Barbara Amaya is a resident of Arlington, Virginia, who broke her decades long silence in 2012, about having been a victim of the sex trade.  She was forced into sex trafficking at the age of 12, and spent the next ten years of her life being trafficked on the streets of NYC.

Not only was she sold from trafficker to trafficker and to one buyer  after another, she was further victimized by the system when she obtained a criminal record ( Barbara returned to NYC in 2013 to vacate those records, and today she advocates for legislation in all states to allow all victims to be able to do the same) for "prostitution" while she was a minor. Barbara was especially vulnerable to being pulled into human trafficking because she had been severely physically and sexually abused as a child.

She had seen several mental health professionals as a child, but fell through the cracks, and didn't receive the help she needed.

Barbara also went through both the juvenile justice and the child welfare systems.

The trafficker that exploited her preyed on the fact that she was trying to escape abuse and looking for someone to love and care for her.  Barbara was forced into drug addiction, including heroin, by her trafficker as a means to keep her under his control.

After escaping from New York and her trafficker, she overcame uterine cancer and eventual infertility, both directly related to being trafficked. She did have one daughter, and voluntarily sought a mental health practitioner after she found herself afraid to let anyone near her baby, for fear they might harm her as she had been harmed.  She understood that her behavior was unhealthy, but was unable to overcome it without help.

Barbara is now, amazingly, an internationally recognized human rights  advocate, speaker, author and survivor leader in the movement to eradicate modern-day slavery.

Her first published book is an educational graphic novel The Destiny of Zoe Carpenter,  that includes a curriculum aimed at educating middle school students.   Her Amazon best selling memoir of escaping a life of domestic minor sex trafficking, and the extreme adversity she overcame to begin her journey of leading a productive life, can be read in her book, Nobodys Girl: A Memoir of Lost Innocence, Modern Day Slavery and Transformation, which was released by her publisher Animal Media Group  in the fall of 2015.

Barbara is an active member of a large network of human trafficking survivor advocates,  the National Survivors Network (NSN). She also is a member of both the Justice Department Human Trafficking Task Force and the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force.

Barbara shares her compelling story of overcoming trauma and horrific abuse as a source of awareness, education, inspiration and motivation across the United States, providing testimony in PSA's, documentaries, and events at local and national venues and in various media.

One documentary film that features Barbara’s story, What Happened to the Girl Next Door? Has been awarded best produced documentary film in Pennsylvania. Some of the recipients of her testimony include: Vanity Fair, Huffington Post, World Magazine, Fox News, Channel 4, More magazine, George Washington University, Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania, George Mason University, Shepherd University, the New Jersey Attorney General's Office Summit, Crystal City Rotary Club, Women’s Peace Federation, both the  D.C. and the Virginia Stop Modern Slavery organizations and the Richmond Justice Initiative and more.

Barbara is a training consultant for the Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center and has facilitated human trafficking survivor mental health restoration groups in coordination with Polaris Project.

She works with a northern Virginia non-profit, Seraphim Global, in their efforts to fight human trafficking in the position of Senior Technical Adviser, Policy, Programs and After Care Services.  In this position, she works to ensure that survivors of human trafficking have the resources they need to help them begin to live productive lives. This includes connecting victims  with mental health resources and getting them into substance abuse treatment, if needed.

As part of her presentations about her own horrendous experience and the ongoing scourge that is human trafficking, Barbara regularly educates people about mental illness,  substance use and their connections between human trafficking.

She also vigorously promotes the concept of recovery, including discussion of her own journey back to leading a secure and productive life  when she speaks at universities, churches, legislative assemblies and to national and local media.

She is an advocate for all people who suffer from mental illness and trauma.

By sharing her personal story of mental illness and recovery, she is working hard to combat the negative stereotypes that are sometimes attached to mental illness and to encourage others to both seek care when needed and to speak openly about it.

Barbara has a website where more information and links to her TEDx talk and all other presentations and films can be found at <http://www.barbaraamaya.com/>.

I first “met” Barbara when we became Facebook friends. We bonded online over a shared love of animals and wisdom quotes.  I then saw her speak to a group of students at Princeton University.  After the event in Princeton, she was heading to Philadelphia to speak about human trafficking to a group of nurses at the University of Pennsylvania.  I live right outside of Philadelphia, so I offered to give her a ride down.  During the trip, she shared a lot about herself and I was immediately struck by her self-awareness and kind heart.  Barbara is an amazing example of courage, resilience, determination and strength.  She endured unthinkable crimes against her person at an age when she should have been enjoying the thrill of a first dance, a good report card, slumber parties, learning to drive a car and figuring out who she was and what her life passion might be.  Her childhood was stolen from her.  In spite of that, she has grown into a wonderful, compassionate, kind, intelligent and generous woman.  She has turned her personal pain and hurt into an individual movement to end human trafficking and to educate people on the mental health issues that result from sexual abuse, to encourage people to be accepting of those with mental illness and to empower those who need help from a mental health professional to seek it with dignity and to talk about it openly, knowing that there is nothing wrong with needing help sometimes.  Barbara is a perfect example of how a consumer of mental health services can recover, talk about it without fear of social ostracism and then use her experience to educate others.

She deserves this award.