

JULY 2026

THE INVISIBLE MOVEMENT SERIES NEWSLETTER

PURPOSE

A Year-Long Storytelling & Dialogue Series on the Human Trafficking Ecosystem

This initiative is a year-long, mindful storytelling and dialogue series designed to illuminate the full human trafficking ecosystem from its historical roots to the modern systems that enable it, and to advance collectively and responsibly for prevention, healing, and action.

Invisible Chains

Understanding the Psychology of Survivors, Traffickers, and the Path to Healing

*By Melanie Reyes, MA, LMFT, EMDR, CCTP-II, CMNCS,
ASDCS, CAGCS*

Through three composite survivor stories, this article explores how grooming, shame, trauma bonds, intermittent reinforcement, and the nervous system create invisible psychological chains that often remain long after physical captivity has ended. My hope is that, by the end of this article, you'll see survivors—and perhaps human behavior itself—through a different lens.

The Invisible Chains We Cannot See

Most people imagine human trafficking beginning with an abduction, locked doors, or physical restraints. They assume that once a survivor escapes, the trafficking has ended. As a trauma therapist, I have learned that many of the strongest chains are invisible.

They are forged through grooming. Strengthened by shame. Maintained through intermittent reinforcement and deeply embedded within the survivor's nervous system.



SERIES PRIORITIES

- Raise Awareness
- Create a Community of Practice
- Expand the Narrative to Include Demand Side
- Elevate Dignity & Compassion
- Create Partnerships & Sponsorships
- Collaborate Resources and Priorities



OTHER PRIORITIES

- Improve Social Media Presence
- Shift How We See, Relate, and Respond

When I teach about human trafficking, I am often asked one question more than any other:

“Why didn’t they just leave if they could?”

After years of sitting with survivors, I have found myself asking a different question:

“What had they come to believe about themselves?”

That single question changes everything. When we begin understanding the psychological forces that shaped them, we begin seeing human behavior through a trauma-informed lens rather than a lens of misunderstanding. Compassion naturally replaces judgment because we realize that many of the strongest chains cannot be seen.

Human trafficking is not sustained by physical captivity alone.

It is sustained by manipulated trust, shame, fear, distorted beliefs, trauma bonds, and the gradual conditioning of a survivor’s nervous system.

If we hope to prevent trafficking, support survivors, and interrupt future cycles of exploitation, we must understand not only what happened to survivors—but also how traffickers identify vulnerability, how they manipulate trust, and why healing requires much more than physical freedom.

Invisible Chain #1: Grooming Begins Long Before Captivity

“Hajeen” grew up in a small village in Asia, where she was taught to honor her elders, obey authority, remain respectful, and place her family’s needs before her own. She was soft-spoken, hardworking, servant-hearted, and deeply committed to helping those she loved. These values reflected the beauty of her culture and upbringing.

Unfortunately, someone recognized those strengths and chose to exploit them.

The person who recruited Hajeen was not a stranger.

He was a trusted male relative. He had recently been approached by members of a trafficking network and offered what represented a life-changing financial opportunity if he could recruit young women from his village. For every additional girl he recruited, he was promised even greater financial rewards.



OPPORTUNITIES

- Write Articles
- Arrange Webinars
- Create a Movement
- Expand Awareness through Social Media
- Outreach and Ambassadors

HEALING

- Visit our website at <https://www.invisiblemovement.org>
- Find the Healing Hub
- Money Tree
- Human Pulse
- Healing Hub
- Healing Art
- Healing Temple
- Healing Words
- Stillness Sanctuary



For a man living in poverty, struggling with a gambling addiction, and believing this opportunity could permanently change his future, the offer was difficult to ignore.

His worldview had also been shaped by generations of hardship. Stories of war, survival, and poverty had been passed down through his family. Within his upbringing, women were often viewed as existing primarily to serve men rather than possessing equal value and dignity.

None of these realities excuse what he chose to do.

He bears full responsibility for betraying Hajeen's trust.

However, understanding how traffickers think helps us understand how exploitation begins.

Traffickers hardly create vulnerability. More often, they recognize vulnerabilities that already exist.

- Poverty.
- Loneliness.
- Addiction.
- Family loyalty.
- Immigration status.
- The desire to belong.
- The longing to provide for loved ones.

