



Season 2
Episode 7 Transcript
Human Trafficking Victim
Gets New Life and Thrives

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur, and this is Tell Me What Happened — true stories of people helping people — an original podcast by OnStar.

Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things, every day.

This episode discusses human trafficking, mental health and suicide. And I know you didn't wake up this morning hoping to hear about the sexual exploitation of children. But the person at the heart of this story didn't want to be involved in it either.

This episode is 25 minutes long. I hope you'll give me that much of your time to better understand this dark and dangerous world. And like all of our stories, this is the story of someone who was saved. And at the end of the show, we'll share some ideas about how you can make a difference.

La Ceiba is a Caribbean beach town in Honduras. There's a reef just offshore where scuba divers come looking for whale sharks. And just inland there's a national park with jaguars and toucans. The town itself is a collection of small hotels and restaurants. Fourteen-year-old Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman works at a pizza place.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I had good money. I was happy. I was excited because I was getting so much good money just from tips and being able to provide for my family in the way that I had not been able to do before.

Torah Kachur:

His income is crucial to his family. His father was abusive to both him and his mother. Then eventually he left them completely.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

Since my father left our home, I had to really work. I had to really do whatever it takes to survive. I was going to be the man of the house.

Torah Kachur:

And for the past three months at the pizza place, he's been doing just that.

One particular evening after the dinner rush, just before closing time, two men come into the restaurant.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

They sit down, order food. I still remember what they ordered. And they left me 100 lempiras for a tip. You have to understand. 100 lempiras — I could feed my family for four or five days straight. I was overjoyed.

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs spends some of that money on a treat for his family.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I bought, like, a big extra pizza to take with me — to take home. And I'm sorry, I'm getting emotional. Pizza was not a thing that we could afford then.

Torah Kachur:

Sometime before midnight when his shift ends, Suamhirs is carrying that pizza home to his family.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

All of a sudden, I just look back and I can see that the two men from the restaurant. I remember I started walking fast and I could hear my heart rate just get louder.

Torah Kachur:

He walks faster. But the men do too. He bursts into a run. But it's too late.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I felt like a knife cut me. And the man on the left side came and put a wet T-shirt over my mouth and nose and I passed out.

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs drifts in and out of consciousness, vaguely aware he's being carried through the streets.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

The last thing I remember is that I was just thrown into a van, and I just don't know anything from there.

Torah Kachur:

He wakes up in a dark room with an IV needle in his arm.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

They were using a combination of sedatives, drugs and other things to just keep me sedated for short-, long-term periods of time.

Torah Kachur:

His semi-conscious state lasts for days. Every time he wakes up, he's in a different place: sometimes a basement, other times a car and one time a black windowless room surrounded by strangers.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I found myself naked in this room while these two people are here looking at my body. The men who actually kidnapped me were standing on the doorway and they just passed over a backpack and they pull out what looked like money. And I realized that I was sold just there and then I had become somebody's property.

Torah Kachur:

A damp rag covers his mouth again and he falls unconscious. He's woken up by a man slapping his face — repeatedly and hard. He can taste his own blood in his mouth. But the violence is just part of the intimidation.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

They told me that I was going to do whatever they asked me to do. If not, they're going to kill my mom and my three brothers. They named my brothers and named my mom by first and last name. Told us the house we lived on, the color of the house.

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs' journey into hell has begun.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

A man came into that room and they were there to rape me.

Torah Kachur:

He's beaten, starved, drugged and raped. Always by different people in different places.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

Some people needed to beat me. Some people needed to do more things that, to them, would fulfill their needs. But every person, no matter who they were or color of their skin, all of them came to rape a child.

Torah Kachur:

He's moved from city to city.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I was taken to San Francisco. I was taken to Las Vegas. I was taken to Tampa. I was taken to New York City. I was taken to Atlantic City. I was taken to all of these places.

