A Voice Against Sexual Slavery, Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking

Nayanika Yellepeddi, a local Bollywood enthusiast and singer, recently organized Romancing the 70s, a benefit concert whose proceeds were channeled to RIA House, a nonprofit organization working to establish a shelter for victims of commercial sexual exploitation in the greater MetroWest area of Boston. RIA House — Ready.Inspire.Act—is also developing service organization in Massachusetts to support adult women who have experienced sexual slavery, commercial sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking. INDIA New England News talked with RIA House founder Heather Wightman and advisor Yellepeddi.

Wightman has more than 15 years of experience managing and designing multifaceted federal, state and local human service programs in the area of violence prevention. Having received her MSW in macro social work practice, and MPH in social and behavioral sciences from Boston University, Wightman is committed to social justice and the advancement of human rights. She is also trained and practiced as a Massachusetts Sexual Assault Counselor. Wightman has served on the boards of the ACLU of MA, YWCA, and Matahari: Eye of the Day. As a former Peace Corps volunteer in Central America, she is proficient in the Spanish language.

WIGHTMAN: Many years ago, I learned about the buying and selling of children in the US through an article I read in the NY Times Magazine: The Girls Next Door by Peter Landesman (published Jan. 25, 2004.) This article changed my life and sent me out to learn everything I could about commercial sexual exploitation. I wanted to be part of the solution. One of the first workshops I attended thereafter was conducted by the team at My Life My Choice in Boston who train folks on how to understand and prevent the exploitation of children in the United States. Over time, it became clear to me that if you are an adult women stuck in experiences of sex trafficking, there is no place for you to get help, there is nowhere to go and begin to heal and thrive. A home community model was the obvious answer.

Q: Some of us were surprised to know that this problem exists in the United States, and especially in Massachusetts, at such a large scale. What are the top three causes?
W: From the research and through speaking with survivors, there are many answers to your question. Quite simply any vulnerability can expose a person to an adult predator. Some of the most common vulnerabilities are youth, history of child sexual abuse, poverty, family history of addiction and witness to violence.

Q: What is one advice you will give on how to stop this?
W: Get educated on what is happening in your community -- I've found that once you begin to learn more about CSE and sex trafficking you cannot "un" learn it. It is impossible to forget about it as it involves all of us in some small way.

Q: It such an uncomfortable topic to discuss. How to start this discussion in a friend and family settings?
W: You are right, it is such an uncomfortable topic, and it should be. I would hate the thought of us ever getting "comfortable" and complacent in any way about such painful and violent realities that people are enduring. The best way to start is to again get educated yourself -- there are lots of books, articles, movies, podcasts where people can get educated. The other thing that I would suggest is to come to one of our Awareness Events. We are hosting four over the next six months.

Q: What is the right age for kids to discuss such issues?
W: I think that it is never too soon to teach your children about how to keep themselves safe from others who may try to hurt them and make them aware of what is happening around them, I think, but I know that there are other parents who would
disagree. That said, there are some good resources offered by a range of groups such as My Life My Choice and ECPAT USA that can provide you more detailed information.

**Q: Nayanika, how did you get involved with this organization?**

**YELLEPEDDI:** This malaise that afflicts our societies has no cultural or ethnic boundaries. Gender and sexual abuse exists in both developed and developing nations, albeit in varying degrees and forms. This is something that we each have to take responsibility for and act on. Every thinking and feeling woman and man must take it upon themselves to reframe their ideas and conditioning about gender and sexual issues. It has to start in each home - the conversations we have with our girls, and especially boys, our mates and spouses and friends.

**Q: How do you plan the Indian community to get involved with this project?**

**Y:** India will always continue to be my roots and the source of my values, and I am aware of the many issues that plague Indian society. However, I chose to come to the US in 2003, eager to experience new cultures and travels. This is now our home, and as a mother I can no longer live with blinders on. Having a child of your own brings home to you brutally just how vulnerable they are. I feel it is important to serve the community in which we live because this is the world our children our growing into. And I urge you all, my neighbors, friends, family and community to start giving back in both small and big ways. If we have the strength of conviction we will find the will to take the first step.