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Amber Kehl, Utah

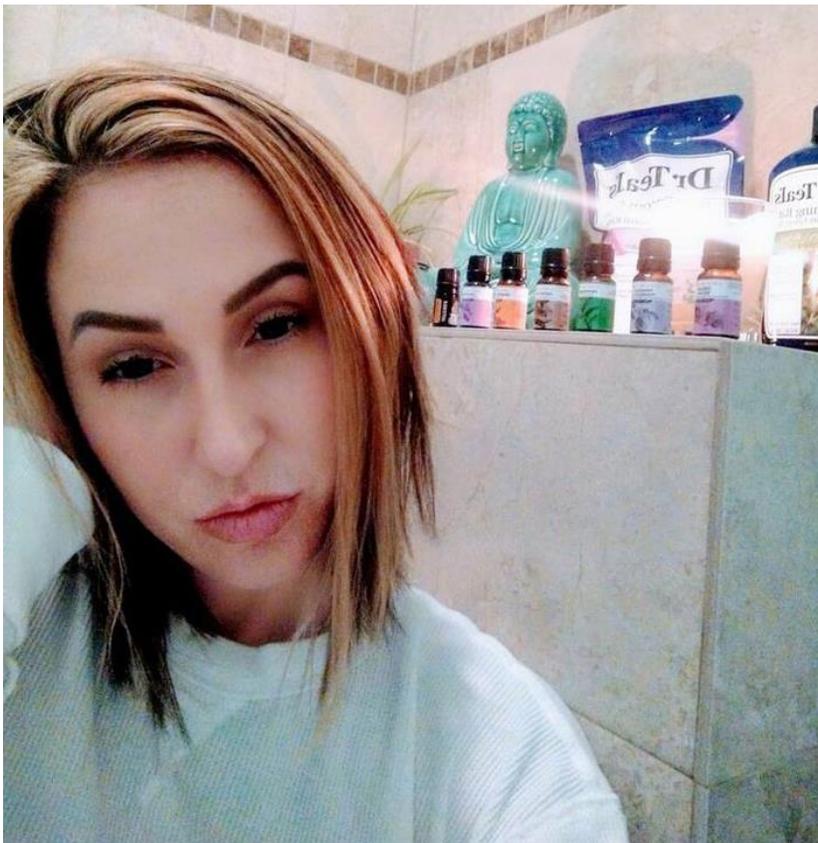


Photo by Amber Kehl

by Lori Teresa Yearwood

AMBER KEHL'S NIGHTMARES are usually about the man who sex-trafficked her, “the one who really, really hurt me—physically, sexually, emotionally and spiritually,” the Salt Lake City resident

said. She spoke so quietly that it was as if she were still in one of the dreams, reporting on it from the inside out.

Last night was particularly horrifying, she told me on Sunday.

The nightmare started in a hallway. Suddenly, the scene changed and the 36-year-old found herself in an elevator, something she avoids in real life, as elevators remind her of feeling helpless and trapped. “But in the dream I didn’t have any options but to use it and when the door opened he was there,” Kehl said.

The man didn’t recognize her at first. “I was wearing my [COVID] mask in the dream. But then there was eye contact and he slowly realized who I was, and then there was another level of intense fear. And I felt like I was being hurt in the dream. I remembered the feeling of it, not the images of it.”

The dreams focus on some “wild, chance encounter,” Kehl said. When she wakes up, her body twitches “and I lay there shaking. And then I try to be quiet again.” The most she’s slept in any given night during the last four years has been four hours of solid sleep, she estimated.

“I keep my eyes closed, I don’t move my body. I hold still and tell myself: ‘Just keep your eyes closed,’” Kehl said.

It’s a nightly ritual that Kehl said she is working to unlearn. It’s difficult to let go of, because feigning sleep is something she did to protect herself when she lived within the grip of her abuser: “I absolutely remember pretending to sleep and avoid confrontation, so I could lay there and analyze my situation and read his energy to figure out what was going to happen next. I played asleep a lot.”

Trauma, in one form or another, has long been part of her life, Kehl said. Her father was an alcoholic, a big reason for the

turbulent environment that she grew up in, Kehl said. “I found his dead body,” she said during our Zoom call.

Happiness came during her marriage, Kehl said. She and her husband rented a gorgeous, four-bedroom Salt Lake City house with high ceilings and a loft and jacuzzi. But then her husband died from an esophageal rupture. “He was an alcoholic and he bled to death in 2014,” Kehl said.

Soon after, when Kehl was still in shock and grief, she said she met the man who would eventually force her into sex trafficking. They started out dating and giving each other lots of freedom, she remembered. But then, about three months into the relationship, he grabbed her by the throat and lifted her in the air, she said. Then the abuse became regular.