Torah Kachur:

For six months he endures the nightmare, night after night.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I decided I'm not going to live in this pain and I'm not going to allow them to take my life, as well as everything else they had taken from me. So I decided to commit suicide.

Torah Kachur:

One of his abusers has left a beer can behind. Suamhirs bends and twists the metal until it rips, exposing the sharp edge. He uses it to cut deep into his forearm, then lies down, hoping to bleed to death.

Then suddenly, there's noise everywhere.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

You can hear the sirens outside. You can hear the helicopters. You can hear everything.

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs doesn't speak any English, so he doesn't know what the voices on the loudspeakers are saying. All he knows is that he's scared.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

It was chaotic. All of a sudden I can hear gunshots.

Torah Kachur:

A SWAT team is staging a full-on, military-scale raid on the house.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I just got under the bed. And I just hid there.

Torah Kachur:

He lies as still as possible. The gunshots stop, but he doesn't move. Then the door is kicked open.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

The door — it just went down and this officer is, like, looking around with a big gun and it had a light on it. And he looks at me — I'm under the bed. This guy just picked me up from the floor and took me out of the house.

Torah Kachur:

Shocked and confused, dizzy from a loss of blood, Suamhirs has no idea if he's being saved or if things are about to get worse.

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how

important a human connection is when you need help.

We've chosen to tell this story — even though it's unsettling and disturbing — because we feel it needs to be told. Human trafficking is happening right now in your state, in your city. And we all need to be aware of that so we can put an end to it.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

There's a lot of names to what happened to me. People call it sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of children, international human trafficking, slavery.

Torah Kachur:

Whatever you call it, it has been six months of unimaginable suffering. A nightmare that should have come to an end with a SWAT team raid. And normally this is the point in the show where we introduce you to the rescuer: the person that pulls the main character from the rising flood or burning car. Unfortunately, we're not at that point yet.

The police take Suamhirs to the hospital. They bandage the cuts on his arms and treat his other injuries. But those are only his physical wounds.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

They didn't know what to do. They asked me, "Who is your parents? What's your Social Security number? Who is going to pay the bill?"

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs doesn't have those answers.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I was transferred to a mental health institution.

Torah Kachur:

And from there, he's turned over to immigration.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I was obviously undocumented. ICE got involved. And I was placed in their largest holding facility in San Diego, and then transferred to Texas.

Torah Kachur:

For two months he is held, awaiting deportation — until someone needs something from him. Prosecutors want Suamhirs to testify against the traffickers, so they convince the immigration officials to release him into their care.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I was back to California and placed in foster care. I wish to say to you that it was easy being in foster care but no.

Torah Kachur:

The foster care system can be difficult for any young person. But especially so for a young man who has been through what Suamhirs has. Trusting strangers, and forming emotional bonds with adults, is nearly impossible.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

I spent four — four and a half years in foster care, 20 some placements, group homes, foster homes, three failed adoptions.

Torah Kachur:

But one day, just as he is about to turn 18, he meets Sabrina Goosby. She works at Voices for Children, an organization providing assistance, counseling and a safe place for abused kids.

Sabrina runs a program called Real Word. They host panels with foster youth who share their experiences so that people working in the system can learn what is and isn't working. Suamhirs is brought to the event by his case worker and is introduced to Sabrina.

Sabrina Goosby:

He was this pleasant, polite, this winning smile, beautiful eyes, tall, and you could tell he was just anxious to be able to make his mark on the world, even though he was a little reserved.

Torah Kachur:

For Suamhirs, hearing the speakers at the event sparks something inside of him.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

And I just remember being there and being so energized and being like, "I want to be here. I have things to say."

Sabrina Goosby:

He really wanted to do it, but he was lacking some confidence in his language skills, but this kid had already survived so much. And I knew for a fact that if he had gone through what he had already been through, he was going to be able to — once he found his voice — be able to share that story and continue to make his mark on the world.

Torah Kachur:

Sabrina starts working with Suamhirs every single day.

