

# STAT – Stop Trafficking in Abducted Teens – NOW

by Thomas F. Coleman, Human Rights Attorney  
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I've been presented with many challenges in the past 30 years as an advocate for human rights and as a civil liberties attorney – protecting personal privacy, stopping hate crimes, and ending various types of discrimination. Between my own cases and projects, and what I have been exposed to by the media, I thought I had seen it all.

But two months ago, August 18, 2004, to be exact, I unwittingly walked into a legal and political mine field in a human rights struggle of which I was unaware: the widespread trafficking, abduction, imprisonment, and reprogramming of American teenagers. Little did I know the consequence of my affirmative reply to a plea from my 16 year old niece: "Uncle Tom, would you be willing to talk with my best friend Ana – she has a problem and needs advice?"

I was in Michigan at the time, visiting for a family reunion. I was scheduled to return to California the next morning.

"Sure, Cameo, let's go into a private area so we can talk about this." I looked at the clock. It was 9:00 p.m. and I had to get up early the next day to catch my flight. This shouldn't take too much of my time.

It is now two months later, 100 hours of my professional time later, dozens of phone calls and e-mails later. My personal life was touched by my encounter with Ana and my professional life is changing as a result of my introduction to the teen abduction, trafficking, and reprogramming industry.

I spent an hour talking with Ana, learning that she had suicidal tendencies (and had twice unsuccessfully attempted suicide) as a result of abuse and neglect in her home. She recounted instances of physical abuse and an ongoing psychological reign of terror at the hands of her abusive father and neglectful mother.

After hearing her stories, I realized that Ana should not return home. So I enlisted the help of two of my sisters who found safe accommodations for Ana and got her to a psychologist who worked with troubled teens.

The psychologist interviewed Ana, and corroborated the abuse and neglect by speaking with Ana's older sister who was home from college for the summer. She then filed a mandatory abuse report with the Michigan Child Protective Services (CPS).

Ana's parents were invited to the offices of CPS. Ana was told to return to her home. Pending completion of

the abuse investigation, Ana's father was advised to stay away from the home until he completed an anger-management program.

Ana continued her therapy sessions with the psychologist, started back to school, and was hired for a new part-time job. I was amazed at how easy my intervention had been and how smoothly the system was responding.

Problem solved. Case closed. Wrong!

On the Saturday of Labor Day weekend – only two weeks later – my niece called me from Canada where she was vacationing with her parents. "Uncle Tom, we have a problem. Ana is missing."

Case reopened. My investigation into the disappearance of Ana introduced me to a large network of businesses that profit from the abduction, trafficking, and confinement of juveniles whose parents throw them to the "mental reprogramming" wolves.

I discovered that Ana had been awakened in the middle of the night by two large "special transportation" people who, at her parent's instigation, abducted Ana and took her to Spring Creek Lodge. In this locked facility in a remote area of Montana, some 1900 miles from Ana's home, hundreds of teenagers are required to submit to abusive mental reprogramming processes.

Ana, and hundreds of other teenagers like her, are held incommunicado at this facility while they are subjected to mental and emotional reprogramming. This can last for many months, even for years. Worse yet, I discovered that thousands of teens in similar situations are abducted each year and then placed, against their will, in dozens of unlicensed and privately operated behavior modification facilities.

My Internet searches about these facilities revealed that some had been closed for systematic human rights violations, and others remained on the "watch list" of the International Survivors Action Committee (ISAC). I felt a glimmer of hope for Ana and other abducted teens like her by knowing that such a human rights agency existed.

I sent an e-mail to ISAC and told them the story of Ana's abduction. When I received their reply, my anxiety was heightened. "Get Ana out of Spring Creek Lodge soon," I was warned, "or she might be transferred to another facility outside the United States and then you will really have trouble freeing her from confinement."

I took this warning seriously and called in the troops. I knew that my good friend and colleague, Dr. Nora



Baladerian, has been involved in the field of child abuse prevention for years. She works with a national network of child abuse prevention and response professionals. Perhaps she could help.

