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BRENDA MYERS-POWELL

## Q & A with Brenda Myers-Powell, Co-Founder and the Executive Director of the Dreamcatcher Foundation

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By [Angela Almeida](#)

*Brenda Myers-Powell is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Dreamcatcher Foundation, a not-for-profit organization working to end human trafficking of sexually exploited individuals and at-risk youth. As a personal survivor of prostitution, Brenda has worked hard to protect and educate victims of the domestic sex trade through her in-depth work on the streets of Chicago. Currently, Brenda is working alongside fellow survivor, Stephanie Daniels-Wilson, to build a residential center for girls and women looking to escape the perils of prostitution. Brenda is featured in "Sex Slaves: Chicago" and you can catch back-to-back episodes of "Sex Slaves" every Sunday in November starting at 6 pm ET.*

**Q: What makes the Dreamcatcher Foundation stand out from other organizations in the Chicago area?**



Photo by "Sex Slaves: Chicago"

A: The Dreamcatcher Foundation is a not-for-profit organization run by two survivors – Stephanie and myself. That’s a difference, at least in Chicago. We also have a harm reduction approach where we work with girls where they are at currently, and not where we want them to be. They are encouraged to make their own decisions on how they want to move forward in their lives. This is an organization with a strong mentor piece, so we have been through what these girls have been through. We can see things, we hear things, and we come from a place where we can touch their hearts a little bit faster than organizations who don’t know who they are. Some organizations have a tendency to control the girls in a way like they’ve been controlled by their pimps. A girl will say, “I’ve just left a place where there was no freedom. You call this structure, but there is no freedom. When am I going to be able to take control of my life?” I mentor her so she can tell me, “That’s not the way to go, Ms. Brenda,” and try things out for the first time without feeling controlled.

**Q: I saw in one of your interviews that you personally approach girls on the street and try to talk them. How do you try to get through to these victims upon first meeting and establish a connection?**

A: It depends. I say I’m from the Dreamcatcher Foundation. I say that I’m a survivor and I used to be out here on the same streets. I worked just the way you did. I give her time and I keep on going. It’s always a hit-or-miss. Sometimes, you can talk to them and sometimes you can’t.

**Q: Has there ever been a time where a victim was not initially responsive, but contacted you after the fact?**

A: It happens all the time. They’ll do that. They’ll have an opportunity to think about it. At that time when I first meet them, what they’re doing is what they’re doing. Once they walk away, they have time to process.

**Q: How did your own experience as a survivor shape how you handle these sensitive situations?**

A: I don’t want to say much about my own [experience], because it’s more about the girls than it is about me. I had 25 years of prostitution. I got out at 39 years old. I was shot five times and stabbed over 13 times. That’s what prostitution looks like. I ended up, at the end, being disfigured and broken. I’m writing my own book now with my story.

**Q: The Dreamcatcher Foundation has a van that seems to hold a prominent role in your service. When searching around neighborhoods to help potential victims, do you find it’s recognized on the streets?**



Photo by Brenda Myers-Powell

A: Absolutely. Girls see me and they're like, "Hey, that's Ms. Brenda" or they'll say to some new girl on the block, "Don't worry about it. That's Ms. Brenda."

**Q: What seems to be the most effective way of getting through to these girls when they first arrive for help?**

A: There is not one way. There is not a paper cut plan that we use to help the girl. Everyone comes with a different story and a different way. Sometimes, we have to figure it out as we go along. Yes, I mean, our position is safety. Once we get that settled, we'll work out the rest. She could have health problems. She could have children. We try to have as much coverage on every area as much as we can.

**Q: There are overlapping issues in the anti-human trafficking fight. You have organizations still working to change policy and federal law. You have other organizations focusing on prevention and community engagement. It seems to be a holistic effort, but what would you say is something not getting enough attention?**

A: We need more housing like the kind Dreamcatcher Foundation is trying to establish. We don't have a residential center yet. That's what we're working on. This will be where young women in prostitution can have a place to say. One problem I have now is with all of these people writing books about trafficking, but where are the services for these women on the

ground? Where are the beds? Where are the houses? We're not showing that and that's the problem. Everybody's on the soapbox but there ain't no soap. How many of these people run over to Taiwan and write about these girls, and then run around the book circuit and get money from God knows who? They'll say, "This is why I wrote the book..." and "I was so passionate about this..." but then where does the money go? You're victimizing these girls by taking their stories, and you don't even give a dime back. Shame on them. It's become more about the subject and people saying, "How can I write about this?" These women need help and beds.

**Q: Given that, what is the next step the Dreamcatcher Foundation is taking to combat this issue?**

A: Our next step is to have beds for girls, so when we pick them up on the street, we do not have to take them to outside shelters. The main difficulty is that there's no money. We need donations. It's so hard for small organizations to get government funding. We're always having fundraisers. Right now, we're having a fundraiser that's a play called, "The Johns." It's play at Her Story Theater and was written and directed by Mary Bonnett. I'd say, just watch us grow.

Don't miss back to back episodes of "Sex Slaves" every Sunday in November on msnbc.