

## **A mess to a message: the story of sex trafficking survivor Patrice Maina**

Patrice Maina woke up one day in September of 2006 with a gun to her head and a heroin needle in her arm. She didn't owe anyone money, and she herself wasn't violent, nor did she do heroin—crack cocaine was her drug of choice. But her pimp's "bottom bitch"—the first woman who had ever worked for him—resented the preference he seemed to have for Maina, and had decided to try to ruin her life by getting her addicted to heroin.

This wasn't the first trauma Maina had endured, and it wouldn't be the last. Abused by her mother's husband as a child and raped countless times by police officers, pimps, and drug dealers, Maina has seen the worst in people and suffered more than anyone's fair share. Somehow, though, she survived it all, and now, over a decade later, Maina doesn't hide from her past. Instead, she actively shares her story, traveling throughout Rhode Island and speaking in classrooms. Her goals, she says, are to educate audiences about the reality of sex trafficking and to highlight the importance of self-esteem—a key factor, she believes, in preventing others from following the dangerous path she took years before.

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Maina grew up in South Providence, Rhode Island with her mother, a correctional officer, and her stepfather, a sheriff—professions that didn't make her particularly popular at school, given the fact that many of her classmates' parents were incarcerated or on drugs. Her classmates mocked her by pronouncing "Patrice" incorrectly and calling her names like "bull nose" because of the way her nostrils flared when she was angry. In addition, Maina stood out from her peers because of her size—she was 5'10" and weighed 205 pounds—and her dark complexion. Time and time again, she was told that she "looked like a man" and was "pretty for a dark skin."

In addition to experiencing bullying, Maina was also exposed domestic abuse at an early age. Her mother and her stepfather didn't always get along, and she noticed that her mother wore the long-sleeved version of her correctional officer's uniform year-round. Maina didn't fully grasp what that meant, however, until later, when she became a victim of the abuse herself.

Then one hot, August day, when Maina was twelve, a game of hide-and-seek forever changed the way she thought about herself. She had been playing with three older boys, and it was her turn to hide. She hunkered down under a peach tree and waited there alone with bated breath to be found. The boys eventually did find her, and then they brutally raped her one by one—the first incident in the torrent of violence and abuse she would face throughout her life.

Big for a twelve-year old and already developed, Maina "looked like a grown woman" at the time of the rape. But she wasn't, she said. She was a little girl.

That summer day confirmed a thought that would stick with Maina for years to come, existing as a nagging voice in the back of her mind that she fights to this day. That moment under the peach tree in 1996 was when she knew, she said, that she would never be "anything more than a piece of meat."

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In part because of the bullying she was experiencing in South Providence, Maina's family moved to Exeter, RI, right before she was supposed to start eighth grade. The school there was a combination junior-senior high school, and when she arrived, the principal decided to enroll her in ninth grade because she was "too big for the junior high side." What it really was, Maina believes, was that she was "too big and too black."

In the predominantly white town of Exeter, Maina was the only African American in a 972-person class. People would drive by her screaming "nigger" and throw pumpkins and eggs at her house. Members of her neighborhood created and circulated a petition to get her family to leave town, dubbing her "the big black monster" and "the female Craig Price," a nod to a thirteen-year-old black boy who had recently murdered and raped a Caucasian family in Warwick. At school, Maina hung out with the outcasts, because they were the only people who accepted her. Her teachers told her she would never amount to anything, and she never went to school dances or the prom because she never got asked.

When Maina was seventeen, she put herself in a group home. At eighteen, she dropped out of school and started working as a maid at the Biltmore Hotel in Providence.

One day, as she was waiting for her bus, a couple next to her struck up a conversation. Lexus and Cash, as they were called, asked if she wanted to join a game of Three-Card Monte—she just had to bet money on which of three bottle caps was hiding a Cheerio. Maina bet \$10 and lost, but didn't think much of it—she liked the couple, and they seemed kind. They said they were from Rochester, NY, and after a bit more conversation, they asked 19-year-old Maina to go back there with them. "I wanted to be a part of something," Maina said. "I was like wow, somebody really likes me." She agreed, and they drove to Rochester that day.

