I attended a serious event Wednesday called Trading Safety For Survival. The Facebook event depicts it as “A Conversation about Violence Against Women in the Sex Trade and the Police Who are Asked to Protect them.”

It was sponsored by Power Inside. According to their flyer, Power Inside is “a nonprofit program for women impacted by incarceration, street life and abuse. Our services help women build self-sufficiency, heal from violence and avoid future criminal justice contact.”

A panel had been assembled by Jacqueline Robarge, director of Power Inside. The person who spoke to me the most was someone who had lived it, Alicia Kirkland. She bravely stood before us all and shared her story. Kirkland is the most inspiring woman I’ve met this week. She did drugs, mainly heroin, for 33 years. A survivor of molestation from ages 4 to 13, she said, “If I let you have sex with me, I’ll have somewhere to sleep, something to eat and protection. I won’t be out in the cold.”

Kirkland talked about her state of mind as a 13-year old child going to Bethlehem Steel with her 45-
year-old boyfriend. “In my mind, I was in love. I didn’t view him as a child molester. I didn’t have the capacity to think it was wrong.”

She talked about having a member of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) as a sex client.

“He was tricking with me and we had a disagreement. He called the police on me and swore out a warrant. Said I stole his money.”

“I was raped,” said. “The guy took my dress. The cops took me home and told me to stay off the corners or they was going to lock me up. They didn’t say anything about charging the man who raped me.”

“Police are supposed to be there to protect us. Sometimes they are the ones who hurt us the most,” Kirkland added.

She is now employed, has her GED and is close to her children and grandchildren. She is a big help to Power Inside and continues to help women who are in the sex trade and victims of abuse.

Michele Decker was another panelist. Decker is an ScD, MPH, assistant professor at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. She gave a presentation about findings from a study with women in sex work in Baltimore on violence, sexual risk, and interactions with law enforcement.

Decker told a story about a woman experiencing violence at the hands of her pimp. The woman was being held captive in the basement, performing sex acts there. The pimp demanded half the money. The only way the woman could think to escape was to hike her dress way up in front of the police and offer the officers oral sex. Jail seemed the only way out for this woman.

“I’ve traded sex, money and drugs in exchange for freedom from police officers,” another person said.

Stephen Janis [2], a producer for Fox 45, was on the panel. He talked about how difficult it was to report on homicides due to sexual violence.

“These women are easy targets. Murders are often politically controversial and often go unsolved.”

Jacqueline Robarge, director of Power Inside, had some startling things to share about recent interactions with the BCPD and filing police reports. “Two weeks ago I had to talk an officer into pulling out a pen and taking a report in our offices. The victim was traumatized. He was not listening. I said, ‘Sir, can you please take out a pen and write this down.’ The women’s attacker had violated a stay away order over 100 times.”

“There’s a Sexual Assault Response Team here in Baltimore. We don’t know who they are or what they do. We can’t go to their meetings. They are private, we are told,” Robarge added. I later told Robarge I wanted to know and would look into the matter.

Taya Graham a Women’s Studies Graduate Student with the Towson University Public Policy and Leadership Program moderated the panel.

As a survivor of rape, the event was informative and moving. I also shared with a few of the panelists my gripes with the criminal “injustice” system. The first being how horrible the restraining
order system is. Not many women or men will show up every week. I also had a private investigator from the Public Defender’s office appear in my hallway looking to get info out of me to discredit myself and help the man charged with raping me. Luckily, I know my rights and slammed the door, telling her to talk to the state’s attorney. The man charged with rape is still in jail. We go to trial June 6, 2013.

My heart truly goes out to all the women and men who are suffering in silence and don’t know where to turn. Below are some important numbers for them and for our readers to help someone else.

POWER INSIDE 410-889-8333

TURN AROUND SEXUAL ASSAULT CENTER HOTLINE 410-828-6390

HOUSE OF RUTH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOTLINE 410-889-7884

FAMILY STRESS LINE 1-800-243-7337

Baltimore Crisis Response (Mental Health & Suicide) 410-752-2272

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Hotline 1-888-843-4564

BSAS - Drug Treatment Referrals 410-637-1900

Grassroots Crisis Hotline 410-531-6677

Shelter Referrals 443-423-6000 OR 1-888-817-4358 24 HRS

Baltimore City Child Protective Services 410-361-1900

Narcotics Anonymous Hotline 1-800-317-3222

211 Maryland/First Call for Help 1-800-492-0618

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