



Shelter from the most violent storms

Collier County's growing number of human trafficking victims leads to plans for newest shelter.

Forced to have sex with up to 40 men a day inside a dingy travel trailer, Marie's life was an endless nightmare of rape and beatings as her traffickers moved from one labor camp to another.

After each violation, Marie was handed a bottle cap for adequately completing the 'transaction.' At the end of the day, if her bottle caps didn't correspond to the number of men, she would be beaten or go without food.

Marie's story epitomizes the unspeakable dehumanization suffered by millions of human trafficking victims exploited for sexual purposes or forced labor in the United States. But she is actually one of the lucky ones. The average lifespan of a human trafficking victim is seven years; Marie got out in one, thanks to a civilian report to law enforcement regarding strange sounds coming from the trailer.

Officers brought Marie to The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, where she spent six months trying to restore the broken pieces of her life.

As you read this, human trafficking is the fastest growing and third largest organized criminal activity in the world, just behind the drug and arms trades. Florida ranks third in the nation for calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline. The Collier County Sheriff's Office has a full-time detective specifically dedicated to human trafficking cases.

Human trafficking is a lucrative industry, representing an estimated \$9.8 billion in the U.S. and \$32 billion internationally. A trafficker can make up to \$100,000 a year per victim, according to the U.S. Justice Department. Like Marie, the average victim may be forced to have sex up to 48 times a day.

It is important to understand that human trafficking can happen to anyone, anywhere and in any situation. In the United States, 83 percent of trafficking victims are American and 50 percent are children. The

'MARIE'S' STORY IS A HEARTBREAKING AND STOMACH-TURNING EXAMPLE OF THE GRUESOME ABUSE COLLIER COUNTY WOMEN ENDURE DAILY AT THE HANDS OF MEN SEEKING TO PROFIT FROM THEIR BODIES.

SHUTTERSTOCK/UPA WATCHANAKIT

average age of a trafficking victim is 13. Victims are often unfamiliar with the culture or do not speak the language of the community they have been trafficked into. Few come forward for fear of retaliation, shame or lack of understanding of what is happening to them.

Although the crisis of human trafficking has more recently made headlines, the problem has thrived in the shadows for many years. For too long, victims of human trafficking have been treated as criminals, facing jail time rather than receiving emergency shelter and the support they deserve. Much like the domestic violence movement of the early 1980s, today's push to raise awareness of human trafficking will initiate the social change needed to provide victims with the services they need to heal and return to society.

In Collier County, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children is the only agency with the trained staff and facilities needed to meet the needs of human trafficking victims. In the last two years, The Shelter provided emergency shelter and support for 38 victims of human trafficking. To better serve the unique needs of this group of survivors, The Shelter

recently launched plans to build the Shelly Stayer Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking & Domestic Violence.

Stayer, who has been involved with The Shelter for more than eight years, provided a \$3 million lead gift to establish this new shelter to be constructed on five acres of property in Immokalee, Fla. Designed by Naples architect David Corban, the \$5.7 million facility will feature three main areas: a section to accommodate the long-term therapeutic needs of victims of human trafficking; a section to shelter victims of domestic abuse; and a section dedicated to Immokalee outreach.

It is important that Collier County residents learn to recognize the signs of human trafficking and do their part to report and combat this horrific crime. Had it not been for the actions of a concerned resident, Marie might still be victimized by her traffickers or, worse yet, she might be dead. ❁

Kaydee Tuff has more than 30 years' experience in writing, editing and public relations for profit and nonprofit agencies. She currently services as communications manager for The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples, FL.



Be aware of and report any activity that looks suspicious to you. In addition to a high volume of traffic at a residence, individual signs of human trafficking in a victim may include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Physical, emotional, or psychological abuse ❖ Fear, depression, or signs of post-traumatic stress disorder ❖ Malnourishment or exhaustion ❖ Threats to self or family ❖ Inability to move or leave job | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Debt owed to employer ❖ Signs of being controlled (someone speaking for them; escorting them to/from work) ❖ Gaps in story ❖ Tattoos/branding |
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If you know of or suspect someone is a victim of human trafficking or domestic violence, call The Shelter's 24-hour crisis hotline at 239-775-1101.

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