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At first, her new living arrangement was nice, Maina recalled. But soon, things took a turn for the worse. Lexus set up a profile for her on a dating chat line, but instead of starting friendly conversations, men started sexually propositioning her. Maina was slightly off-put at first, but she said she figured that if she was going to be having sex anyways, "Why not get paid for it? I felt like a piece of meat anyways."

Even with that mindset, however, Maina said, "it took a while for it to get easy." Her first client was an Armenian man who "stank"—so badly that her first reaction was "*Oh my God, he's going to sweat all over me.*" In that interaction, and the many that would follow with other men, Maina protected her breasts—she didn't want the client to touch them. "I know they want [this]," she said, gesturing towards her crotch, "but they didn't *have to* have these," she said, indicating her breasts.

As time went on, Cash started to become more demanding of Maina, and more controlling. The tipping point came when he and Lexus convinced Maina to take part in an armed robbery. Though her only role was to get the door open, she was "scared to death," she remembered. But she did it anyways, and watched as Cash and Lexus entered the house with guns. A few seconds later—*BANG*—she heard a gunshot. She ran out of the house, heart racing, thinking, "I can't do

this anymore.”

To this day, she doesn’t know what happened to the victims.

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After parting with Lexus and Cash in Rochester, Maina embarked on what she calls her “road trip,” a journey that took her through Massachusetts, Maryland, Washington, D.C., Nevada, California, and Arizona.

Though her location changed frequently, the abusive conditions didn’t.

In Boston, her pimp sold her to a drug dealer to make a point after she spent \$120 of her earnings on cocaine. The dealer, who had a gun, imprisoned her in his house in Fall River and raped her while his girlfriend watched. Maina was there for a month before she managed to escape, barefoot, to a nearby McDonald’s.

In D.C., Maina witnessed a woman leave the hospital just three days after giving birth by caesarean and immediately start working again, under orders from their pimp. Maina knew that having sex was highly dangerous—not to mention painful—six to eight weeks after a caesarean, so she made a deal: the new mother would give the customers blow jobs, and Maina would sleep with them.

In Las Vegas, Maina’s pimp, called Hennessey, physically abused her while having sex with her. He beat everyone, but he beat her the worst, because she was the biggest. She realized years later at a doctor’s appointment that one of her eyes had a busted capillary from repeatedly enduring his hits. In other words, she has a permanent black eye.

In Oakland, California, Maina’s pimp, who went by the name “Kilo,” used her as a pawn in his fights with Star, his “bottom bitch.” But while he sometimes favored Maina, he would also punish her. When he was mad, he would lock her in a room with crack cocaine and a pipe, but no lighter. She couldn’t even leave to get water or go to the bathroom, and was forced to use a bucket, and curtains for toilet paper. “It was like mental torture,” Maina said.

One day, Maina woke up to Kilo forcing himself upon her. Completely helpless, she started her day being raped in her own bed by her pimp.

Despite the control and abuse, Maina felt like Kilo was the only one who understood her. “These men are your father, your husband, your everything. You depend on [them] for everything,” she said. “After a while, you really do fall in love with them.”

Maina was still working for Kilo when she had another horrifying awakening—one morning, she opened her eyes to see a shotgun at her head and a needle in her arm. Star was shooting her up with heroin, saying, “You think you’re so much better than me.”

“I was terrified,” recalled Maina. “What if it was a dirty needle? What if I got HIV?”

After the incident, Maina left as fast as she could and moved in with Summer, Kilo’s “sister,”

according to him. In reality, Maina learned later, Summer was another woman he had been sleeping with.

While she was staying at Summer's, Maina got sick. She didn't know what illness she was suffering from, but she realized she could no longer take a hit of crack without vomiting, and she had also developed a strange bump on her arm.

Maina went to the hospital, and there, she learned she had MRSA, a high-resistance staph infection. The nurse treating her asked if she was pregnant. Maina said no, but the nurse made her urinate in a cup. A few minutes later, she returned with big news.

"You're five months pregnant. It's a girl."

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Maina's pregnancy, though unexpected, provided major impetus for positive change in her life. She quit doing drugs cold turkey and stopped working as a prostitute. Today, at 38 years old, she lives in East Providence, Rhode Island, and is working towards her associate's degree. She hasn't talked to Kilo since 2010, and her daughter—his daughter, who she named Ja'naya—has never met him.