That was when Kehl’s fear became so constant that she could barely think straight, let alone plan a route of escape, she said. “There were times when I tried to set boundaries and assert myself and take control,” Kehl said. “But he was hopping out of cars and bushes and sending text messages and saying he could see me through the windows.”

After he became violent, the sex trafficking started. He told her to go to a party and “do sexy things,” she said. He said they needed the money. She hesitantly obliged. But later, when she told him she wanted to stop, “it would be like he was holding me hostage with manipulation or anger—and lots of violence. I learned quickly that as long as I kept the money coming in, I could avoid a lot of physical injury.”

At one point, he punched her in the face and he broke her ribs. Another time, he beat her up in a bathroom and there was blood on the walls. The police came and took him to jail and her to an emergency room.

“You know this is never going to end,” Kehl remembers the emergency-room doctor saying as he pulled her stitches tight—so tight that she felt he was angry toward her, Kehl said.

Once, she tried to escape the abuse by getting on a bus and taking a four hour trip to St. George, Utah, where she rented a room in a stranger’s home, doing her best to hide from her abuser.

Then, she said, he began making fake profiles on social media to gain access to her, and he made threats to her family. “So I went back,” Kehl said. “Then it got to the point where, everyone around me, everyone who cared for me a little bit? They became irritated with me and cut me off.”

The abuse stopped in 2016, when a police officer trained to deal with trauma helped Kehl feel safe enough to reveal the true story behind her continual hospital emergency room admissions for broken bones, concussions, and ruptured veins. At that point, Kehl was going in and out of jail for substance abuse. “That was my only escape, the only thing that gave me relief from my life,” Kehl said. The officer sat Kehl down, Kehl said, and told her, “I know someone is hurting you. I don’t believe you accidentally hurt yourself this much.”

Kehl said she began to sob.

“She rescued me by helping me put together a plan,” Kehl said. “I took the risk of her not being able to help me because I was just tired. I had nothing left—no people, no relationships, any sense of self. It was all gone.”

Today, Kehl has a full-time job helping an organization expand its treatment center for substance abusers. She is also a full-time student at Salt Lake Community College, where she is learning how to catch computer hackers. Her long-term goal: to work for an apprehension team that stops sex trafficking. Meanwhile, she is

a volunteer at Soap2Hope, a Salt Lake City non-profit that helps sex-trafficked and other vulnerable women who are living on and working the streets.

Kehl, along with other volunteers, goes directly to high-risk hotels and other high-crime areas known for prostitution, sex trafficking, and drug abuse. “We hand out hygiene kits and try to strike up a conversation and hopefully establish enough of a relationship to provide resources or shelter or even an escape plan,” she said. “I don't sleep very well on those nights at all—there’s massive amounts of adrenaline in my body at that point,” she said.

Kehl rents a three-bedroom house from her mother, a home where she lives with her 12-year-old son and helps to care for her 90-year-old grandmother. A sense of mutual trust and safety surrounds her, Kehl said. But the old terror of feeling trapped almost never stops.

It peaks in her nightmares and persists throughout the nights and even days. Sometimes she’s unable to breathe, and a whooping sound comes unexpectedly out of her throat. People turn around and stare at her like she’s some kind of freak, she said—“like they’re afraid of me.”

The unease and uncertainty caused by the pandemic has been especially hard to deal with, Kehl said, and she’s had to increase her trauma therapy visits to twice a week.

The therapist has been pushing Kehl to agree to a treatment that involves a kind of tranquilizer during her therapy sessions and to take prescription sleeping medication when she goes to bed, Kehl said, but Kehl said she’s “done with being treated like a trauma experiment.”

For now, she’s treating herself naturally, she said. At bedtime, that looks like an extended ritual that starts with an extremely hot

bath. Then she opens some essential oils, usually a blend for post-traumatic stress syndrome designed by Doterra Oils and breathes as deeply as she can. After that, Kehl said, she drains the tub and takes a shower. Next, she fills the tub again and takes another bath.

“Sometimes I listen to soothing podcasts and meditations,” Kehl said.

Once she's dressed for bed, she said, “I take some melatonin and sleep oil and light some candles and I say a lot of prayers and set a lot of intentions. It takes about an hour. My body twitches then, too, and I have to go through this anxiety and I have to be forgiving of myself.”

Then, finally, Kehl said, relief flooding into her voice, “I fall asleep.”

Still, the nightmares come.



Lori Teresa Yearwood. Photo: Cass Studios of Salt Lake City

Lori Teresa Yearwood's work can be found at loriyearwood.com