



My name is Karla Highman, and I founded *Walking Wise*® in 2021. My journey as an advocate for child safety started years ago when I began volunteering for an anti-sex trafficking organization. I believe education is a community's first defense against child exploitation because knowledge is a powerful defense against sexual predators.



Karla K. Highman,
Founder, *Walking Wise*®

My inspiration to create educational videos about child sex trafficking resulted from a frightening personal experience that lasted no more than 30 minutes. In the U.S., the event I faced is so infrequent that human trafficking experts classify it as a *myth*. Yet the incident shaped my *Walking Wise* mission to help adults hold candid conversations about sexual exploitation with young people.

A friend invited me on a European vacation with her 18-year-old daughter in 2010. I felt intimidated about traveling alone and navigating airports where I could not speak the language. Nevertheless, the three of us met up, enjoying the sights until my young travel companion became alarmed by a man photographing her on the subway. Shrugging it off, I assumed she had watched one too many movies. However, her anxiety increased as the photographs continued. So, I suggested we assess the threat level by quickly darting out of the subway to see if the man would react.

After scrambling from the tunnel, we attempted to hide by crouching at a crowded neighborhood pub outside the subway exit. I experienced an indescribable emotion when the suspicious man appeared, sprinting out of the passageway. Brazenly, he stood in the street's median, scanning the crowd to find us. The man slowly worked his way in a circle until we appeared in his direct line of sight.

We were in broad daylight on this crowded street, so it seemed impossible to think we were in jeopardy of victimization by this stranger. However, the man's photography and the "chase" made his fixation understood. Fearful of being followed to our apartment, we stepped into a restaurant. The stranger stood openly outside, making multiple phone calls; his body language revealed that he was sharing directions to our location.

Predators prey upon the vulnerabilities of the people they target using manipulation and intimidation—and our pursuer was doing just that. He singled us out as vulnerable American tourists, presuming we could not speak the language, recognizing our uncertainty about asking for help, and our hesitancy to involve others.

In navigating life, we must discern good and evil while trusting our instincts. Reclaiming one's power demands level-headed thinking and, at times, a willingness to take risks during a threatening situation.

Our travel occurred in an era when flip phones were still mainstream, and mobile phone cameras were a newer concept—at least for this villain. The standoff ended abruptly when we surprised our perceived trafficker with an up-close photo-op. While generating a series of camera clicks, I explained to the man that his face was being shared through email. His shocked expression became etched in my mind. Instantly, we knew we had defeated the stranger's mission as he stood deflated. With slumped shoulders, he began making a sequence of apparent cancellation calls.

Human traffickers continually evolve their business model, so in these technology-driven times, *abductions by strangers* are reportedly infrequent in the U.S. The number of public cameras and the millions of video-making mobile phones impact criminal behavior. For example, a review of 44 studies revealed a 51% decrease in crimes committed in parking lots with video surveillance (Cornell University, 2014). Similarly, the 2019 COVID pandemic escalated sex traffickers' online manipulation and coercion used to pursue young people. In fact, CyberTipline received an exorbitant 36.2 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation in 2023 (NCMEC CyberTipline Report, 2023).

Manipulation, intimidation, and coercion can happen to anyone – at any age and gender. However, education can help interrupt predators' schemes set for children and teenagers. Our *Walking Wise* online course for adults, animated video series, and educational guide are designed to increase a youth's insight into sidestepping sexual predators and traffickers. Most importantly, we want those who have been victimized to know that there are ways to seek help from trustworthy adults.