Beautiful qualities such as compassion, sacrifice, responsibility, faith, and obedience can become the very doorway through which exploitation occurs when trust is manipulated.

Hajeen believed she was leaving home to work as a housemaid overseas so she could provide for her family and help care for someone she loved. Instead, she was trafficked into years of exploitation.

At one point, she secretly found an opportunity to make a phone call to the very relative who had convinced her to leave home.

She expected rescue. Instead, he told her never to call again. That phone call marked a heartbreaking turning point. The person she believed would protect her had become part of the system exploiting her.

Human trafficking doesn't begin with chains. It often begins with manipulated trust. As I have listened to survivors over the years, one truth has become increasingly clear:

Traffickers often exploit what is most beautiful about a person rather than what is weakest.

- Family loyalty.
- Compassion.
- Faith.
- Responsibility.
- Obedience.
- The willingness to sacrifice for others.
- These qualities are not flaws.

Yet, in the hands of someone seeking to exploit another human being, they become powerful tools of manipulation.

Grooming slowly teaches a survivor to question their own instincts while placing increasing trust in the person leading them toward danger. Long before physical captivity begins, the survivor's understanding of safety, trust, and choice has already begun to change.

Invisible Chain #2: Shame Becomes Another Prison

"Dina" was twelve years old when she believed she was sneaking out to meet a fifteen-year-old boy whom she had met online. Instead, she encountered an adult man who manipulated her trust and drew her into a human trafficking network. What she believed would be a brief meeting became years of exploitation.

Throughout her captivity, Dina experienced repeated abuse, coercion, manipulation, and profound loss. She became pregnant multiple times, and each child was taken from her shortly after birth. The repeated trauma reinforced the message that she had no control over her own life or future.

Then something happened that many people find difficult to understand. At one point during her captivity, Dina was brought back to her hometown. She recognized the streets.

She knew where she was.
She could have tried to run.
She didn't.

People often ask: "Why didn't she escape?"

As a trauma therapist, I have learned that this question often reflects what we do not yet understand about trauma. When we reframe the question through a trauma-informed lens, we ask:

"What had she come to believe about herself?"

Over months and years, traffickers systematically reshaped Dina's beliefs. She was repeatedly told:

- "Your parents don't want you anymore."
- "They're ashamed of you."
- "You snuck out."
- "You chose this."
- "No one will believe you."
- "You'll never be accepted again."

When those messages are repeated over time, they can become deeply rooted beliefs.

By the time Dina returned to her hometown, physical restraints were no longer necessary. Shame had become another prison.

One of the most powerful tools traffickers use is not simply physical control.
It is psychological control.
Shame convinces survivors they are unworthy of love.
Unworthy of forgiveness.
Unworthy of returning home.

When shame becomes part of a survivor's identity, asking for help no longer feels possible. Leaving does not automatically feel like freedom. It can feel like facing rejection, humiliation, or the belief that there is no place left to belong.

One of the greatest misconceptions about trauma is that healing begins the moment someone escapes.

In reality, psychological captivity often outlasts physical captivity. As trauma-informed professionals, one of our greatest responsibilities is helping survivors separate what happened to them from who they are.

No perpetrator has the authority to define another person's worth.

Healing begins when survivors slowly discover that the lies spoken over them were never the truth.

Clinical Insight

Over the years, survivors have taught me that shame often becomes one of the greatest barriers to healing. Many are not waiting to be rescued because they no longer believe they deserve rescue. They are waiting for someone to help them believe they are still worthy of coming home.

When we begin viewing survivors through a trauma-informed lens, our questions naturally begin to change.

Instead of asking:

"Why didn't you leave?"

We begin asking:

"What made you believe you couldn't?"

That single shift changes everything. Judgment becomes curiosity. Curiosity becomes compassion. Compassion creates space for healing.

Invisible Chain #3: Hope Can Become Captivity

Twin brothers "Kalua" and "Kaynin" entered the world already surrounded by addiction, exploitation, and violence. Their parents exploited them to support severe substance use, placing their own needs above the safety and well-being of their children.

Eventually, the boys entered foster care. Yet they repeatedly ran away. To many people, this makes little sense. Why would children run back to someone who had repeatedly harmed them?

As trauma therapists, we know the answer is often found not in logic, but in attachment. Every once in a while, their father apologized. Sometimes he told stories. Sometimes he laughed with them. Sometimes he showed small moments of affection that reminded them of the father they longed to have.

