



The Other Iowan Young Woman

By Alvin Erickson
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I love to watch Caitlin Clark play basketball. This young woman at the U. of Iowa is the whole package. Her shooting, her passing, her court presence, her smoothness makes basketball look simple, like child's play. I love the loyalty she has for her home state of Iowa, the win she provides for so many Iowans who follow her. The inspiration she is to so many girls around the country. What an inspiration she has become in our country where so much seems to be going wrong. Don't we all need some of her right now in 2024?

But thinking of such success, my heart has turned me back to remember another young Iowan woman, Angel Ayala. I don't remember how I ever met Angel. She was in her twenties when our lives crossed. At the time my family and I were living in the inner city of Minneapolis, two and a half blocks from the toughest corner in south Minneapolis—Franklin and Chicago Avenues. Because my third daughter had been trafficked in 1987, my wife and I had joined a support group for families seeking to alleviate the pain and if possible, find some kind of recovery for our exploited loved ones. It was a group with few answers but much sharing and commiserating. After three years together our group decided to launch an organization we called S.T.O.P. (Speaking Truths on Prostitution). It is now called Adults Saving Kids. By the way, the phrase human trafficking was never used till about 2006.

Our group knew we were in deep waters from the start, with little to go on. We did know we were all hurting and the pimping operations were winning. Since I was the only person available to be the director, I got chosen to somehow take that on. At the same time I had no idea what could be done. A feeling of helplessness is just part of the picture. We finally started a newsletter called STOPLIGHT, seeking to build awareness of how vulnerable our kids are and how clever the procurers (now called human traffickers) are.

All of this threw me into a world I had never known and truth to tell, didn't want to know. Here I was in the early 1990's running into people whose lives were totally out of my experience. One of those people was Angel Ayala. Angel was not much to look at. Her family in Iowa had put her into prostitution when she was 12. The years had not been good to her. She was thin,



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addicted to chemicals. She looked more like she was 40 or more. I came to realize how years on the streets can do that to a person. The tragic consequences in such a young person's life is so sad, beyond belief.

However it happened, I got involved with Angel. She was a lost soul. One memory I have is her staying at our house and in the morning her helping to wash the dishes. In spite of everything, I liked Angel. I just didn't know how I could help her and really she was not ready for some kind of long term recovery help anyway. I still vividly remember her leaving our house and walking down the street as the snow was coming down. Where she was going to go next was anyone's guess. But it wasn't going to be pretty. A precious young woman being used again and again like a piece of meat.

So it didn't really surprise me that she got arrested and sent to the workhouse or prison in Plymouth, Minnesota, a suburb. I went out there and visited her. She appreciated me coming. We talked and shared but I had no answers for her that she was ready to hear.

Later after she was released, I heard she got into a one month chemical treatment recovery in house program in downtown Minneapolis. It cost about \$5,000. The money probably came from taxpayers. Instinctively, I realized this program was far too short and would do Angel no good. Just another futile effort to reclaim a human being. Sure enough, once out of the program she was back on the streets. It was another one of those attempts back in those days that speaks volumes—too little, too late.

I don't know what happened but the next time I talked to Angel was in Des Moines. She had made it back to her earlier stomping grounds. But again, she was in jail in downtown Des Moines. Once after that, I was able to talk to her on the phone. By this time I had discovered a good recovery center called Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco. Working with some people in Des Moines, I told them I would pay for her bus ride to San Francisco if she was willing to go. After much discussion with them and they with her, she opted out and never went.

My last contact with her was when she was in the Iowa Correctional Institute for Women in Mitchellville. By this time we only communicated by letter. Obviously, prison was not the answer for Angel. She needed love, care, understanding, some vision of who she could become and a safe way to get there. Our communication told me she had become more hardened to life itself. How sad! It was the last contact I had with her. It would not surprise me if I were to hear that she had died. Her life story still haunts my soul.

Looking back, I wonder how I did in sharing the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ with such a person as Angel. Whatever I did or said didn't get through to her. In years following I have come to see the horrible damage done to such a life as Angel had. It extinguishes the human spirit. There is no quick fix even though many believe deliverance should be an easy step. Much love, much patience, much perseverance is needed to reach into the disastrous brokenness that is all too real.

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Still if I had the opportunity to relive some of those times with Angel, I would keep telling her, "You are a treasure in God's eyes." I would take her to Matthew 18:1-14 and show her how Jesus lifted up a child as having first place in the kingdom. I would show her how others have sinned against her and how precious she is to God as we see in verse 10 and then verses 11-14. I would not just say all this once but keep sharing passages of how Jesus dying on the cross speaks volumes on what he is saying to her. There would be deep conversations and persistent messages of grace and mercy for her to hear again and again. In God's eyes she was an honored human being. At that time helpful and successful Christian recovery centers were hard to find. But I would have sought one out closer to home.

For me, Caitlin Clark is a gift to many. Angel, on the other hand, a tragic reality hard to be with. God, have mercy! I have come to see more clearly why our Father allowed his Son to experience his excruciating suffering and death on the cross for us lost human souls and yes, for both Caitlin Clark, Angel Ayala and all the rest of us sinners.