

The Broken Loving On The Broken

Meg Abebe



Although not always aware of it, giving back comes naturally to Shari Montgomery, 53, of the Lansing area.

Originally from Traverse City, Michigan, Montgomery first made her way to the capitol city when she was in the 8th grade. While she has plenty of memories to recollect from her childhood, including moments from the Annual National Cherry Festival, she

also harbors some triggering aspects of verbal and physical abuse.

Growing up with an abusive mother had pushed her into seeking solace elsewhere. She would find herself sitting in church, receiving comfort from the congregation and services by the time she was a teenager. While attending Waverly High School, she would volunteer at the former Michigan School for the Blind where she taught students everything from how to brush their teeth and make their way back home on their own.

"I didn't think a whole lot about service, I was more into survival mode," Montgomery said. "I was just looking for love." The love she was looking for, surprisingly came in the form of a part-time job. More specifically, with a local automotive repair business, the Pollack Glass Company — an establishment that once belonged to her step-father. She started working there at the age of 17.

For the next four decades, Pollack would claim a huge part of her life. What may have seemed like a job to pass the time and make some money on the side, transformed into a lifelong career. She officially bought Pollack Glass in 1997 from her mother, who had taken charge after her step-father passed away.

"You don't realize how something is a part of your identity because it's always been there," Montgomery said. "It was my life." She had reached a point that many Americans strive for. She was an established business owner, known and trusted by the local community, and as a result, in a state of coveted financial stability. In fact, she had maintained this position blissfully for the next ten years.

It wasn't until she was first introduced to the subject of human trafficking did she realize her purpose was intended for something much greater.

The industry of trafficking humans for forced labor or sex work is an issue that concerns all parts of the world, including the United States. Over 2.4 million people have been affected, as reported by the United Nations. The industry thrives off the most vulnerable—children, migrants, the homeless and disproportionately targets women. The average age of victims who have been trafficked is just 12 years old.

Victims of human trafficking come from either rural or urban settings and can be of any gender. Many young girls are drawn into trafficking from false online job opportunities, sometimes posing as talent or modeling agencies or lured into slavery from romantic partners or even family members. Men are usually solicited for forced labor purposes, although they can be prostituted as well. Traffickers or "pimps" coerce people into slavery usually through physical and emotional violence, frequent threats to a victim's family and sexual abuse.

While usually associated with poverty-stricken or third world countries, human trafficking is alive and thriving in the United States. In July of 2013, the FBI conducted a 76-city sweep which resulted in the arrest of 150 pimps and 105 rescued children nationwide. The Metro-Detroit area had the highest concentration of pimps, with 18 arrested.

The fight against human trafficking has been growing as more people learn about it. Popular movies like *Taken* and *Trade* have introduced the subject to a broader group of people, even if sensationalized. Hundreds of nongovernmental agencies and nonprofits have been established to fight human trafficking, and most recently the White House created a task force dedicated specifically to ending this form of modern day slavery at home and abroad.

Montgomery was first called into this fight—as she would say—in 2007, when the issue was just starting to gain traction. By 2013, she had already chosen the people she wanted to work with her to create a holistic healing place, otherwise known as *The House of Promise*, intended for women and girls who have survived the cycle of sex trafficking. By 2015, she sold Pollack Glass for good so that she could devote more of her time to establish *The House of Promise*.

The connections Montgomery made from her childhood abuse helped her relate with the people who were the most susceptible to being trafficked. While on the quest for love, she understood many victims of abuse, like her, may look for it in the most dangerous places. "I was the lucky one," she said, quickly acknowledging how broken families can lead the defenseless right into the hands of pimps or traffickers.

Since then, Montgomery has shown almost obsessive commitment to eradicating human trafficking in the Lansing area. "Not in my city. Not on my watch," she said in a video on her website intended to educate people on the severity of sex abuse and trafficking, as well as encourage them to join the fight.