To an outside observer, those moments may appear insignificant. To two little boys longing for love, they became unforgettable. This is one example of intermittent reinforcement—unpredictable moments of kindness, affection, or connection mixed with prolonged abuse and neglect.

These brief moments do not erase the harm. Instead, they strengthen hope.

Many people mistakenly believe survivors become attached to abuse.

That is not what I have repeatedly witnessed. Even the smallest amount of hope can keep survivors waiting. They do not become attached to the abuse; they become attached to hope.

Hope that today will be different.

Hope that this time the loving version of the person will stay.

Hope that the person they desperately love will finally become safe.

The survivor is not chasing abuse.

The survivor is hoping for safety.

One of the most difficult realities of trauma work is recognizing that some perpetrators were once victims themselves. The twins' father had also experienced profound childhood trauma and exploitation. His own understanding of relationships had been shaped by violence, addiction, and survival.

Understanding his history does not excuse the choices he made.

He remained fully responsible for the profound harm he caused his children. However, understanding the cycle reminds us that trauma, addiction, exploitation, and distorted beliefs can echo across generations unless someone intentionally interrupts them.

Healing survivors is essential.

Preventing future exploitation requires breaking those cycles wherever we find them.

As therapists, advocates, churches, educators, and communities, our responsibility is not only to help survivors heal but also to recognize the conditions that allow exploitation to continue.

Only then can we begin preventing future harm.

LOOKING UPSTREAM

At the Invisible Movement, we believe that preventing trafficking requires more than responding to exploitation after it occurs. It requires understanding the conditions that increase vulnerability long before harm becomes visible. Our work focuses on helping individuals, communities, organizations, and systems better understand the social, economic, environmental, and psychological factors that contribute to vulnerability, dependency, exploitation, and resilience.

Through research, education, community dialogue, survivor-informed resources, and practical tools, the Invisible Movement seeks to shift the conversation from reactive intervention toward proactive prevention. One of the tools currently being explored is the Drift Assessment.

The Drift Assessment was developed to help individuals reflect on patterns that may influence decision-making, relationships, opportunities, resilience, and personal well-being. It is not intended as a diagnostic tool. Rather, it is designed to increase self-awareness and encourage reflection on the factors that may either strengthen resilience or increase vulnerability during difficult periods of life.

While vulnerability is shaped by many external factors, including economic conditions, housing stability, community support, safety, education, and opportunity, our internal beliefs, perceptions, and responses to adversity also play an important role in how we navigate challenges.

The Invisible Movement explores both sides of this equation.

Visit us at:

<https://www.invisiblemovement.org>

There you will find:

- Educational resources and articles
- The Healing Hub, a growing collection of wellness, recovery, resilience, and community resources
- The Healing Temple, a reflective space designed to encourage healing, renewal, and personal growth
- Community conversations and webinars

- The FREE Drift Assessment (Know Your Drift)
- Opportunities to learn, volunteer, collaborate, and support the movement

Together, we can create communities where vulnerability is reduced, resilience is strengthened, and exploitation has fewer places to thrive.

Join us for the JULY Webinar | JULY 23 @ 2 PM PST

FREE ZOOM Webinar: <https://calstatela.zoom.us/j/83168591613>

Panelists:



Dr. Debra R. Dunston is a nationally recognized Trauma Recovery Specialist, Speaker, Author, and Founder of Healing Lives Fellowship, Inc. With more than 40 years of experience serving individuals, families, and communities, she equips people with practical tools to heal from trauma, build resilience, and create meaningful lives beyond adversity, while serving others.

Drawing from both professional expertise and personal experience, Dr. Debra brings a powerful and authentic voice to conversations surrounding trauma recovery, emotional wellness, domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse, human trafficking, and leadership empowerment. Having survived multiple forms of trauma herself, she understands firsthand the challenges of healing and the courage required to move forward. Her story serves not as the focus of her work, but as evidence that recovery, growth, and transformation are possible.

An engaging and dynamic presenter, Dr. Debra has delivered keynote presentations, workshops, leadership training, women's empowerment programs, and community-based initiatives throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Audiences value her unique ability to translate complex emotional and psychological concepts into relatable, practical, and actionable tools that inspire lasting change. Her trauma-informed approach combines emotional wellness principles, life skills development, and empowerment-based coaching to help people move from surviving to thriving.