I called Nora and she responded by giving me her best advice and by alerting thousands of abuse prevention professionals of the problem and asking them for advice.

Ana's psychologist in Michigan reacted with outrage when she learned of Ana's abduction. Her concern intensified when she contacted Spring Creek Lodge only to be told that they would not allow Ana to speak with her. "Ana's parents placed her here and we have full custody of her now," a director at Spring Creek told her.

For the next several days, Nora and I and Ana's therapist worked diligently to broaden the network of concerned professionals. We pressured the CPS in Michigan to file a lawsuit to get Ana out of confinement. We worked with the sheriff's office and prosecutor's office in Michigan to get this victim/witness back into their jurisdiction before something terrible might happen to her.

Ana's father tried to pull political strings. "I know people in high places," he told local authorities in Michigan. "You are not going to get a court order against me."

Oh yeah? Despite his clout and political connections, we provided sufficient information to the authorities that a Michigan court ordered Ana to be returned to Michigan – but not to the custody of her parents.

Case closed. Everything is fine. Wrong! The sheriff in Montana refused to honor the court order from Michigan.

I was getting an education. These facilities are powerful. They provide jobs to the areas where they operate. They make large political donations to local and state politicians. And they feel no one can touch them because they are not licensed by any federal, state, or local government agencies. With the signature of a parent, a behavior modification facility becomes a corporate god which controls every aspect of an abducted teen's life.

Through my outreach to the Montana Attorney General's office, and with a lot a pressure from the prosecutor and sheriff in Michigan, the sheriff in Montana finally saw the light and Ana was released to a foster home in Montana. Two sheriffs and a case worker flew from Michigan and brought her back from Montana.

Case closed. Everything is fine. Wrong! I open my Los Angeles Times and read a story about the closure of a similar facility in Ensenada, Mexico which was reprogramming about 500 American teenagers.

Then, on October 7, I was informed that an unnamed girl committed suicide at Spring Creek Lodge in Montana. No media reports have mentioned the suicide.

What I learned from my recent experiences is that:

- The abduction, trafficking, and reprogramming of teens is a \$1 billion per year industry – without oversight.
- The federal government regulates the interstate transportation of furniture – but not the abduction and interstate transportation of children.
- State and local governments either lack the resources or the will to regulate this industry.
- Currently, private nonprofit organizations concerned with these issues lack sufficient resources to adequately address them.
- An ad hoc approach to rescuing individual victims, while laudable, will not cause the systemic changes which are necessary to reform and regulate this industry.

With this recent experience in mind, and with knowledge of the complicated legal and political nature of the abduction, trafficking and reprogramming processes, I and a number of my colleagues will be taking specific steps to stop these abuses from growing in number and in magnitude.

We will be creating a multi-disciplinary "think tank" to focus on this industry. The primary purpose of the "think tank" will be to create a national plan of action to stop the abduction, trafficking, and reprogramming of teens.

This network of service providers, academics, human rights advocates, and law enforcement personnel, will focus on the implementation of and/or reform of:

- International human/children's rights treaties
- Federal anti-trafficking laws
- Federal child labor laws
- Federal interstate commerce regulations
- State judicial placement procedures and guidelines
- State licensing of special transportation services
- State child abuse and family violence laws
- State health and safety laws
- Interagency cooperation in monitoring this industry

What started out for me a simple request from my niece for me to talk to her best friend Ana, has turned into a crash course in the murky realm of corporate financial gain and abdication of parental responsibility. My life may never be the same again.

I seem to have found my next human rights mission: stopping the abduction and abuse of minors in residential treatment programs.

If I ever wondered why I have developed skills in law, politics, writing, public speaking, directing, and producing – it seems I have found the answer: Ana and thousands of teens like her need another strong advocate and powerful ally. I guess that would be me.

Contact attorney Thomas F. Coleman at Spectrum Institute, P.O. Box 11030, Glendale, CA 91226 / (818) 482-4485 / [tomcoleman@earthlink.net](mailto:tomcoleman@earthlink.net).