

**Statement by  
Nacole S., Mother of a Child Sex Trafficking Victim on Backpage.com**

**Backpage.com's Knowing Facilitation of Online Sex Trafficking  
January 10, 2017**

**Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations  
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee  
U.S. Senate**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and esteemed members of the Subcommittee.

My name is Nacole S., and I want to thank you for the opportunity to be here today to represent myself and my family. I also hope I can be a voice for the countless other families who are not present today, whose lives have been forever changed by Backpage.com and similar websites that make their living hiding in the shadows of the law.

Before I get any further, let me first say that, I am truly honored to be addressing you as members of the U.S. Senate. Neither I nor my family felt like we were fully equipped to provide testimony since we're not lawyers or politicians. Our experience with the English language isn't nearly as poetic or profound as other testimonies you might hear. But, after a lot of thought (and a lot of prayer), we realized that this testimony is not about poetry—it's about honesty. It's about telling a story, *our* story, and hoping that what you hear today means something. It's also about keeping a promise to our daughter to bring justice to everyone (*everyone*) that wronged her. So instead, for a moment, let me address you not as politicians, but as fathers and mothers; as aunts and uncles, as grandparents (if you've been so blessed like I have). These are credentials that I can relate to. You are the people who need to hear our story.

In 2010, we were a close, loving family. We were all realizing our American dream. We had built something for ourselves more valuable than money, more important to us than a big new house or better cars in the driveway. We had built 3 lives, our great kids, ready to come into their own and take on the world. Passionate about our children, we wanted and expected the best. I remember a conversation with a school guidance counselor who was chastising us on how we were going about our son's college applications. The counselor was convinced that our son, a first-generation college student, would be best served applying to only local schools. We, ever-reaching, were convinced that he was better than that. It felt like our stubborn optimism and belief was rewarded when our son was accepted into a prestigious private engineering school in New York. We weren't surprised at all. We were so proud of all 3 of our children, each national honor roll students, and at the top of their games. Little did we understand how dramatically our lives were about to change. In just a few months, our American dream would be exchanged for a third-world nightmare, and would lead us to question everything.

Our youngest, our baby Natalie<sup>1</sup>, was something special. She was always the most energetic of our 3 children, so full of life and promise. She participated in varsity soccer and wrestling, and played violin in the high school orchestra - all in her freshman year. That was Natalie, she tried to experience everything. She was taking high school by storm, in her light-hearted way. She was *one of those* kids. (Only a family with *one of those* kids knows what that means. Natalie wanted to do everything at once, with high energy, and nothing could contain her zest for life). Challenging as she was, she was exceeding every possible expectation a parent could have. It was amazing to be part of. None of us could've predicted that her innocent, care-free attitude was about to take her down a path what would shake our family to its very core. At the time, our family dynamic had changed as our son was off to college and our oldest daughter was distracted by her own concerns. Natalie was struggling to find her place in her new world.

Looking back, we understand that our daughter was burning the candle at both ends, struggling with all the sudden, but inevitable, changes that were occurring. While they were all good things to us; they were confusing and difficult to Natalie. All we saw was an exceptional young lady, doing exceptional things. But Natalie, in her own way, was sending out signals. It's easy to see now, because of all the painful retrospection that comes with a tragedy, but it was impossible to see then.

She made the implausible decision to leave the safety of her home. She wrote a letter, five pages long, telling us how wonderful her family is and how much she loved us. "Finding herself" was the gist of the letter, and of course not to worry. Not certain of her choice, Natalie had shared the letter with friends and like a sick game of telephone it circulated the school. Now it wasn't just a letter, but a dare. It was her reputation at stake. So, backed into a corner, she left.