Dr. Debra is the author of *Ten Principles to Heal Emotional Wounds*, *Getting Free & Staying Free*, *From Vision to Provision*, and *The Call to Stewardship*. She is currently completing her memoir, *Three Nights in Captivity: My Journey from Human Trafficking to Freedom and Healing*.

Whether speaking to survivors, professionals, leaders, or community groups, Dr. Debra inspires audiences with a message of hope, healing, resilience, and the vision of building a life beyond trauma. Dr. Debra's saying is "Healing is a Process, but Freedom is a Journey."

Visit: www.HealingLivesNow.org



Melanie Reyes, MA, LMFT, EMDR, CCTP-II, CMNCS, ASDCS, CAGCS, is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, trauma specialist, speaker, and humanitarian with more than 30 years of service and over 15 years of trauma-informed clinical experience. Since 1993, she has served vulnerable and underserved populations through humanitarian outreach, ministry, advocacy, education, and community support in the United States, Mexico, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Canada, Japan, Dubai,

and other international communities. As the granddaughter of a survivor of the Bataan Death March and a member of a multigenerational military family, she brings a particular appreciation for the effects of war trauma, resilience, and recovery.

Melanie has worked extensively with trauma survivors from diverse communities. She has provided thousands of clinical sessions for individuals, couples, and families impacted by human trafficking, domestic violence, exploitation, addiction, severe mental illness, military-related trauma, complicated grief, autism spectrum disorder, postpartum mental health concerns, acculturation challenges, complex PTSD, crime, and torture.

Her experience spans county-contracted community mental health programs, crisis intervention, community outreach, domestic violence shelters, addiction treatment programs, first responder and healthcare worker services, Victims of Crime services, STRTP residential treatment, and private practice.

As a trauma-informed clinician, Melanie utilizes EMDR, somatic approaches, and integrative trauma-focused interventions that address the mind, body, and spirit to support healing and recovery. Her work emphasizes nervous system stabilization, psychoeducation, and helping individuals develop a deeper understanding of trauma responses and pathways toward healing, including collaborative experience with Equine-Assisted TF-CBT and expressive arts interventions. This collaboration was implemented as part of her residential treatment experience, where she served foster youth in a Level 12 STRTP setting with severe behavioral, emotional, psychiatric, homicidal, and suicidal presentations, many of whom had experienced trafficking, exploitation, and complex developmental trauma. She has developed a deep understanding of trauma, coercive control, recovery, and survivor empowerment.

Grounded in her Christian faith and informed by both professional and lived experience, Melanie is passionate about helping communities understand the often invisible effects of trauma and the pathways that promote healing. Having spent decades sitting with individuals and families facing unimaginable tragedy and loss, she brings compassion, clinical insight, and a deep respect for the resilience of the human spirit. Drawing from decades of frontline service, clinical expertise, faith, and international outreach, she brings a unique perspective on survivor empowerment and the belief that healing and restoration are possible even in the aftermath of profound adversity.

Visit: <http://melaniereyecounseling.com/>



Mariah Rief is a survivor-informed policy strategist, speaker, and consultant specializing in technology-facilitated exploitation, image-based sexual abuse, and modern human trafficking. Drawing from both professional expertise and lived experience, she helps organizations better understand how the internet has transformed coercion, victimization, and survivor recovery.

Mariah serves as Director of Client Experience and Trust at Protect Privacy AI, where she helps develop survivor-centered solutions to identify, report, and remove exploitative content online. She is also the founder of Undox Content Removal, a consulting firm that assists individuals, attorneys, organizations, and businesses in navigating online exploitation, digital risk, and content removal.

Beyond her direct work with survivors, Mariah contributes to California legislative efforts addressing nonconsensual intimate imagery (NCII) and technology-facilitated abuse. Her policy work focuses on building scalable systems that

strengthen victim protections and improve implementation of emerging state and federal laws, including the Take It Down Act.

As a federally recognized survivor of one of the largest prosecuted sex trafficking cases in United States history, Mariah brings a perspective few professionals can offer bridging survivor leadership, technology, policy, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Her presentations challenge audiences to rethink how trafficking and exploitation look in the digital age while equipping professionals with practical, trauma-informed strategies they can immediately apply.