Sabrina Goosby:

We spent a lot of extra time together so that we could get him more comfortable, more confident in his public speaking.

Torah Kachur:

He's still learning English. Plus, he's trying to develop presentations skills.

Sabrina Goosby:

I would show him what the right word to use in the right places, highlight a place where you really want to — in order to captivate your audience — we would teach him how to pause there, just take a breath, pause and let them kind of hang on it.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

She became my coach. She became my mentor. She became the person who I cried to, the person who I talked to about my mistakes and told me how to fix them.

Torah Kachur:

Learning public speaking, developing his own voice, became a way to address the horrors of his past.

Sabrina Goosby:

I really saw him work through some really dark times, you know, because everything wasn't rosy at the end of this. And he went through a lot of trials which would break any person, but they never broke him.

Torah Kachur:

And for the first time since that evening he was grabbed outside the pizza place in La Ceiba, Suamhirs begins to trust someone.

Sabrina Goosby:

I was someone that he could call at any time and ask, "Could we get together?" Or we would have a conversation on the phone. And so I think that that opened our relationship up because I was someone he could look to for guidance and for support. But I also was one of those people who provided love for him. And I think he could feel that. And then once he could feel the love that I had, then he eventually got to the point of trust.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

That was the last person I needed in my life to feel that I was capable of being loved and loving somebody else. You see, Sabrina became more than Sabrina Goosby; she became Mama. She became my mom.

Sabrina Goosby:

I remember one where he was moving to an apartment and wasn't sure about

how to go about doing the paperwork or signing a lease. Or, “I’ve met this incredible young woman and this is who she is. I can’t wait for you to meet her.” And we did get a chance to meet. And I’m like, “Yep. She’s the one.”

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs’ rescue is different from most of the ones we share on this show. It wasn’t with a rope or a ladder. And what he needed saving from wasn’t a mudslide or quicksand. What he needed was someone he could trust and someone who could help him believe in a future.

Sabrina Goosby:

Once Suamhirs found his voice and was able to share that with the world, that’s when you knew that he was going to do some exceptional work for and with people.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

That I can tell you was single handedly the biggest gift that Sabrina gave me. The ability to say, “I’m here. I’m present. I have a voice.”

Torah Kachur:

The following year, Suamhirs spoke at the Real Word panel. The response was overwhelming. It was a powerful moment for the audience, but also for him.

He went to school. Earned a degree. All the while, speaking to larger and larger groups.

Sabrina Goosby:

I’ve watched him take what he learned in finding his voice — fine tune his skills. He would go to that stage, and you could see people open their heart to him, and I think that’s truly his gift.

Torah Kachur:

His unique ability to open up to people and help them understand what happened to him, and thousands of other kids, got him noticed.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

So one morning, I’m waking up and I see a message and I noticed the email says the White House. And I’m like, “Somebody is pulling my leg.”

Torah Kachur:

But the email was legit. In fact, it was a job offer.

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

He told me that he would like to present me to President Obama as an option to join the National Security Staff as a member of the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking. And I was like, “Yes, sure.”

Torah Kachur:

A few months later, President Obama personally appointed him to the U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking.

Sabrina Goosby:

I knew when I met him that he had incredible gifts and talents and treasures. I knew he would be someone special, but did I ever think that he would be working on a committee with President Obama?

Suamhirs Piraino-Guzman:

As I walked onto the steps of the White House, I remember the coaching Sabrina taught me about speaking slowly so people can hear me, about enunciating so my message can stay there and present, about loving myself in a way that I can possibly love somebody else.

Torah Kachur:

Suamhirs' story started with a kidnapping and the turning point was a massive raid by the police. But Dr. Minh Dang, the executive director of Survivor Alliance, explains that not all trafficking is that dramatic and it's not exclusive to the sex industry.

