ask 'Why? How could you do all that bad stuff?' GEMS is limited in what they can do, but at least

here they accept you for who you are. There really isn't any other program like GEMS."

For my children

"I struggle every day with feelings of loneliness and abandonment. It's pain on top of pain, and the tattoos bring back memories. But for me the most important thing is to raise my children as well as I can, with love," says Faith. 🌐

Male Allies

Rachel says it is essential that boys and men are involved in the fight against CSEC and domestic trafficking. "That's why we've launched the 'Male Allies' campaign, which invites everyone to stand by our side."

Teaching little sis to be strong

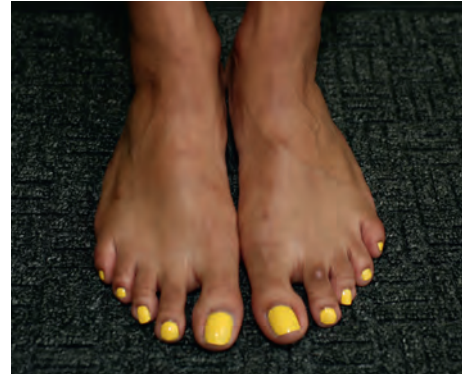
"My mother has made sure I have respect for girls and women," says Jordan, 18, who often looks after his little sister.

"She's only three, but I'm gradually going to teach her about the dangers in life. Of course I'll support her as a brother. But what's most important is that she can take a stand for herself and her rights."

Jordan

Gabriel proudly wears his GEMS t-shirt with the words girls are not for sale.

"I've become more conscious of my behaviour since hearing the girls' stories. We have so many words that describe girls in a negative way; they're part of our culture. Guys and girls use them without thinking. I know better now. If I hear people use them, it does not sit well with me and I tell them to stop."



Grateful for the men in my life

"When I was growing up I was always hanging with boys. I didn't really trust girls. Then I started developing and boys turned into men, who were interested in me just for sex. Then came the life, where I was sold by a man and bought by men... When I got out of the life, I felt like I could never trust another man ... I expected them all to be the same, but over time I began to meet men who were more like brothers and friends to me... I began to see men as humans, all different, with different experiences, instead of just these nasty, emotionless, sex-driven robots. It took time though, but I'm grateful for some of the men in my life, and I'm grateful for my friendships with women too."

Farah

