

# Immokalee event offers information on human trafficking

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NAPLES, Fla. - Roberto Perez watched proudly Saturday as his two daughters enjoyed getting their faces painted at Immokalee Community Park.

The Perez family was joined by several hundred Immokalee residents for a fun-filled event with food, music, and games for kids, but with a serious message about the prevalence of human trafficking.

The Collier County sheriff's office held its fifth annual "A Day Without Slavery" in the Immokalee park Saturday to build awareness of the growing problem and to inform residents the agency is there to help them. The event each year brings between 300 to 500 people to the park.

Perez, 40, who speaks little English, likely didn't understand the theme of the event. He was just happy his daughters, Nori, 4, and Jeraldin, 2, were having fun.

"I like this, everything about it," he said.

Ave Maria School of Law, which operates a human trafficking law clinic to represent victims, had an information table to talk with people about sex and labor trafficking, said Elizabeth Donovan, a professor and director of the clinic. Ave Maria law students help her represent victims.

"The problem is on the rise and phenomenally on the rise in Florida and the United States, and people don't know," she said. "The big rise is domestic minor sex trafficking (with) U.S. citizens, girls and boys, not just foreign nationals."

The cases are hard because victims don't come forward and it takes time to build trust, plus it takes time to convince victims that the sheriff's office is more concerned about helping them and less concerned about their immigration status, she said.

Building trust is one reason why Cpl. Shawn Micciche and Sgt. David Russell, who both work in the Collier County Jail, were on hand with a pepper ball gun, which is similar to a paint gun, and protective gear like a bullet proof vest, helmet and shield. They spoke with kids and let them try on the gear.

"It's just so they know we are not the bad guys," Russell said.

Miami-based attorney Jorge De La Mar purchased 40 pizzas and soft drinks to help spread the word that he opened an office in Immokalee in January and represents human trafficking victims. He's attended the event in prior years.

"I think it's awesome," he said. "But it breaks my heart. I didn't know there was so much need."

Last September, the sheriff's office established a human trafficking unit with a full-time detective and full-time victim advocate, said Sgt. Wade Williams, who heads up the unit.

The problem of trafficking isn't any worse in Immokalee than elsewhere in the county, but there is an issue of labor trafficking due to some in the area who are not in the country legally, he said.

"Human trafficking is modern-day slavery. It is not the same thing as human smuggling," he said, adding that it does not require the transportation of a person anywhere. "It's sex trafficking, or forced prostitution, or labor trafficking."

The sheriff's office has had more than 20 sex trafficking cases this year, with a handful of arrests, and there have not been any labor trafficking cases.

"But that doesn't mean it isn't there," he said.

The victims are vulnerable because of bad home environments or they are runaways, which make them susceptible. The traffickers exploit them and use coercion, like taking sexual pictures of them and threatening to publish the photos, or getting them hooked on drugs and withholding drugs, Williams said.

"The message is people need to be aware this is an issue," he said. "Exploitation is often hidden in plain sight."

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