



Adding her voice to the fight

As executive director of Amirah, Inc., **Mary Speta** draws on her past to advocate for the exploited

While Mary Speta may be a classically trained vocalist as well as a doctoral candidate in law and policy, it is commercial sexual exploitation that is her daily focus.

As executive director of Amirah, Inc, a Beverly-based nonprofit that provides exit and aftercare services to women who have experienced trauma through prostitution, sex trafficking, or commercial sexual exploitation, she works on their behalf. Prior to her current position, Speta was the director of development.



In her first action as executive director of Amirah, Inc., Mary Speta sought to establish an independent housing program rather than group homes.

Battling the scourge of sexual exploitation may seem an unusual career choice for a vocalist who briefly sang professionally. But it is less surprising once you know Speta's history.

Raised in a tiny, farm community in western New York state, Speta, the granddaughter of Bulgarian immigrants, got accepted to Gordon College in Wenham and was among the first in her family to go to college. With her family's limited financial resources, Speta worked three jobs to fund her education.

During one of her shifts as a bartender, the college student met the man who would become her exploiter.

"I was convinced I was in love," Speta says. "He was worldly."

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Brad Small of Solomon Private Wealth, LLC, nominated the 31 year-old Speta for her Diamond Award, writing "she is mature beyond her years. Mary leads an amazing team of people that are helping to save women from trafficking."

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Mary Speta greets the audience at the Diamond Awards.



Solomon Private Wealth founder Brad Small nominated Mary for the Diamond Award.

self-esteem led to two “dark, messed up years,” she says.

Eventually she arrived at “rock bottom” both emotionally and physically. It took her five attempts before she would break free from her exploiter. She would later learn, on average, it takes the exploited nine attempts to find freedom.

Three years after she escaped the relationship, with her bachelor’s in music performance and a master’s from Boston University in administration, Speta began rebuilding her life. She soon realized there was a name for what she experienced. Initially, Speta didn’t trust herself and feared she was creating a false narrative.

Once she accepted her lived trauma and became familiar with words like “groomer,” “love-bombing,” “manipulation,” and “coercion,” she was ready to leave her position at a local orchestra and help others change their own trauma narratives.

Today, she oversees 11 paid staff and more than 80 volunteers.

“They deal with the most heinous of crimes and do it with poise, compassion, and intelligence,” Small says.



Alongside her dedicated staff, Mary works tirelessly to advocate for those who have been exploited, drawing on her own past experiences to offer support and encouragement.

Since the organization’s inception in 2011, more than 450 individuals have received assistance through the residential treatment program.

In just a few short years, Speta has become a seasoned researcher, educator, speaker, and advocate in the movement to end commercial sexual exploitation. She uses her research to bust myths, inform policy, and shape effective evidence-based exit ramps for those seeking to gain their independence from commercial sex, according to Small.

In April of 2022 when Speta became executive director, the chairman of the board of directors asked her a hypothetical question.

If she could take the existing budget and revamp Amirah’s framework what would it look like?

Her immediate response was to close the group safe homes, and build out an independent housing program that prepares clients economically to reintegrate into society.

She was given the approval to implement that vision.

With the new individual, residential housing, Amirah staff realized the residents improved “light years faster,” Speta says. Most of the women, who are in their 30s, receive training and education to prepare them for success, according to Speta. They work on improving their self-esteem, creating economic stability, and establishing communal connections, she explains.

In the future, Speta says, she would like to improve collaboration with

other organizations and agencies. “I believe in collaboration, not duplication,” she says. The new Beverly location also provides the organization the opportunity for upgraded technology.

But there is much to do, she acknowledges, and is working to do her part.

She serves on multiple legislative advisory and service provision committees throughout New England.

These include the Global Association of Human Trafficking Scholars (developing scholar member), The New England Coalition Against Trafficking (committee member,) and the Mass. Governor’s Commission on Human Trafficking.

Speta is also currently a doctoral candidate in Northeastern University’s Law and Policy program.

The name Amirah has several translations including “female warrior.” It was borrowed from a closed domestic violence center in Mexico that was operated by a colleague’s grandmother. Speta says it is appropriate for the agency’s clients.

“We don’t rescue anybody,” she says. “They are the heroes of their own stories.”

Speta says she sees herself staying in the fight against sexual exploitation.

“I’m a person of faith. This is work I have dedicated my life to...I will continue to work along side others to create programs and policies,” she says. “No one deserves to be exploited. We need the voices of the people with lived experiences.”

– By Ellen Small Davis

Much attention is focused on mental health, particularly since COVID-19. The taboo around the topic is slowly evaporating as Gen Z seeks help to overcome anxiety, depression, and loneliness in the face of stressors and uncertainties in the world today.

Psychiatrist.com surveyed over 1,000 Gen Z, ages 18 to 24, and this is what they found:

- ◆ 85 percent of respondents say they are worried about the future.
- ◆ Nearly 90 percent of Gen Z say they do not feel set up for success, and 75 percent believe they are at a disadvantage compared to the older generations.
- ◆ The most common diagnosis for the younger generation is anxiety, followed by depression, ADHD, and PTSD.
- ◆ 42 percent of Gen Z have received a mental health diagnosis. One in five are in therapy.
- ◆ About 20 percent of Gen Z has been to therapy, and 60 percent are on medication to help manage their mental health.

In the workforce today, loneliness has been identified in all generations. It is a driving force of depression and anxiety, representing an internal negative and critical belief system directed towards oneself, contributing to low productivity. A devastating effect of loneliness is when the inner critic starts

a feedback loop (I am not likable, I am destined to be alone, and something is wrong with me).

