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Try and imagine the horror of being a four-year-old child that is sexually abused by a family member.

For years you might be made to do terrible, unspeakable things, and because abuse is part of the only life you've ever known, you assume everything is normal. This cycle of misery goes on and on and on, and it might be a decade down the road before you finally realize something is wrong.

This is a true story and one of dozens just like it, according to Kennedy Mabe and Coryne Blackman, founders of a new local nonprofit organization Rescue the Children of Georgia.

"I can honestly tell you that when I was in high school I wouldn't have even thought twice about sex trafficking; it wouldn't have even crossed my mind," Mabe said. "I thought it was the white van snatching kids out of their yard, don't take candy from strangers, whatever — but that's not what it is. You don't know that the troubled kids at school that come in beaten or with bruises or ragged clothes, that a lot of times it has to do with what's going on at home."

## **How they got started**

Mabe and Blackman, both of whom have young children themselves, decided that they couldn't just sit by and wait for someone else to fight against the problem of sex trafficking. So they started Rescue the Children of Georgia, a nonprofit dedicated to creating and funding groups to rescue trafficking victims, helping the rescued victims maintain a life outside of trafficking, and educating the community about what sex trafficking really is and how to recognize its warning signs.

According to Mabe, it all started with a Facebook group back in the middle of August.

"I saw the big movement on Facebook with the hashtag so I made a Facebook group, and my husband had mentioned to me why don't we make our own nonprofit," Mabe said. "The group went from 0 to 10,000 within a week so we decided we had to do something."

Mabe reached out to Blackman, and together with several other volunteers, the two worked to make their nonprofit organization official.

Blackman said that their group hopes to both help efforts to rescue victims out of sex trafficking and to educate local community members on how to recognize victims of trafficking.

"We want to raise awareness for sex trafficking while also getting out there and doing stuff," Blackman said. "We'd also like to create seminars in schools in our surrounding counties to help raise awareness for young adults and children of the potential risks of sex trafficking, how to avoid it, warning signs and what to look out for."

These seminars would include education for parents as well, by including brochures to be sent home with their children.

"We want to have parents know that this is a potential risk, not just in Atlanta," Blackman said. "It's everywhere, and since we're so close to Atlanta it can happen even in our small town."

Blackman said that if community members knew what warning signs to look out for, the community could better keep an eye out for potential trafficking victims.

"12 to 14 is the average age for sex trafficking victims, and that can be just normal kids that live in your county because traffickers can be family members, friends or people you've known your whole life," Blackman said. "There's so many warning signs that need to be made aware, so that if you have suspicions on it you can act upon those because you're so educated about it that you know that could be a possibility."

In addition to the education aspect of the organization, Mabe said that actually aiding rescue efforts is a goal for Rescue the Children too.

"We wanna work closely with the GBI, and we'll have a couple of teams of our own that will be certified by the sheriff's office for search and rescue that we can volunteer as extra bodies and extra help for the stakeouts and rescuing part," Mabe said.

Rescue the Children also hopes to eventually work towards opening some sort of store as a way to employ trafficking victims.

"Eventually we'd also like to open a store and employ sex trafficking victims because a lot of times they go back to sex trafficking because they've been groomed and that's all they know so in their minds they don't think that anything is wrong with it," Blackman said. "We want them to have some sort of stability in their life, to maintain a good work ethic, be able to make money and provide for themselves without having to depend on a trafficker."

## **How to get involved**

For now, the Rescue the Children team is hard at work networking within the community in Dawson and Forsyth counties and getting their name out there, according to Blackman.

"We want to host our fundraisers in the community for right now to get trust; we need our community and the surrounding counties to know us and trust us," Blackman said. "We really need our community's support."

Recently the group hosted a donut fundraiser in Forsyth County, and on Oct. 17 they will host another fundraiser in Dawson County at the Georgia Racing Hall of Fame.

"That's gonna give us a chance to really tell people what we're about, who we are, get to meet us face-to-face and speak to us and get to know our personalities," Blackman said. "There will obviously be a tent of facts and brochures and we'll have a booth set up there, but it's more for families to interact with us and get to know us as well as us to get to know our community."

The event will be from noon to 3 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 17 and will include bounce houses, face painting, food, live music, a raffle, free books for children, goodie bags and a costume contest. Everything will be free except for raffle tickets and food, and anyone is welcome to attend.

Mabe and Blackman said that gaining the community's support will be vital in their organization accomplishing its mission.

"We really need sponsors and donations before we can do anything," Mabe said. "The people that wanna do the search and rescue have to get their certificates and pay the sheriff's office to do that; obviously we would fund that but we can't do much without donations and sponsors."

The group is also in need of an office, which has proved to be more difficult of an endeavor than anticipated.

"Getting an office has been the hardest thing ever," Blackman said. "It can be written off as a charitable donation if someone donates an office to us, but we just don't have those contacts yet — it all goes back to building that trust and contacts in the community."

According to Mabe, almost everyone on the organization's board is a father or mother that is passionate about the cause because of their children.

"We're not some big business that's just doing this to look good," Mabe said. "We're from this town and we're just stay-at-home moms who had a passion and jumped."

Blackman said that she wants to help other people's children because as a mother herself she would want others to help if her own child were in danger.

"I would never in my life dream of something like this happening to my child, and I know that there are other kids out there whose parents are fighting endlessly to get them out of sex trafficking so if I can help them in any way that's what I wanna do," Blackman said. "If it were my own kid I'd hope that other people would wanna help fight for her as much as I wanna help fight for other children."

Both Mabe and Blackman said that at the end of the day, if they can rescue one child from sex trafficking it will all be worth it.

"Rescuing a child would be one of the most monumental days of my life other than my own child's birth," Blackman said. "Our overall goal is to help many, but one is where we're starting; if we can save one child that would be a success to me."

For more information on Rescue the Children of Georgia or how to donate to the organization, visit <http://rescuethechildrenofgeorgia.org> or <https://www.facebook.com/groups/658551024744455>.