

Hope and Healing for Human Trafficking Victims

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children grows, to help even more.

With more than 27 years of caring for survivors of abuse and violence in Southwest Florida, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children will soon break ground on its next phase of service with the construction of the Shelly Stayer Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking & Domestic Violence, also known as The Shelly Stayer Shelter.

Stayer, who has been involved with the shelter for more than

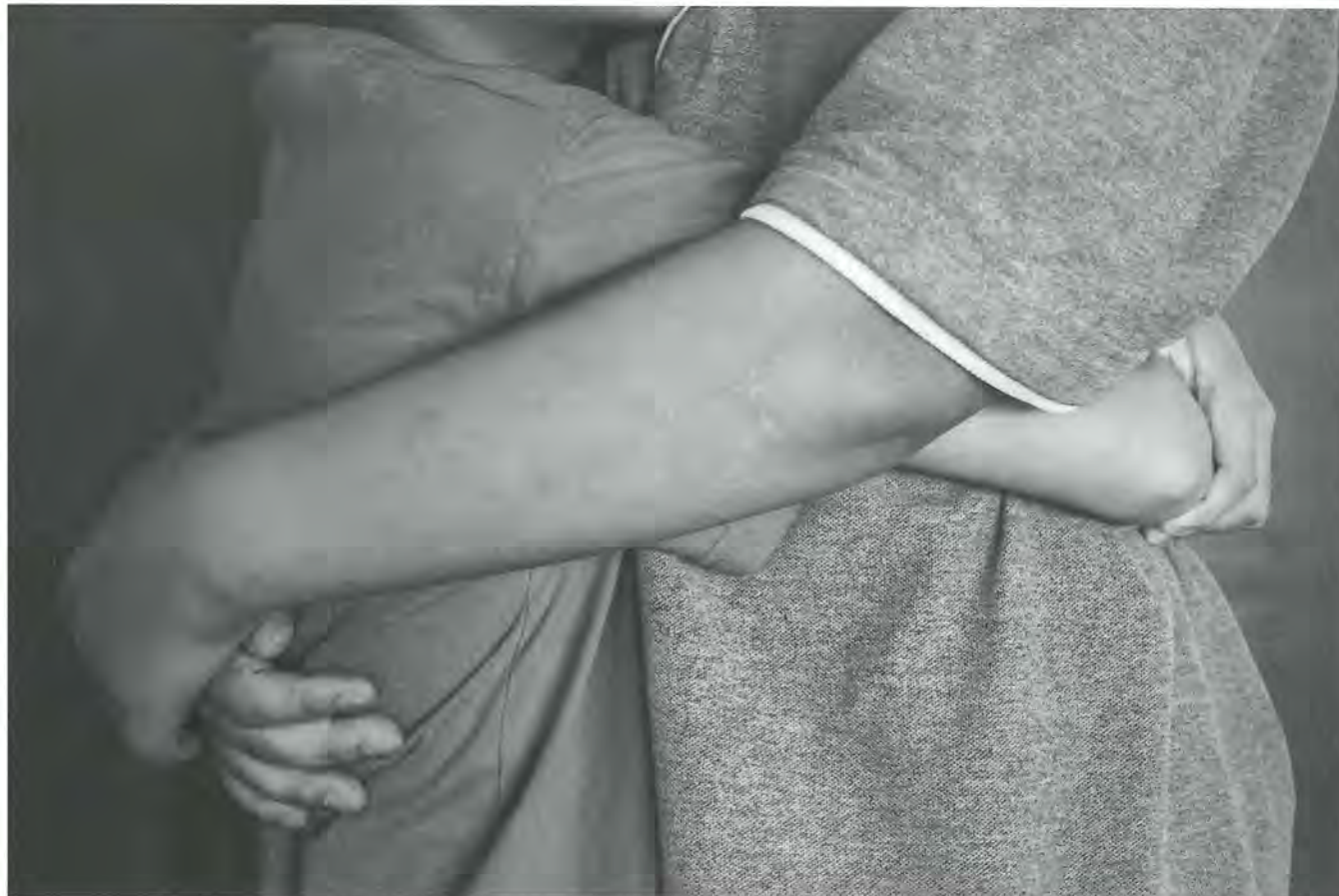
eight years, has now turned her focus to the issue of human trafficking. Her lead gift of \$3 million will help build the 15,000-square-foot, 32-bed shelter in Immokalee, to accommodate survivors of domestic violence, as well victims of human trafficking.

Below are the stories of Ellie and Destiny (names have been changed), just two of 38 human trafficking victims served by the shelter in only the last two years.

ELLIE

Ellie was 16 when she fled a broken home to pursue a new life with her boyfriend. Three years later, battered and bruised, Ellie was brought from the hospital to The Shelter for Abused Women & Children. Her dream of a new life had shattered into a nightmare of violence with her boyfriend – turned sex trafficker – selling her on a website called Back Page.

When officers brought her to The Shelter, Ellie looked through the back



window of the patrol car and watched the gates close. When they closed and no one followed, she felt relief blanket her constant fear.

At The Shelter, Ellie was slow to trust or confide in her advocate. When she finally did, she spoke for a long time about the extreme sexual and physical abuse inflicted upon her. At the end of the conversation, she paused in silence. Her eyes filled with tears as she whispered, "May I hug you?"

Ellie's story epitomizes the unspeakable dehumanization suffered by millions of human trafficking victims across the country. But she is one of the lucky ones. The average life span of a human trafficking victim is seven years. Ellie got out in three.

At The Shelter, she found a safe haven, counseling, and was ultimately reunited with her mother.

DESTINY

At 22, Destiny found her way to The Shelter seeking safety after many years of being trafficked from state to state. Her life had been a continuous ritual of daily beatings, verbal abuse and rape.

During the first meeting with her advocate, Destiny disclosed that she tried to escape several times, but each time she was found and forced to return to trafficking. She was sold or exchanged many times among traffickers to either pay off a debt or strike a deal.

Destiny shared that for the longest time she thought being trafficked was normal, since her own mother had sold her for drugs several times during her childhood years.

For Destiny, time spent in jail for crimes related to her own victimization was "the most peaceful time" she could recall in her short life.

She came to The Shelter with a backpack and small purse. These two items contained her entire life. Upon her arrival, Destiny received clothing, toiletries, food, counseling and lots of TLC.

She enjoyed The Shelter's Healing Arts Program, as she always wanted to try painting. She also told staff that The Shelter's twin trundle was the most comfortable bed she had ever slept in.

While at The Shelter, Destiny identified obstacles, many emotional, that stood in her way of a safe and positive life. She continues to stay in touch with The Shelter and has shared that her past is behind her, and she is confident that something great is ahead.

GROWING AWARENESS

Nationally, Florida ranks third in the country

for human trafficking. While we live in a community that one might not associate with this horrific crime, one of Florida's largest human trafficking stings took place in Collier County on March 6, 2015, culminating in the arrest of 17 traffickers and rescue of six victims.

"This much-needed shelter is a project that has been in our plans for several years," says Linda Oberhaus, executive director of The Shelter. "Ms. Stayer's generosity has allowed us to fast-track this project, which will save and transform many lives." ❀

Kaydee Tuff is the communications manager for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, Collier County's foremost provider serving the needs of victims of domestic violence and human trafficking.

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