

Human trafficking survivors offered full scholarship at Christian university

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(RNS) Point Loma Nazarene University wants to offer a full-ride scholarship to human trafficking survivors who want to earn a college degree.

PLNU, a private Christian university located in San Diego, officially launched an Indiegogo crowd-funding campaign this week with a goal to raise \$40,000 in 40 days. The money will fund the Beauty for Ashes Scholarship Fund, a reference to the Bible verse Isaiah 61:3.

San Diego is the 13th highest child prostitution area in the country, according to the FBI and PLNU's Center for Justice & Reconciliation resource website, Abolish Human Trafficking. The site also says 1.2 million children are trafficked every year, and it's the second-largest source of illegal income in the world.

"One of the things we are hearing over and over again . . . is that (the survivors) so badly want a college education, but that just seems so completely out of the realm of possibility for them," said Kim Jones, external relations volunteer at CJR. "Many of them, when they're rescued, don't even have their high school diploma."

While being accepted into the university and receiving the scholarship is one thing, being successful throughout the four years it takes to earn a degree is another. So PLNU is developing a plan to ensure the survivors, who will remain anonymous among the student population, get the support they'll need to succeed.

"We're in the process of developing that plan, and it starts with the fact that anybody that applies for the scholarship will need to be referred in by a direct service agency, so that they already have some connection to some agency in town that has been working with them and knows their story and knows what level of support they need," Jones said.

The \$40,000 would cover one year's cost of attendance for one person, but the university hopes to be able to help more.

"In most circumstances, somebody coming in, in this situation, is also going to be eligible for other sources of grants and aid, so we're hoping the scholarship will be a supplement to get to the full amount they need to be here," Jones said.

A couple of survivors are currently going through the application process at PLNU for the fall 2015 semester, which is when the scholarship will first be awarded.

The university looks at the scholarship as a long-term deal and plans to have the scholarship be self-sustaining in the future, according to Jones.

"We're really using the crowdfund as a way to get the word out and raise friends as much as raise funds," she said. "We've got a long-term need to grow the fund way beyond \$40,000."

Mollie Ah Sing, a senior at PLNU who also interns at CJR, is excited about the scholarship but said this is a serious issue for the community to understand.

"It's a super exciting thing to be at a university that is taking steps to live out what we believe in," she said. "We hope that by setting an example it will continue."