

Social work grad shares story of survival as advocate for victims of sex trafficking

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Savannah Sanders was 16 when she began her battle with drug addiction and homelessness. Trafficked into the sex trade from a massage parlor in Mesa, Ariz., Sanders fought back, and nearly two years later, began her mission to provide resources to victims of sex trafficking and childhood abuse.

Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer recently recognized Sanders, who has dedicated her undergraduate career in social work at Arizona State University to giving sex trafficking victims a voice in the criminal justice process.

The recipient of the 2014 Triumph Over Tragedy award as part of the National Crime Victims' Rights Week in Phoenix, Sanders is about to celebrate another achievement this month when she becomes the first person in her family to graduate with a bachelor's degree.

At 19, Sanders decided to use her tragic past experiences to fuel her life's work as an outspoken victim's advocate. She wanted to provide resources to potential victims and raise awareness of sex trafficking in Arizona. To make this happen, she earned her GED in 2010 and applied a full scholarship toward her studies at Mesa Community College. Through the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, she received another full scholarship to continue her education at ASU's School of Social Work, an academic unit of the College of Public Programs.

Now, Sanders is a regular speaker at national conferences, and her testimony has been featured on documentaries and local and national news. She was one of two national speakers featured during several events to recognize national Child Abuse Prevention Month, and she has signed a 2016 book deal to publish a memoir focusing on intervention and prevention.

After graduation, she says she will continue her work as a program fellow at TrustAZ.org, a project aiming to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts in Arizona.

"One of the biggest things I'm seeing in the county and nationally is a lack of collaboration," Sanders says.



Savannah Sanders was recognized for her work as a passionate social worker and survivor of human trafficking by Gov. Jan Brewer. Sanders will receive her bachelor's degree in social work this spring.
Photo by: courtesy of Savannah Sanders

Sanders says that TrustAZ.org finds gaps in the community and helps fill them by building a better community network. Every six months, she implements a new project through TrustAZ.org. In 2013, she worked with Polaris Project to establish a national human trafficking hotline and text program. In its first year, the hotline drew in 298 calls, 66 of which were from potential victims. In the next six months, she says she will create the Arizona Survivors Council to shape organizations within the community with similar interests.

“Throughout my work, lack of communication was a huge issue, and Trust.org fills that need in the community,” says Sanders.

At the end of the day, Sanders just wants to “do it for her kids.” A wife and mother of four children, she plans to pursue her master’s degree in social work at ASU.

“I think if we can adjust things in our society, we can make a huge difference in supporting and empowering people,” Sanders says.

In her 2014 State of the State speech, Gov. Brewer acknowledged Sanders’ work as a passionate social worker and survivor of human trafficking, which traumatizes 27 million victims worldwide, according to Brewer.

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