

EXCLUSIVE: One Of The Heroes Behind the MetaFilter Human-Trafficking Rescue Speaks Out

Late Wednesday night, Kathrine Gutierrez Hinds, 24, came across a frightening story—unfolding in real time on an online message board—about two young Russian women who, by the looks of it, were about to unwittingly become hostesses at a seedy nightclub. Now, less than 48 hours later, they are sleeping in her Chelsea apartment in Manhattan, and she is trying to keep them safe while helping them figure out their next move.

Hinds logged onto MetaFilter—a community Weblog where users share links, give advice, and discuss the news—only a few hours after Daniel Reetz, a regular poster on the site, started a thread asking for help. Reetz had discovered that two of his female Russian friends—one 18 years old and the other 20—were stranded in D.C. in very suspicious circumstances. The women came to the United States through a company called Aloha Travel, which had promised them jobs in Washington, D.C. The employment mysteriously fell through and the girls received instructions to meet a potential employer at midnight in a shady New York nightclub where they would work as “hostesses.” Reetz suspected the worst. Thousands of miles away from the East Coast, he turned to MetaFilter for help.

“I read it and contacted the person who posted it and essentially said, ‘I have an extra room in New York, so if they do come to New York we’ll make it easier on everyone and they can stay with me.’” She wasn’t the only one. Dozens of posters offered help, advice, and the numbers for trafficking support groups, but without the consent of the women themselves, Reetz was having trouble getting help from established institutions.

Meanwhile, Reetz—who was on a road trip to California when he found out about his friends’ situation—was frantically monitoring the message board on his phone, calling posters who had volunteered to help, and trying to dissuade the girls from going to New York. He failed on the last count, and on Thursday afternoon they boarded a bus in D.C. and started the four-hour trip to the Big Apple.

While en route to D.C., the girls received a call from a representative at their visa sponsoring agency whom Reetz had informed of the situation. The rep asked them not to go, but the girls insisted they were fine and, according to one of Reetz’s posts on MetaFilter, “apologized for the problems I am causing.” Shortly thereafter, they stopped taking his phone calls. In the same frustrated post, Reetz wrote, “If you choose to meet them at the station, be prepared for them to want no help.”

Realizing the girls were reacting adversely to the parental strong-arm tactics others had tried, Hinds decided to take a different approach. “They’re young women. They want to have fun and go to New York City, so I said, ‘I can do that,’” Hinds says. “I’ll just give them another option.”

Hinds texted the girls, adopting a casual, friendly tone: “It’s Kathrine, come visit me. I don’t really care what you do, let’s just enjoy ourselves in New York.” She offered to show them around the city and let them store their suitcases in her apartment. They agreed to meet her at the bus station.

“I was hoping I’d get the chance to talk to them and get them to reconsider before they went to meet him,” Hinds says. “You can’t control someone—they’re adults, they can make their own decisions—but I was hoping I could keep them from doing it with their consent.”

She informed Reetz that they had agreed to meet her, and he put her in touch with the NYPD. The officer she spoke to was “very nice, very comforting,” she says. “He essentially just walked

me through going to Port Authority and said police were supposed to call me and help me set something up."

Hinds waited for a call from the police, but as the girls' arrival time neared, she still hadn't heard anything. "I thought the police were going to be there so I could ask them for help, but nobody called me," she says. Without the security of police protection, Hinds decided to meet the girls at Port Authority regardless of the danger that might await her—many posters on the board were concerned about tangling with the Russian mob, which they suspected were involved.

"I didn't see the police; there was no cell-phone service in the basement. I had no idea what to do," she recalled. "I was terrified." The girls finally arrived, and the three women started on their way home. She quickly realized, however, that they were being followed. "I noticed that there were two men following us, which, as you can imagine, was pretty nerve-racking," Hinds says. "I kept thinking, I hope they're cops."

Indeed, they were. When the women got to the street, the men identified themselves as plainclothes NYPD and spent the next two hours questioning them. When the interviews ended, they went home to the one-bedroom apartment Hinds shares with her husband. They offered their new guests the bedroom and slept in the living room, but not before Hinds notified Reetz that his friends were OK. Reetz, of course, notified the MetaFilter message board, and Hinds checked in later.

Hinds is unemployed, and the apartment isn't meant for four. In a upbeat MetaFilter post about their sightseeing plans, she made an offhand comment about feeding two extra people. The response was overwhelming.

"Someone asked for my PayPal so I gave it to them," Hinds says, her voice breaking. "I'm going to cry about it—so people have been sending money. We've gotten \$3,500 since last night. Multiple [posters] in New York who speak Russian have been coming to socialize and hang out with them."

The girls aren't out of the woods yet, though. Hinds says Aloha Travel contacted them Friday and tried to persuade them to fly to San Diego. Worried that they would fall into a similar trap, Hinds persuaded them to stay and do some sightseeing with her.

"We're going to the Empire State Building today," she says. "I told them not to worry about money for a while because they have some here."

Indeed, members of the MetaFilter community have been offering everything from translation services to hugs and beer, and have accompanied the women on sightseeing tours and social calls. Meanwhile, Hinds says that the State Department is investigating the situation, and the NYPD is following up as well.

But for now, the women are safe. Hinds, Reetz, and the other MetaFilter posters involved in their rescue are heroes, and people across the country are feeling a little bit better about humanity—and the Internet.

Bible Passages to be discussed:

John 8:3-8:11

³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Acts 9:3-9:19

Paul's Conversion

¹Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

⁷The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. ⁹For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

- What are the similarities in these two texts?
 - What are the differences?
- Do you think these people were courageous?
- How can we apply these texts to ourselves?
- Is there anything in your life that you can and would like to change?
in the world?