Due to changing work conditions (in-person, remote, and hybrid), leaders and managers need to create social and group project opportunities to reduce loneliness so that people build bonds with co-workers to enhance their well-being and productivity.

SPOTLIGHT ON MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Most employees leave their jobs because of poor managers. This behavior can include ignoring good work and just focusing on the errors, a lack of engagement, subpar management skills, poor communication, and negativity.

Innovative organizations emphasize Emotional Intelligence for their managers and leaders in response to Gen Z, who desire competent, empathetic, and engaged managers and leaders. Too often, a terrific salesperson or technical person is promoted into management as a reward, only to be a poor fit for the role. While other generations might have been more tolerant, Gen Z is not, and many of them leave for a better work-life elsewhere.

Managers interested in learning more about coaching younger professionals are encouraged to reach out to me to talk more. [I](#)

Important changes to FAFSA that families need to know



By Brad Small

Solomon Private Wealth

The Department of Education has described the recent changes to the FAFSA as the “most ambitious and significant redesign of the federal student aid application in decades,” aiming to create a more streamlined and user-friendly experience.

As you may be aware, the FAFSA form is crucial for students applying for federal student aid, including grants, work-study funds, and loans. Even if you believe your family’s income disqualifies you, it is still recommended that your child submit a FAFSA form each year to provide financial flexibility. Additionally, the information provided on the FAFSA form is used by states and certain private aid providers to determine eligibility for additional assistance.

Typically, the FAFSA form becomes available on Oct. 1 of each year. However, for the 2024–2025 school year, the form will not be available until December 2023 due to the proposed changes. Once released, we recommend completing the FAFSA as soon as possible, as some states and colleges award funds on a first-come, first-served basis.

The new FAFSA form from the Department of Education will have 46 questions, less than half of the previous 108 questions. In addition to this change, there are several other adjustments, including:

- ◆ The Expected Family Contribution will now be known as the Student Aid Index.
- ◆ Families with multiple children in college will no longer receive a discounted Student Aid Index.
- ◆ Small business owners and family farms will no longer be able to exclude certain assets from the eligibility calculation.
- ◆ In the case of divorced parents, the parent who has spent the most money on the child will complete

the FAFSA.

- ◆ Contributions made by grandparents and others from qualified college savings plans will no longer be taxed as the child’s untaxed income.
- ◆ The financial aid formula will be more generous to lower-income students.

While covering the costs of higher education for your children or grandchildren may seem daunting, proper preparation can make it more manageable. It is important to remember that few students pay the full sticker price because college is expensive. Although college costs have doubled over the past 30 years, so have the financial aid packages and merit scholarships offered by colleges to students.

If you would like to learn more about how to start preparing for college costs, please feel free to contact us. We have illustrations that show the advantages and disadvantages of various college-saving options.

Brad Small is the founder and CEO of *Solomon Private Wealth*. He is on the Chamber’s Board of Directors.

Answers to your most common Social Security questions



By Brad Small

Solomon Private Wealth

Social Security, the program you may have spent a lifetime paying into, is designed to offer stability, supplemental income, and other valuable benefits that can play a role in your overall financial strategy after you retire. However, the complexity of these benefits tends to generate several frequently asked questions. Here are a few high-level answers to some of the most common questions we've received.

When Can I Start Collecting Social Security Benefits?

You have the option to claim Social Security as early as age 62. However, your monthly Social Security retirement benefit could be larger by staying in the workforce longer. If you wait until your full retirement age (which varies from 66 to 67, depending on your birth year), you can receive 100% of your monthly retirement benefit. An added advantage of delaying beyond your full retirement age is that the Social Security Administration increases your benefit by up to 8 percent for each year you wait (up to age 70).

How Does Social Security Impact My Retirement Cash Flow?

While you may have a variety of sources of income to tap into during retirement, Social Security should not be overlooked when preparing your distribution strategy. Here's a hypothetical example that outlines what it might take to replicate the income you could receive from Social Security:

Assuming an annual benefit in 2023 of \$30,000, you'd need to invest approximately \$1,000,000 in an investment vehicle that yields 3% to generate that type of income.

Remember, this is a hypothetical example used only for descriptive purposes. It's not representative of any specific investment or combination of investments. It's used to describe the cash flow potential of a Social Security benefit.



Is Income From Social Security Taxable?

Social Security benefits are taxable, and the rate is based on your income. The Congressional Research Service found that the percentage of all tax returns with taxable Social Security benefits reached 33% in 2017 (the most recent data available). This percentage is expected to increase to more than 50% by 2046. In 1999, fewer than 8% of all taxpayers reported taxable Social Security benefits.

When Should I Start Taking Benefits?

Deciding when to begin taking Social Security is a critical decision and one of our most common questions. It may seem straightforward, but it's more complex than it looks. You'll want to consider your employment status (if you're still working), your health, and if you're married and if your spouse anticipates drawing benefits. This is an important decision, so we're here to help you better understand how Social Security plays a role in your overall retirement distribution strategy.

If you or anyone you know have questions about Social Security and its role in your retirement strategy, we'd love to schedule a time to discuss the specifics of your situation. Our team is passionate about helping clients understand Social Security and highly experienced in showing individuals and families how they can make informed decisions that can positively impact their financial future. [1](#)

Brad Small is the founder and CEO of Solomon Private Wealth and a member of The Chamber's Board of Directors.