

# Des Moines Register

**REKHA BASU** | Opinion *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

## Rekha Basu: After 10 years of 'sadistic brutality,' sex trafficker who fell through the cracks gets life

*For nearly 10 years, Marlin Thomas lived among us, preying on local women and a 14-year-old girl at places we all frequent.*

**Rekha Basu** Des Moines Register

Published 10:46 a.m. CT Nov. 19, 2021

"Mama, I'm about to get killed," a woman identified in court papers only as "NL" wrote in a farewell text message to her mother. " ... I will watch over you during your time on Earth. I love you and the rest of the family so much."

She was being held captive by a man named Marlin Thomas, a man who had already almost killed her once, she texted her father.

NL had met Thomas on social media via a friend who was getting drugs from him. According to the investigator, "He sought NL out and gave her drugs, then forced her into prostitution," posting her photos on Backpage, a since removed sex trafficking website.

When NL recently spoke to Des Moines Police Sgt. Brady Carney, the lead investigator in Thomas' case, Thomas had pleaded guilty to six counts of sex trafficking by force, fraud and coercion. She planned to attend the Nov. 15 sentencing to address him directly on how his abuses had affected her. After struggling with addiction for almost a decade, she had graduated from a rehab facility and gotten clean.

But her absence Monday told a larger story. Four days before the sentencing, the 30-year-old with the warm smile, a devoted mother to an infant daughter, was dead from a drug overdose.

When Carney got to that part of his testimony, a collective gasp rippled through the courtroom, prompting U.S. District Judge John Jarvey to call a break.

**More:** 'I had to find out the hard way that evil does exist': Marlin Thomas sentenced to life for multiple sex trafficking charges

"I know you didn't sell the heroin or shoot it up in her arm," NL's mother later told Marlin in her victim impact statement later, "but you were a vital part of the equation."

But the man in the green jail suit, hands chained together, didn't appear to listen to any of the victim impact stories. He looked over documents listing his 100 objections to the pre-sentence report and chatted with his lawyer.

Shortly, he'd be sentenced to life.

## **Sex trafficking doesn't happen only 'someplace else'**

We've heard warnings about sex trafficking, and especially heightened activity around the Iowa State Fair period. But we still we think of Iowa as a mostly pass-through stop for perpetrators looking to snare girls on their way from or to someplace else. So it is hard to fathom that, from 2009 through 2018, Marlin Thomas lived among us, sometimes right in our neighborhoods (he had various addresses), preying on local women and one 14-year-old girl at places we all frequent: gas stations, convenience stores, Walmart.

In his plea agreement, he admitted to using physical violence against six adult victims to coerce them to engage in commercial sex acts. That included punching one in the face and assaulting another after she told him she was done working for him. He admitted to taking them to hotels and motels in Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, and North Dakota to sell sex.

Thomas didn't have to literally snatch his victims off the streets. He employed a variety of coercive techniques to win their trust or dependency. He especially preyed on women with substance abuse problems, staking them out at gas stations or other businesses close to recovery centers. He'd lure them out of sobriety by giving them heroin and getting them hooked again, then push them to have sex with him and another man together to get more. Some had already been abused as children

He demanded his victims bring in between \$1,000 and \$1,200 a day, and turn it all over to him. Earning \$1,200 required five sexual encounters. Failure to achieve that resulted in physical and verbal abuse, and withholding of drugs and food.

"He would tell us we couldn't eat until we had made our stack," one victim told Carney.

Some women initially responded to what they saw as his good looks and charm, and believed themselves to be in relationships with him. Then things would take a turn.

Almost as disturbing as Thomas' sadistic, depraved behavior (the judge's words) is that he got away with it for so many years. Carney said one of the victims had reached out to West Des Moines police years ago instead of to Des Moines authorities to report that he was trafficking her. But she never got a call back, even to say she needed a different police department.

