

## Guiding Young Girls to Better Lives

by Maura Kelly



Once a week, 20-year-old Fatima Johnson takes the subway to a juvenile detention center in one of New York City's toughest neighborhoods. A former resident of such a facility herself, Johnson (whose name has been changed to protect her identity) advises the girls on how to protect themselves from predators who would try to buy and sell them. "A pimp won't tell you up front what he does," she says. "He'll pretend he wants to be your boyfriend. He'll make you think he loves you. But he'll use that bond against you."

Now a college sophomore, Johnson is a part-time outreach worker for Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS), a New York City-based nonprofit founded by Rachel Lloyd (pictured at left), 35, a former prostitute herself, which assists underage victims of sex trafficking. In Johnson's case, her pimp posed as a 17-year-old boy. She was 14. He wooed her, and she fell head over heels for him. Then he made an ultimatum: "I could start working for him or never see him again," she says. "All I wanted was to be with him. So I numbed myself to the reality of the situation." Two years later, Johnson was nearly beaten to death by a man who picked her up off the side of the road. After that, she says, "I realized I could die if I didn't get out." Aided by GEMS, she left her pimp and went back to high school, graduating as valedictorian.

One of GEMS' biggest admirers is actress Demi Moore. She first learned about underage sex trafficking when she came across a TV documentary on the topic. She was horrified. "We're talking about people preying upon the most vulnerable among us—our children," she says. Looking to support nonprofits working to save such children, she heard about GEMS and met with Lloyd and girls whom the group has helped get off the streets. "GEMS makes such a huge difference, transforming the girls they reach into positive, productive individuals who give back," Moore asserts.

[Read our exclusive interview with Demi Moore about her effort to end sex slavery](#)

Although it works on a shoestring budget, the group has had a significant impact. In 2009, it helped 327 girls in the New York area—many under the age of 12—escape from traffickers. "Rachel enables girls to gain a life of dignity," says Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of Equality Now, an international nonprofit that is fighting to stop violence against women.

The first step in the process is sending survivors like Johnson to talk to at-risk girls in community centers, group homes, and schools. Outreach workers also visit juvenile detention centers to speak to residents who are already in the sex trade and encourage them to leave. Other girls are directed to GEMS through a court order. The group's caseworkers find transitional housing for those who need it and help those who've been arrested to navigate the legal system. With GEMS' support, they go back to school, get GEDs, or find jobs.

Lloyd played a key role in pressing New York to pass the 2008 Safe Harbor Act for Sexually Exploited Youth, the first state law to provide assistance to underage prostitutes in lieu of prosecution and incarceration. "It benefits girls who are not legally old enough to consent to sex, who'd be protected under statutory-rape laws if money hadn't changed hands," she says.

Perhaps the greatest testimony to Lloyd's—and GEMS'—impact are the many thank-you letters from survivors. As one girl put it, "Some people know what proper love and care is, and I know [what they are] because of GEMS. I get that every time I come here."



Earlier this year, actress Demi Moore started a foundation to eliminate child slavery worldwide. As part of the **Pepsi Refresh Celebrity Challenge**, she and Kevin Bacon battled to see who could get more fans to vote for their philanthropic causes. Moore triumphed, and as a result, GEMS won a \$250,000 grant from Pepsi.

[Click here](#) to read our exclusive interview with Moore and her efforts to end sex trafficking.