



Convention release
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From victim to hero: Carissa Phelps' journey

From a life on the street to a champion for children struggling as she once did

SACRAMENTO – Carissa Phelps spoke with hard-won personal knowledge about the power of caring adults in children's lives during a presentation to a rapt audience of several thousand at the California State PTA's annual convention on Thursday, April 29.

After becoming homeless and being forced into prostitution in her early teens, Phelps found the keys to freedom and fulfillment only after she was locked up in a juvenile justice facility in Fresno.

It was there that a caring, adult counselor told her that she had value and promise, things she had trouble seeing in herself.

"He told me I had potential, and then I started trying to figure out what that meant," Phelps said in a documentary about her life, excerpts of which were shown to the convention audience.

The young woman managed to move on from her chaotic adolescence to earn a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Fresno State. And then, in 2007, she received a JD and an MBA from UCLA.

She is a woman driven to succeed not only for herself but to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

"I'm on a mission to give a voice to children who are on the streets today," Phelps says. To that end, in 2009, Phelps formed a nonprofit to provide opportunities to children who have been involved in prostitution. She is also partnering with the Fresno County Economic Opportunity Commission to create a task force that will work to combat human trafficking.

Phelps said such efforts are sorely needed, as experts estimate 300,000 children in the United States are at risk of being sexually exploited at any time.

At this year's convention, delegates will consider adoption of Resolution B: Child Trafficking in California. The resolution calls for the PTA to work with others to encourage the California State Legislature to create a Child Trafficking Awareness Day. National PTA adopted a child trafficking resolution in June 2009.

everychild. onevoice.

The California State PTA has nearly 1 million members throughout the state working on behalf of public schools, children and families, with the motto, "Every child, one voice." The PTA is the nation's oldest, largest and highest profile volunteer association working to improve the education, health and welfare of all children and youth. The PTA also advocates at national, state and local levels for education and family issues. The PTA is nonprofit, nonsectarian and noncommercial. For more information, visit www.capta.org.