In 2017 Des Moines police arrested Thomas for trafficking a runaway of 14, whom he invited to stay with him, plied with hard drugs and took to several hotels, where he and other men had sex with her. He was charged in state court with trafficking a minor, but unfathomably, was allowed to plead it down to misdemeanor assault.

He fell through the cracks in other ways, federal prosecutor Amy Jennings told the court, noting he had a felony drug conviction from 1997 and a harassment case in which he threatened a convenience store clerk with physical punishment if she didn't have sex with him in the bathroom. By the time he was indicted federally on 17 charges involving seven women and a minor, he was already serving a four-year federal prison sentence on a 2018 federal conspiracy to distribute drugs.

## **Victims likely crossed paths with us and others we know**

In a state like ours, where neighbors know and are supposed to look out for one another, too many seem to have turned a blind eye to the red flags. Thomas took a college student identified as LG, whom he met through an online dating site, to a professional photographer and had her pose for sexy pictures that Thomas would use to peddle her online. Then he made her pay for the photos by having sex with the photographer.

What self-respecting commercial photographer would do that?

And when Thomas' car broke down while he was with GM, the underage runaway, he made her have sex with a car repairman at a motel, in exchange for another car for Thomas.

I've done business with that man. Now I wonder how he sleeps at night.

Thomas met many of his victims at a particular gas station across the street from a substance recovery center and lured them back into drug dependency by offering them drugs. Didn't the people working inside notice him hanging around talking to young women and suspect something improper was going on? Did no one speak up?

One of his most severely punished victims, JW, met him that way and expressed concerns to staff in the recovery program about his constant pursuit of her. They told him to leave her alone, but it continued. There are photos of her eight months pregnant, covered in bruises and still being trafficked. Thomas also forced her to leave her young son alone when he made her go out of state to be trafficked. Another victim's young child was compelled to be present while she engaged in commercial sex.

Again, what kind of client would tolerate that?

Compounding the horrors is that some of the most supposedly upstanding individuals can be complicit. A recent Department of Justice report on trafficking said a U.S. naval officer was found guilty of sex trafficking, a former U.S. Army reserve police officer was sentenced to 40 years for it, and a state attorney was charged with human trafficking and was awaiting trial. The report notes instances of law enforcement officers engaging in sexual acts with known or suspected victims of sex trafficking "in the course of conducting criminal investigations."

"I wasn't sexually abused as a child," a victim known as EJ told Thomas in court Monday. "I had no drug problem." Still, Thomas took her to Chicago to traffic her and violently beat and raped her there. She

said she smeared her blood on the hotel wall in case he killed her and her parents never found out what happened to her.

When she got pregnant from rape by him and had an abortion, he called her a "baby killer."

It has taken years of therapy and prayer to get to past what happened to her, EJ said, "but I still have weapons hidden in my car and house. I still cope with shame and guilt. My family still doesn't understand what happened to me."

Two other victims of his besides NL also died of drug-related causes. One of them, KT, appeared in a video in which he was performing various sex acts on her while she was described as "out of it." His other victims were forced to watch it. KT developed MRSA as a result of heroin abuse and died from it.

And then there was RVR, eight months sober when Carney made contact with her about Thomas' criminal case. She agreed to speak to him the next day. But by the next morning, RVR had fatally overdosed on heroin at age 31.

One victim wrote that she can't trust anyone, has herpes from being raped by Thomas and fears her 13-year-old son will grow up to be a predator.

Another wrote, "You left me feeling dirty, washed up, never good enough. ... I will forever have to work through the mental and physical trauma, depression, severe anxiety, self-mutilation and suicidal thoughts because of you."

All of these women have inhabited our community. We may have crossed paths with them, maybe even when they were living under Thomas' grip.

Evil can't persist without enablers. Part of the work to be done is changing lingering cultural attitudes about women as vehicles for male gratification. If you see something that looks and feels wrong, don't shrug it off. Ask questions, alert authorities, follow up. These are our sisters, our daughters, mothers and friends. This is our collective problem.