Today, she spends most of her time invested in both securing a physical residence for *The House of Promise*, and providing counseling and schooling and working on creative ways to deal with trauma for survivors; all in one residential location. Creating a residential safe place for those who choose to enter is a driving force for Montgomery, and thus, she is constantly seeking funding to turn her vision into fruition.

Purchasing a home, however, is only part of the quest. Montgomery must also diligently research and provide other necessary factors in order to truly rehabilitate residents. Research shows that survivors of sex trafficking are much more susceptible to developing mental health illnesses such as depression, anxiety, bi-polar disorder, alcohol or substance dependency, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to name a few. In order to effectively take care of each survivor, there must be appropriate medical and nutrition programs as well as frequent psychological assessments. Montgomery wants to offer all this and more.

She plans to incorporate art therapy, gardening opportunities, dance class, and plenty of other uplifting activities to keep the residents busy and focused on self-healing. Montgomery is constantly thinking "outside the box" and has even begun partnerships with rescue dog shelters, where she plans to have residents build true friendships with *The House's* canine additions — "the broken loving on the broken" as she would say.

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Through the help of these and other stimulating activities, Montgomery wants to maintain love and keep everyone laughing within the home; and at the same time equipping the residents with the necessary life skills (education—obtaining a GED, learning to drive a car, etc.) to function successfully in the world. “I want to give them every opportunity to succeed,” Montgomery said. “I want to dig in and find what they love.”

To help them thrive professionally, Montgomery has already begun relationships with local businesses who are willing to volunteer their time to teach interview skills and other important services for the residents. Having obtained a nonprofit status for the *The House of Promise* has also helped tremendously with this process.

Montgomery speaks of all her plans fondly, and realistically. There is no doubt in her mind that *The House of Promise* will become a reality.

However, the struggle to pay for all the necessary expenditures has hit her with a huge speedbump. The price of the dream home for this endeavor has been fluctuating ever since she expressed interest in purchasing it and the operational costs for the first six months are daunting alone. In general, the projected expense per resident across the country is between \$4,000—\$6,000 per month, not including utility bills and other maintenance costs.

“I have been given a purpose. It is my passion to help provide the restoration and recovery that is essential for healing the deep wounds [survivors] carry.”

Shari Montgomery
President & Founder,
The House of Promise

Other homes of similar virtue usually receive state funding to aid with costs, but Montgomery refuses. She does not want to be tied down by government regulations as state law tends to place restrictions on how long a resident can stay in the healing place. Additionally, Montgomery strays away from taking on a mortgage because she doesn't want to launch *The House of Promise* with a huge debt or ever be at risk of losing the home. When *The House of Promise* opens its doors, it will be here to stay!

Given the many roadblocks that Montgomery has met, most people would have been burned out to the point of giving up. She continues forward with feisty dedication and commitment that will not be defeated. Her commitment to sharing love in safe places, her abhorrence of modern slavery, and the deep connection she makes with survivors are her driving forces. And most importantly, Montgomery maintains faith in her own vision.

“I have been given a purpose,” she writes on her website. “It is my passion to help provide the restoration and recovery that is essential for healing the deep wounds [survivors] carry.”



For more information about *The House of Promise*, please visit: thehouseofpromise.com.



MSU LEAD Campaign INFORMATIONAL:

Tuesday,
September 15, 2015
MSU Union Building,
Lake Ontario Room (3rd floor)
7:00PM — 8:00PM



Human Trafficking in the Greater Lansing Area

A CALL TO ACTION! MSU LEAD Campaign

The MSU Women's Resource Center and Break the Shackles are hosting an informational meeting on how we, the people, can get involved in the fight to eradicate human sex trafficking in our communities.

FAST FACTS:

Human Trafficking is the illegal movement of people, typically for the purposes of labor or sexual exploitation.

Michigan's proximity to waterways and its international border make it susceptible for Human Trafficking in the United States.

Human Trafficking is the second-largest and fastest-growing criminal industry in the world.



Sources:
2013 Michigan Human Trafficking Report
The Detroit News

Presented by the MSU Women's Resource Center Student Staff &
Break the Shackles Student Organization
Hosted by the MSU Women's Resource Center