Visit: www.undoxcontentremoval.com

Featured Resource: The Healing Hub

Understanding exploitation is important, but awareness alone is not enough. Healing is equally important.

The Healing Hub was created as a growing collection of resources designed to support healing, resilience, self-discovery, and personal growth. Visitors can explore articles, wellness resources, mindfulness practices, healing art, inspirational stories, community connections, and tools that support recovery and well-being.

Whether you are a survivor, family member, professional, student, advocate, or simply someone seeking greater peace and resilience, the Healing Hub offers a space to learn, reflect, and grow.

Visit: www.invisiblemovement.org

OUR UPCOMING AUGUST 2026 WEBINAR TOPIC: FOLLOWING THE MONEY: Economics, demand, and profit structures

What Can YOU Do

You do not need a title or a degree to make a difference, but you do need awareness and the willingness to act on it. With this first step, you can help by slowing down, asking questions, noticing patterns, and joining in on the conversations.

Every human trafficking system is made of people, and every victim is a person. The shift begins with someone deciding to see, understand, and act. Become aware and find the courage to act.

The Invitation

The Invisible Movement is building a community of practices across industries: people committed to looking more closely at the systems around them.

Slow down —————> Notice patterns —————> Ask questions —————> Speak up.

This series is not just information; it is a **community of practice**. Over the next year, we will move together through three acts:

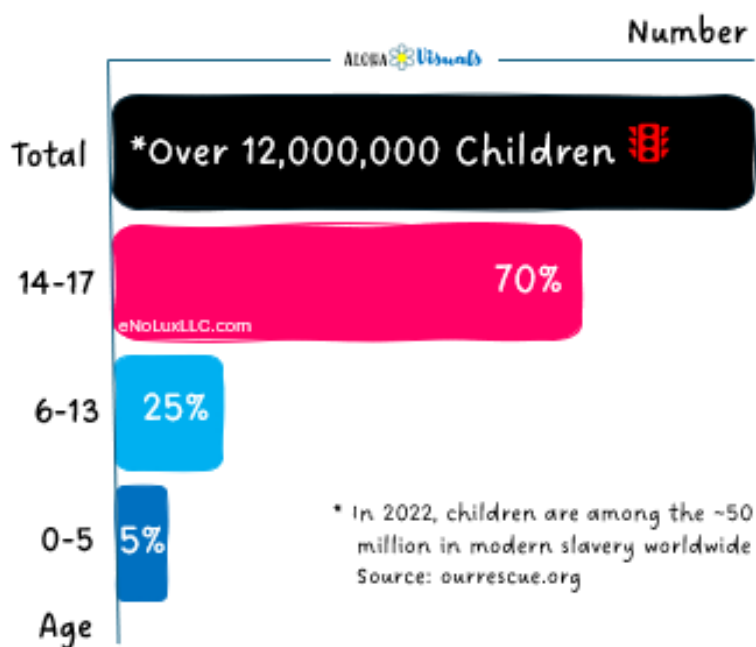
- **Act I:** Seeing the Whole
- **Act II:** Understanding the Machinery
- **Act III:** Choosing to Act

Each month builds on the last. Each conversation deepens awareness. Each story brings us closer to clarity. Each action shifts the system.

Human trafficking thrives in what remains unseen. Awareness is the light that exposes the path.

Begin by seeing the whole system and your place in it. Take the pledge to join the Invisible Movement Community of Practice today.

Child Trafficking Industry



The Invisible Movement Pledge

Seeing Clearly. Acting Intentionally. Protecting Human Dignity

I recognize that human trafficking does not always appear as force. It often begins with influence, vulnerability, and unmet human needs.

I commit to:

- **See clearly** – understand how grooming, manipulation, and coercion unfold
- **Stay aware** – of both my environment and my internal patterns
- **Speak openly** – to normalize informed conversations
- **Support others** – by creating spaces of trust and dignity
- **Act early** – when something feels off, even if it doesn't look like harm

I understand that prevention is not just about reacting to danger—it is about recognizing patterns before harm takes hold. I choose awareness. I choose responsibility. I choose action. I am part of the Invisible Movement.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____



**INVISI
MOVE**

CONTRIBUTORS



Chang, Paul is a part-time Lecturer at the Global Center for Women and Justice and at California State University, Los Angeles. Paul received his BA and MPA from California State University Los Angeles and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. at Claremont Graduate University, where his scholarship focuses on human trafficking.