Making her way to Seattle she found herself at a teen homeless shelter. A woman there, 22 and posing as a teen, must've immediately noticed Natalie as an easy target. As smart as Natalie was, she had no idea of the danger she was in. As a parent, it's hard to talk about what happened next. I can't imagine her fear and bewilderment at what was happening to her as she was repeatedly raped and beaten and threatened, and treated like a sexual object every single day. All while being posted on a Backpage online ad. I honestly try not to think about it. I can only tell you that when we finally got Natalie back for good, months later, the young girl we found wasn't the same Natalie who left our home months earlier. I literally didn't recognize her at first; her appearance had changed so much. Her hair was dyed and cut and she was wearing different clothes. She didn't even sound like Natalie. Everything she was saying was incomprehensible to me. Our Natalie's light was gone. That was the beginning of our 6 year odyssey to get here, to our new American dream.

Our new dream is simple: to live in an America that doesn't stand aside while little girls like our daughter, Natalie at age 15, are sold online like a commodity. Purchased with all the same conveniences you would expect from an order on Amazon and always returned as broken, damaged human beings, forever changed by the horror they experienced.

It's time to accept that child sex trafficking has entered the digital age, and been embraced by it. The loose moral code and "sisterhood" of the streets is now gone. There is no protection, no accountability, and no escape. The same speed and anonymity that attracts so many to the Internet has made it a hot-bed for the ugliest human behaviors; at the forefront of which are websites like Backpage.com. Backpage and similar sites have changed the rules of engagement for people who

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<sup>1</sup> We use the pseudonym Natalie to protect our daughter's privacy.

purchase children for sex. Any semblance of risk has been taken from the process. All of the dark street-corners have been replaced with the familiarity and comfort of computer screens, and these men now make their illicit transactions from the safety of their homes. Secure in the fact that no one is watching. While Backpage may wish to pretend they are simply the new virtual street corner in this metaphor, inanimate and blameless, that just simply isn't true. They are complicit. They are more like the corrupt authority figure, paid to look the other way (paid well, I might add), reporting a few hundred suspicious advertisements every year to feign compliance and concern, all while letting thousands of others slip by. We have reason to believe their level of involvement goes further still to enable and streamline the process of illegal prostitution and child sex trafficking on their website, and yet so far they've gotten away with it.

The question is how? How could such a horrific, morally bankrupt business model find success in our America? Backpage.com and its facilitators continue to operate as they do because they feel the same level of immunity as those who purchase children for sex while sitting behind their computer screens. Because they believe they are *protected*. Hiding behind old laws, and the mantra that somehow any action on the Internet is free speech, they carry on unabashedly while children like my daughter are repeatedly raped day after day. They *claim* to be protecting 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights, while at the same time allowing my little girl, a young bright-eyed resident of an all-American neighborhood, to be sold on their website as a "Weekend Special". I ask you now - where was her right to be heard? What immunity was there for her from these unspeakable acts, or from the damage it caused to her and our family? It is time to admit the truth to ourselves that this was never about protecting the Constitution. This is about abusing Constitutional protections for greed and gain, no matter the consequences. In reality, Backpage CEO Carl Ferrer is no warrior for Free Speech, he's just another pimp. One who happens to have a lot of expensive lawyers on retainer.

My family believes in a just America. We believe that, in time, our government and our people will realize that the moral cost of our current path is too high to sustain. What we would like to ask of this subcommittee, of the parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents present today is "How long?" How long until changes are made to prevent what happened to our daughter from ever happening to another child? Because it's already been six years for us. While our family hasn't rested, neither has the evil that took our Natalie from us. Please don't let another innocent child in America be bought and sold for sex, and have their spirit crushed.

I've heard it said many times that the Communications Decency Act doesn't need a rewrite to prevent further tragedies like the one that befell my family, just a few new words, carefully crafted. A few words to end online child sex trafficking in our country, so that we can honestly and with pride say that we are the land of the free.

I would like to thank you for your time on behalf of my family, and also thank the dozens, if not hundreds, of people who have helped us get this far over the years. Only with their help have we had the strength to continue to fight this cause.