

Target 8

## Trafficked in Grand Rapids: 'I knew I was a victim'

By:

[Susan Samples](#) ()

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (WOOD) — Ruth Rondon was determined to change the way her story would end.

It's a story she hid for decades.

"When I first started working, I was so afraid someone was going to expose my past," Rondon recalled.

Rondon's fiercely guarded secret: She had been sold for sex on the streets of Grand Rapids as a teenager and young adult.

At the time in the 1970s and '80s, the justice system branded her a criminal, not a victim.

"Back then, 'human trafficking' wasn't even a word," she said.



*Mug shots of Ruth Rondon at age 17.  
(Courtesy photo)*

By 17, Rondon was addicted to hardcore drugs including heroin, had dropped out of high school and had a lengthy criminal record that included drug and prostitution charges.

"I was carrying so much shame," Rondon told Target 8. "It wasn't until 2012 that she first heard the term 'human trafficking.' I knew I was a victim."

Now 63, retired from her job as a clerk in Kent County's Register of Deeds office and living in Wyoming, Rondon wants her voice and her story to be heard.

"Now we have a word. We have a human trafficking word," she said. "Now we can talk about it."

### "'EASY PREY' ON MY FOREHEAD"

Rondon was also determined that the system that once branded her a criminal would finally recognize her as the victim she really was. She applied to have her record expunged under a new state law.

**Legislation (PDF)** enacted in January 2015 allows human trafficking victims to have prostitution convictions erased.

"I'm so grateful to be living in this era of change," Rondon remarked outside a Grand Rapids courtroom, flanked by her attorney, Suellyn Scarnecchia of the [University of Michigan Human Trafficking Clinic](#).

"I never thought I'd see this day. I've been waiting all my life for this," Rondon continued, tears in her eyes.

Courts can expunge a conviction if there's a preponderance of evidence showing the defendant committed the crime as a direct result of human trafficking, meaning someone forced, coerced or lured the defendant into committing the act of prostitution.

At 9 a.m. April 24, Rondon read a prepared statement at her expungement hearing before Hon. David J. Buter, chief judge of the 61st District Court in Grand Rapids.

"It takes a long time to recover from 18 years of being trafficked. But I understand now why I fell prey to traffickers and why I stayed trapped for so long. I also understand what it took to escape and be set free," she continued. "That does not take away the fact that it took 18 years out of my life. Your honor, I'm doing what I can to make up for all those lost years. And I'm doing what I can to give back. Back then I was a victim. Today I am a victor."

Rondon submitted a sworn affidavit to the court outlining the traumas she experienced as a child that left her vulnerable to predators trolling for young people to sell for sex.



Ruth Rondon with her family. (Courtesy photo)

She was the youngest of six children born to an alcoholic father and battered mother, neither of whom was equipped to parent. Tormented themselves and with few resources, both parents were abusive to their children, who were often left to fend for themselves.

"I had 'easy prey' on my forehead big time," Rondon told Target 8.



Ruth Rondon at age 9. (Courtesy photo)

She was 10 years old when she was raped by a stranger who lured her away from her sister and a friend at a shopping mall. It was the first of several sexual assaults she suffered as a child and teen at the hands of nonrelatives.

"When you're sexually abused, especially at a very young age, you carry a lot of shame," Rondon explained to Target 8. "You believe that you are not worth fighting for. You don't see yourself as worthy. And I guess that's why you settle for it. If it happens again, you had it coming."

## "LOVE-STRUCK," "DESPERATE FOR ATTENTION"

Later, as an adult, when she pieced together her chaotic early years, she found a record of her nine-month stay at a mental hospital. Her parents had sent her there after she was gang raped at a party.

"She leads a pretty fast life — smoke, alcohol, sex — for a 13-year-old girl," a mental health worker wrote in Rondon's file.

At 14, she met her first trafficker as she sat in an emergency room waiting room with a friend. The girls noticed two strangers giving them the eye.

"We were just love-struck teenagers. We were just desperate for attention," Rondon recalled. "And we were very impressed by (the two men), and we exchanged numbers after that. That was my demise because he showered me with gifts, took me shopping, and I was just smitten."

Eventually, the man Rondon considered her boyfriend and savior announced he was too broke to come around anymore because he had lost money gambling.

"Of course, I sat by the phone waiting for these calls from him. Oh my gosh, I was devastated. He was making me think our happy life together was coming to an end," Rondon said.

Then came the pitch.

"He said he could borrow some gas money and come and pick me up," Rondon remembered. "He said there was a really nice man at the gambling house who wanted to spend a lot of money on me. I didn't really know what he meant, but I figured he'd really appreciate it if I helped him

But the man at gambling house wasn't nice. And it wasn't just one, either.

Rondon, 15 years old at the time, was gang raped by four men.

It was the beginning of 18 terrifying years on the streets of Grand Rapids, trafficked for sex and addicted to the drugs that helped her survive it.

## TRAPPED BY DRUG ADDICTION

"They kept me addicted to drugs and involved me in various criminal activities," Rondon wrote in the affidavit she submitted to court as part of expungement application. "...A succession of traffickers forced me into commercial sex through a combination of false promises, violent beatings and threats. ... I suffered many violent beatings from them. They used force, fraud, and coercion to maintain control over me and keep me engaged in commercial sex.

In the affidavit, Rondon named the three pimps, now referred to as traffickers, who controlled her for the longest periods of time.



*Ruth Rondon in the 1980s. (Courtesy photo)*

"All of my criminal convictions resulted from my human trafficking victimization," Rondon wrote.