Pchang26@calstatela.edu | [linkedin.com/in/paul-chang-85857643](https://www.linkedin.com/in/paul-chang-85857643) | 626-642-6275



Ley, Aloha is a seasoned transportation leader with over 30 years of service at the U.S. Department of Transportation, where she held key roles including Chief of Staff, Senior Advisor, and Director across the FAA, FTA, and the Office of the Secretary. She brings expertise in aviation and transit safety, safety management systems, community development, anti-human trafficking initiatives, strategic planning, grants management, and public engagement. Aloha also integrates mindfulness and modern leadership into her work as a certified yoga teacher and practitioner of manifestation and mindfulness mastery. She has social media mastery and is currently pursuing AI mastery. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Maryland, and is a graduate of the Federal Executive Institute. Her career reflects a commitment to innovation, resilience, and meaningful community impact.

aloha@enoluxllc.com | www.enoluxllc.com | www.linkedin.com/in/aloha-ley | 949-371-5828



McKeithen, Isaac is the Regional Leader of the EPIK Project in Southern California, where he leads initiatives to combat sex trafficking by reducing demand. A U.S. Army veteran with service in Germany and Kansas, Isaac also spent over 25 years as a martial arts instructor in Central Florida before moving to California in 2015 to work with the Department of Transportation. His anti-trafficking work began at Saddleback Church, where he joined the Human Trafficking Ministry's street outreach in Santa Ana. He later served as Orange County Coordinator for Men Standing Against Trafficking (MSAT) and worked with Magdalena Hope's outreach in Anaheim. In 2019, he launched the Southern California chapter of the EPIK Project, which has been actively addressing demand since January 2020.

imck.maht@gmail.com | www.epikproject.org | 951-821-6313



Yagci Sokat, Dr. Kezban is an award-winning Associate Professor of Business Analytics at San José State University and a Research Associate at the Mineta Transportation Institute. Her research uses decision analytics and management science to address human trafficking and other societal challenges. Her work has informed policy and practice in the United States and globally, including her current SB-1-funded research examining transportation system vulnerabilities and human trafficking during major events. She has served on the U.S. Department of Transportation's Advisory Committee on Human Trafficking and has received a U.S. Senate Citation, the 2024 AACSB Influential Leader Award, and recognition from the U.S. DOT and IBM. She holds a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering and Management Sciences from Northwestern University and multiple degrees from Georgia Institute of Technology.

Kezban.yagcisokat@sjsu.edu | [Yagci Sokat, Kezban | People | San Jose State University](#)
[linkedin.com/in/kezbanyagcisokat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/kezbanyagcisokat) | 408-924-1000

SUPPORTERS



Founded in 1991, the **Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI)**, is a university transportation center located within the [Lucas College and Graduate School of Business](#) at [San José State University](#) (SJSU). MTI increases mobility for all by improving the safety, efficiency, accessibility, and convenience of our nation's transportation system. Through research, education, workforce development, and technology transfer, MTI helps create a connected world.

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[CalState University LA](#) | (323) 343-3000



For over 100 years, Vanguard University has remained committed to our founding Christ-centered educational mission and has chartered new paths to live out our calling. Founded in 1920 by the Southern California District Council of the Assemblies of God, Vanguard reflects the distinctives of the Azusa Street Revival, the historical Christian movement to which well over half a billion Christians globally trace their roots. As one of the first ministerial training schools formed out of this revival, Vanguard has prepared women and men for Spirit-empowered lives of Christ-centered leadership and service from our inception.

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**Leatherby Center
for
Entrepreneurship
& Business Ethics**

The **Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship & Business Ethics at Chapman University** is a hub for innovators, founders, and students who want to turn ideas into real ventures. It provides hands-on support through mentorship, startup resources, incubator programs, pitch opportunities, and community partnerships — all designed to help entrepreneurs build, test, and grow their companies. The

Center serves Orange County's broader ecosystem by fostering collaboration between students, industry leaders, and local startups, helping drive new business creation and strengthening the region's entrepreneurial community.

[The Leatherby Center for Entrepreneurship & Business Ethics at Chapman University](#) | (714) 997-6815