However, though her life has improved in many ways, Maina's struggles are not over. Her most recent relationship was with a wealthy white man 24 years older than her, a well-respected labor leader named Arthur Jordan. "I was Julia Roberts and he was Richard Gere," Maina said with a laugh.

The relationship made her feel loved and gave her confidence. "He made me recognize my potential," Maina said. However, in many ways, the relationship was a symptom of her past prostitution. Maina stayed with Jordan for seven years despite the fact that she wasn't attracted to him—she was simply used to having sex with older white men, so she didn't care.

Jordan knew about Maina's past, but in 2016, when *Marie Claire* published a story about her experience with prostitution and sex trafficking, he ended the relationship. The breakup devastated Maina. She became severely depressed, started drinking "a lot," and couldn't get out of bed for a month. "I broke," she said. "I couldn't handle going back to [being] regular Patrice again."

As a result of her depression, Maina started neglecting Ja'naya, and on September 20th, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) removed Ja'naya from her custody. Maina's mother was the one who made the call, which hurt, said Maina.

But while Maina used to see DCYF as "the big monster," she has since realized that she needed them. "I didn't realize that depression—when it hits you, it hits you," she said. Now, in a much better place, she says, Maina is currently fighting to regain custody of Ja'naya.

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In some ways, Ja'naya is her mother's "mini-me," which is "kind of scary," Maina said.

Like her mother before her, Ja'naya is overweight, dark-skinned, and already developing at the age of ten. And like her mother before her, Ja'naya is also severely bullied at school.

This year, Maina's heart broke when she learned of something else they had in common. On January 21st, Ja'naya gave Maina a note decorated with hearts on top that started, "I'm sorry, Mom." In it, Ja'naya revealed that two years earlier, when she was just eight years old, Maina's adult, male neighbor asked if he could pay to touch her. Unaware of what that meant, Ja'naya said yes, and he raped her. Afterwards, he handed her \$10.

Maina immediately reported her daughter's abuse to the police, and they are now prosecuting the former neighbor.

The worst part for Maina was that Ja'naya took the money after the rape. When asked why she did so, she replied, "Because we need the money, Mom."

Maina hasn't told her daughter about her past yet, other than her drug use, but now she feels she has to. "I realized my child was broken because I was broken," she said.

Despite what she has suffered, Ja'naya has proven to be remarkably strong. Watching her daughter put her legs in stirrups for a rape exam at just ten years old, Maina started hyperventilating. But Ja'naya grabbed her hand and said, "Don't cry mom, I'm not damaged by this."

Maina was shocked and inspired by her daughter's resilience. "If she can't be damaged by this," she said, "why should I?"

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Today, Maina visits classrooms around Rhode Island to educate students about sex trafficking and end the misconception that it only happens in faraway countries. "It's happening right here," she said to a classroom of Brown University students, "and it doesn't discriminate."

In the talks she delivers to students, Maina also highlights the importance of self-esteem, which, in her opinion, contributes to sex trafficking more than poverty.

That's why, whenever she speaks to students, Maina reminds them to "pick their heads up." A recent letter from a student revealed the huge impact this can have—in it, the young girl said that after hearing Maina speak, she decided to get help for her anxiety and depression.

Maina blames her own self-esteem issues for shaping her into a victim of sex trafficking. However, it's clear today, as she speaks confidently from a podium, how far she has come. She used to avoid wearing heels because she felt people would judge her for her size or think she looked like a prostitute. But now, she said, "I embrace my tallness."

In terms of the future, Maina's main priority is getting custody of her daughter. However, she also hopes to one day study public policy at Brown University, and she dreams of writing a book. When asked if she had any titles in mind, she offered a phrase she once heard in Narcotics Anonymous that she thinks describes her story well: *A Mess to a Message*.

“I’m glad I went through everything I went through,” she said. “I’m strong. I’ve been broken, shattered, broken, shattered... But I’m not shattered this time,” she said, speaking about her recent breakup and the loss of custody of her daughter. “I’m [just] cracked, and that glue is drying. And when it does dry,” she said with a smile, “People are going to [call it] abstract art.”