Dr. Minh Dang:

I think it's important to know that trafficking is about an extreme exploitation in labor. It's anybody who is there through force, fraud or coercion to do something for somebody else under threat of violence and who are receiving little to no pay. And so it's less about the industry that it happens in and more about the loss of freedom and the complete control over somebody that is perpetrated by somebody else.

I think that it can be a gradual system of exploitation, right? Someone just asks you to volunteer one day to work with them, and you're doing it as a favor because your mom borrowed money from them. Oh, and then it's this other situation. Oh, and then the length of time that you need to work for them just continues to build. And you realize that you can't get out of this situation with this person or you fear for your family's life. So it can absolutely be gradual.

Torah Kachur:

Are children or teenagers particularly targeted?

Dr. Minh Dang:

Anybody who has a certain vulnerability is, and I think that children are uniquely vulnerable because of their developing brains, because of the power differential between adults. If you're a child; if you live in a country where your democratic rights aren't as available; if there's a lot of poverty; if you have

undergone any form of gender-based violence. War and conflict is a huge place where people are exploited.

And so it's important to recognize the intersection of multiple oppressions, right? So whether you're LGBT+, you grew up in a poor family who doesn't have access to resources, and you're migrating because of climate change — I mean, there's so many things that can drive people to be vulnerable and therefore have fewer options. And typically when people have fewer options that's where they can become exploited.

Torah Kachur:

What are some telling signs that maybe someone's being held against their will?

Dr. Minh Dang:

So I don't like sharing "spot the signs" and I'll share it with you why. It creates a bit of a checklist that can actually lead to potentially harmful actions. All of the checklists about "spotting the signs" can also be situations that are fine. I think what's more important than the public going around trying to spot human trafficking is the public investing in adequate social services, adequate income, a minimum wage, education for all, ending gender-based violence, et cetera, because it's those structural pieces that are really important to changing the conditions in which people will be exploited.

So work on addressing the vulnerabilities that people have in their lives. If there's survivors of sexual assault, and they haven't been able to heal from that; if there's people in long term poverty; if there's people who have been through war — I mean, I think there's so much to do in that regard that we would save a lot of money on spot the signs training.

Torah Kachur:

OK so in this case, in the story that we're talking about, Suamhirs was taken on U.S. commercial planes. At one point there was a passenger that kept looking at him, knowing something was wrong. You know, we start thinking about that feeling as a bystander, that feeling like, "Oh, geez, this just — this situation is not right." What do you do?

Dr. Minh Dang:

I think it's OK to just ask, "Hey, are you OK?" Or if you have this intuition that something's wrong but their perpetrator is sitting right there, is there a way that you can slip them a message? Is there a way that you can find — you know — if the person has to go to the bathroom, just check in with them and say something. Nowadays, airline officials sometimes are actually trained and so you might be able to speak to somebody there and say, "Hey, I'm noticing something. Is it something that you guys might be able to handle?"

So, I think ask yourself — well, if you have an intuition and they do say, “Yeah, I need help,” think through what will you do after. So really first think through your intuition and say, “Well what exactly do I think is going on?” And let yourself go there and then say, “OK, if that becomes confirmed, what am I going to do next?” Because what’s going to be really difficult is if the person then says, “Yeah, I need help,” and you’re not ready. I think that’s going to be very, very challenging.

Torah Kachur:

Dr. Dang, I really appreciate your expertise. You’ve given I think a lot of people a lot to think about, and I wish you were the absolute best in your journey and all the support you give for all the survivors.

Dr. Minh Dang:

Absolutely.

Torah Kachur:

That’s it for this episode of OnStar’s Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people.

If you suspect someone is in a dangerous situation, there is a human trafficking hotline you can access by calling 1-888-37-37-888. Or go to [HumanTraffickingHotline.org](https://www.HumanTraffickingHotline.org).

There is also a Suicide & Crisis Lifeline you can access by dialing 988. People who are able to help are there 24 hours a day.

Those phone numbers are listed in the show notes.

On behalf of OnStar, I’m Torah Kachur. Thanks for listening.

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