Megan Lundstrom doesn’t have much money to spare these days. She’s a married mom of three kids, 11, nine, and eight months; a scholarship student at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC); and an entrepreneur carefully nurturing a newborn organization. With the little extra pocket money she can scrounge up, she buys gifts for people she’s never met—women she’s connected with over Facebook, women who appreciate the snack bars, lipstick, and bubble bath she sends them.

These women are members of a very large and almost entirely underground club—one no one wants to join. Lundstrom, 30, calls this club alternately “the life” and “the game.” These Facebook friends are human trafficking victims working as prostitutes, most of whom never see the money they make. Lundstrom sends them gifts, she says, because “Everybody in their life wants something from them all the time. They don’t believe people are nice just to be nice.”

Lundstrom ought to know. Until a few years ago, she too was a member of this club, a captive of a life she never wanted to live. Today, she directs Free Our Girls, a Greeley-based nonprofit calling attention to the tragedy of sex trafficking in Northern Colorado and helping to rescue victims. The women who receive her small gifts are a small handful of the hundreds Lundstrom connects with via social media, trying to help them see their own worth and escape “the life.” Lundstrom’s also on a mission to explode myths about sex trafficking, which thrives in Denver and in oil towns like Greeley. One fact she wants to drive home: it can happen to anyone.

BECAUSE IT HAPPENED TO HER.

At 16—a graduate of Greeley Central High School, a first-chair violinist who’d won a four-year college scholarship—Lundstrom became pregnant with her son. Instead of heading off to college, she married. She had another child and spent five years with a husband she says was an abusive alcoholic. After leaving him, she found herself virtually penniless, striving to get a degree in early childhood education, caring for two young children, and relying on child support that came only sporadically.

In the midst of financial stress, Lundstrom one day met an attractive man driving a fine car. He seduced her by promising to love and care for her children. And he suggested she could become financially independent by working in dance clubs and working as an escort. When her car broke down and she had no way to get to school or work, she succumbed. “I had two little mouths to feed,” she says. “It all piled on at once and made me feel trapped... This guy, masqueraded as my boyfriend—before I knew it, I was caught up in something that spiraled out of control.”
Little did she know that her “boyfriend” was, in fact, a pimp. His methods—preying on vulnerable young women, promising love and money—were a formula wielded all over the country against children as young as 11 years old. A 2014 Urban Institute study valued Denver’s sex trade at about $40 million in 2007, using the latest data available. And it could be much more: Study authors estimated that the trade’s value was significantly under-reported. Late last year, the FBI rescued 20 child sex workers in Denver and arrested seven pimps as part of a nationwide sting that netted 149 underage victims and 153 pimps; the agency recovered the largest number of victims in Denver.

Lundstrom’s harrowing experience is typical. Her pimp fluctuated between promises of love and threats of violence—particularly when she tried to leave. “He threatened to tell my parents what I was doing and that my children would be taken away,” she says. “I lived in this bubble of terror for four years.” And inculcated into a culture of prostitution, she became convinced that “the game” was all she was good for. She finally escaped from a second pimp in 2012—but it took Lundstrom more than a year of integrating back into her family and getting treatment for PTSD before she could return to a safer life.

Lundstrom was finally ready to get her bachelor’s degree. She applied to UNC, and, entering her second year, she applied for and won the Reisher Scholarship, a need- and merit-based scholarship administered by The Denver Foundation. Funded by the Reisher Family Foundation, the scholarship goes to rising sophomores and to transfer students who demonstrate academic ability, community involvement, and financial need. In 2014, using the business skills she was learning at UNC in service of her passion, Lundstrom founded Free Our Girls.

Reisher Scholars also team up in cohorts at the six Colorado universities they attend—and they can apply for project grants of up to $2000 to build a stronger cohort or provide service to the community. In 2015, Lundstrom and her cohort received a Reisher grant to bring “Empathy Week” to UNC—a series of events designed to familiarize the public with human trafficking. They hope to expand Empathy Week in October 2016.

Today, Lundstrom is embarking on a project to train all of the teachers in Weld County to recognize the signs of trafficking. (Other organizations are training health care workers, particularly emergency room physicians, to recognize victims.) And while Lundstrom is devoted to ending trafficking in Northern Colorado, she’s also slowly, one small gift and one conversation at a time, helping her Facebook friends—victims all across the country—to get strong enough to escape their traffickers, as she did. “These women have seen me leave probation, go back to college, [deal with] PTSD. They’ve seen me have my third child, do my senior year, and take on speaking engagements,” she says.

“I WANT TO GIVE THEM HOPE THAT THERE’S A LIFE BETTER THAN ANYTHING THEY COULD IMAGINE ON THE OTHER SIDE.”