"I ran to and from danger on a daily basis when I was on the street," Rondon told Target 8. "I had tried to escape several times. Every time I went to jail, I became drug free. But there was always a dealer or a pimp in the parking lot waiting for me (when I got out). Where else was I going to go?"

Also submitted to the court in support of Rondon's request for expungement were letters from professionals, family and friends, all of whom testified to how Rondon has lived her life since she got clean and away from traffickers 30 years ago at age 33.

"Ruth sought services to address the multiple complex traumas that she had experienced in her lifetime," wrote Patricia Haist, Rondon's counselor since 2013 and the director of crisis intervention services at the YWCA in Grand Rapids.

"She continues to push and challenge herself to address the difficult issues from her past," Haist continued.

## "HAUNTED" BY HER RECORD

All five of Rondon's siblings, who were once forced to cut ties with her, submitted letters in support of the expungement.

"My family was so affected by all of this, too," Rondon acknowledged. "I put them through hell. They didn't want to hear that I was a victim. I had to slowly introduce to them what happened to me as a child. Took a long time, but we all understand now. We compared notes and we understand now."

Rondon is grateful that her siblings eventually accepted her back in to the family and they are exceptionally proud of how far she's come.

"For a long time, we believed she was going to remain homeless her whole life," Bonnie Alberts, one of Rondon's sisters, wrote in her letter to the judge. "But to our surprise, at age 33, Ruth was able to pick herself up and turn her life around completely. She proved us all wrong.

"I hope to see Ruth's criminal record expunged or set aside because she is deserving of it," she continued. "She's been an upstanding citizen now for almost 30 years. Her record has haunted her for years. She's reminded of the darkness she pulled herself out of often and she relives the pain and fear all over again because of it. In spite of all the triggers and reminders from her past, Ruth perseveres."

Alberts also wrote of the exceptional care Rondon provided their mother at the end of her life:

"We are grateful Ruth ... stepped up to care for our mother in her last years, even while still holding down a full-time job. ... Even though we all participated in caring for Mom, Ruth was by her side most of the time doing the hands-on caring."

Rondon's sisters were in the courtroom for the expungement hearing. Their presence and support did not go unnoticed by Judge David Buter.

"This isn't a legal term, but it's really cool the way family works here," Buter said as he announced his decision. "It's the way family is supposed to work."

## **JUDGE: "YOU ARE AN INSPIRATION, FRANKLY"**

Even the representative from Grand Rapids Office of the City Attorney, who could have objected to the expungement, instead praised Rondon's determination.

"It's very rare that we come across a case quite as compelling as this one," Matt Kroll of the City Attorney's Office told Target 8 outside the courtroom. "It's great to be a part of. As prosecutors, a lot of times what we're doing is tough work. We're dealing with people in the toughest of times, and now she's overcome the toughest of times, and we get to do something positive for her."

It was clear that the judge was similarly moved.

"Ma'am, you are an inspiration, frankly," Buter said. "The entire story is quite inspiring. ... We don't have all that many circumstances where we have great pleasure in what we do here, but it is with great pleasure that I grant your motions and I'll sign the orders."

With that, Rondon became the second person in Kent County to have a prostitution conviction expunged since the new law went into effect in January 2015.



*Ruth Rondon shares a hug after her prostitution record was expunged. (April 24, 2018)*

## **"WE'RE ALL LIVING IN AN ERA THAT'S CHANGING FOR WOMEN"**

But her work is far from over.

"Fighting human trafficking is something I will never be able to stop," Rondon explained. "It's my passion. I'm in this for life."

She's committed to sharing her story to raise awareness.

"History will repeat itself if you don't understand," Rondon said. "Even though it's hard to do, reflecting back on our darkest moments enables us all to pass our life lessons on to the next generation."

In addition to telling her story to groups statewide, Rondon is a victim representative on the state's Human Trafficking Health Advisory Board.

But even with all her work, she still struggles with survivor's guilt, wondering why she escaped when other trafficking victims could not.

"I believe we're all living in an era that's changing for women," Rondon said. "Some of the women who didn't make it, I wish they were here with me to experience it."

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She has also written an online learning program for health care and law enforcement professionals and shared her life story in a book titled **"The Realities of Human Trafficking: From the Inside Out to Freedom."**

## "DETERMINED" TO STAY OFF THE STREETS

Rondon's book examines not just how and why she fell prey to traffickers, but also what it took to escape. She credits her mom, her siblings, several kind souls and a six-month stint in jail.

"My saving grace was that six-month jail sentence," Rondon recalled in her interview with Target 8. "It was for drug possession. ... I was a mess. I was a broken mess. ... I did a lot of reflecting during that time and I became determined to once again never go back to the street when I got out this time."

Rondon said several people, in addition to her brothers and sisters, were instrumental in her recovery including Char Fouty, a volunteer who ministered to women in jail; Ken Navis, a therapist who counselled Rondon for years after she got clean; and Charlie Brown, a Kent County Sheriff's detective who showed Rondon kindness, compassion and respect when she was raped by two men during her years on the street.

Though her mom was abusive and neglectful when Rondon was a child, mother and daughter became very close in later years.



*Ruth Rondon and her mother. (Courtesy photo)*

"I believe my mother loved me," Rondon said. "She just didn't know how (to parent). She wasn't educated."

When Rondon stumbled early on in recovery, it was her mom who saved her.

"(Recovery) was a long haul. ... I even relapsed after being clean for two years," Rondon said.

"I went to a drug house and stayed there for like three days," she continued. "I don't know how my mom ever found out where I was, but she found me. She had some young man with her. I don't know where she found that young man, but they both knocked on the door and demanded to come in. Long story short, she rescued me from that drug house that day. She was 72 years old.

"That was the last time I ever did drugs."

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