

NAPLES FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF DECEMBER 7-13, 2017

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BY THE NUMBERS:

20.9 Millions of victims of human trafficking globally

3rd Florida's state rank for trafficking.

888-373-7888 Number to call if you suspect trafficking, or 911 if you see someone in immediate danger.

INSIDE:

>> Stories from victims; steps being taken to combat the crime. **A9** ▶

Stopping HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Criminals are targeting and recruiting vulnerable kids across SWFL

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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K ATARIINA ROSENBLATT was recruited by a ring of human traffickers in South Florida to be sold for sex when she was 13.

Like many victims of this crime, Ms. Rosenblatt recalled being a vulnerable youth with low self-esteem stemming from a troubled home life with an abusive father. Her experiences being sexually trafficked also left her with long-term emotional scars that becoming an author and advocate have helped her overcome.

SEE TRAFFICKING, A8 ▶

"Human traffickers select their victims purposely ... They don't just pick anybody."

— Michael Dolce, attorney who represents victims of sexual violence



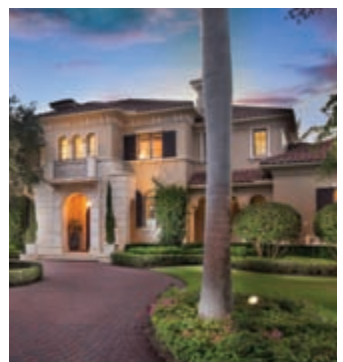
Seraphic Fire

Church makes heavenly venue for otherworldly music. **C1** ▶



62nd Farm City BBQ

Filling up at lunch on the day before Thanksgiving. **A31** ▶



House Hunting

Five bedrooms and more in Estuary at Grey Oaks for \$4.995 million. **B1** ▶



In the funnies

"Beetle Bailey" creator gives nod to local man's dedication to Toys for Tots. **A13** ▶

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Step back in time for the holidays at Palm Cottage

BY LINDSEY NESMITH
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'Twas pre-season in Naples and all through the town, residents were scurrying up Gulfshore and down. New Year's, they say, is when snowbirds appear, but full-timers know it's with Santa and his reindeer.

Location-specific rhymes aside, what better way to spend a Neapolitan Christmas season than immersed in the area's yuletide history with Naples Historical Society? While the organization's

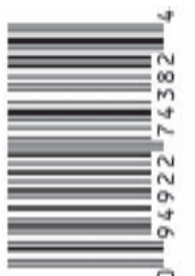
holiday light display at Palm Cottage is has been a Christmas staple for years, administrators decided to add a little more sparkle to this year's events with "Ten Days of Christmas." Programs Tuesday through Saturday, Dec. 12-23, will showcase Victorian and mid-century American and Southwest Floridian Christmas traditions and displays.

"Palm Cottage serves as the portal from which we can talk about Naples history and welcome the public to come in and enjoy the holiday season in

SEE PALM COTTAGE, A19 ▶

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HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Criminals are targeting and recruiting vulnerable kids across SWFL
/ December 07, 2017

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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KATARIINA ROSENBLATT was recruited by a ring of human traffickers in South Florida to be sold for sex when she was 13.

Like many victims of this crime, Ms. Rosenblatt recalled being a vulnerable youth with low self-esteem stemming from a troubled home life with an abusive father. Her experiences being sexually trafficked also left her with long-term emotional scars that becoming an author and advocate have helped her overcome.

“There continues to be a strong presence of domestic sex trafficking and it is facilitated primarily over the internet on various advertising pages, but also through social media,” said Sgt. Wade Williams, head of the human trafficking unit with the Collier Sheriff’s Office.

A form of modern-day slavery, human trafficking is legally defined as a person who is exploited for sex or labor by force, fraud, or coercion — or as a minor under age 18. Ms. Rosenblatt wrote a memoir called “Stolen” about her experiences primarily in the 1980s, before human trafficking was identified as a crime.

Now, awareness is growing through recent busts of trafficking rings and a growing number of outreach campaigns including presentations in local schools, services for victims, business initiatives, and media such as the documentary “I Am Jane Doe” (2017) detailing how the website Backpage.com became a marketplace in which traffickers sell youth for sex.

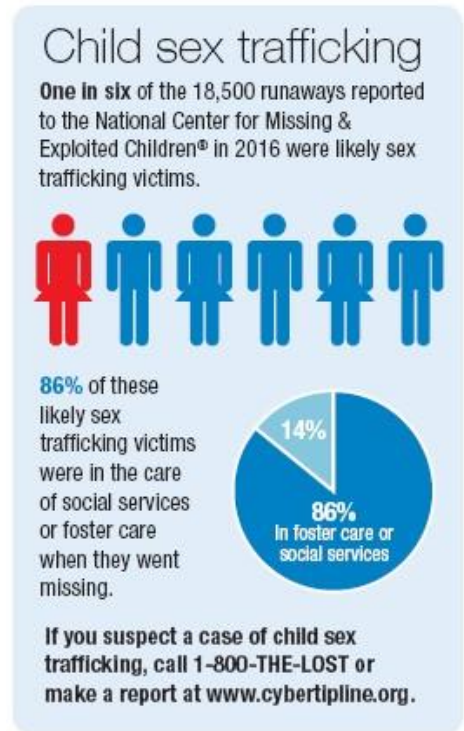
Through their efforts, advocates across the region say they have been alarmed by the extent of traffickers’ reach into the lives of vulnerable youth across South Florida, which is greater than they previously realized.

“Human trafficking is a pervasive problem in Charlotte County but it’s largely hidden in plain sight,” said Englewood resident Jamie Walton, who runs The Wayne Foundation (waynefdn.org). Started in 2010, it operates a Drop-In Center for victims of trafficking in Southwest Florida referred by the Charlotte County Sheriff’s Office, Guardian ad Litem and other organizations, providing them with necessities and help such as food, clothing, counseling, and government benefits. There is also a podcast posted on the website in which Ms. Walton discusses her own experience as a sex trafficking victim in the late 1990s.

When Ms. Rosenblatt, now an Orlando resident, went to middle and high schools to share her knowledge, dozens of kids began to tell her about their own experiences.

“What I didn’t expect was the amount of kids who would come forward after and tell me they were either former victims of trafficking or being recruited,” she said.

She decided to conduct her own informal survey of kids at about 20 schools in Miami-Dade and Broward counties in 2012 and 2013, Ms. Rosenblatt said.



“I found after talking to about 300 kids, one in three middle schoolers and one in nine high schoolers were actively being recruited by traffickers either through social media like false modeling, false friends,” she said, as well as in person, though other kids or adults.

Those numbers have not been confirmed with law enforcement or the school systems there, but kids continue to contact her with their own stories, she said.

Shelter managers, clinical therapists, law enforcement, and other advocates both nationally and across South Florida in Lee, Charlotte, Collier and Palm Beach counties say that growing awareness is revealing that human trafficking is common in communities throughout the state.

Reports of human trafficking cases to The National Human Trafficking Hotline, through the Polaris Project, have also continued to increase over the last five years. They indicate that Florida is a hub for trafficking second only to Texas and California, though victims are often moved between cities and states by traffickers.

Florida-based calls to the Hotline more than doubled between 2012 and 2016, from 237 to 556 calls to report human trafficking. Based on calls nationwide, sex trafficking is the most common type followed by labor. It is occurring most often in hotels and motels, followed by illicit massage or spa businesses, and in private residences.

They have also been trafficked more often in recent years in online ads on websites such as Craigslist and Backpage. The Collier County Sheriff’s Office reported that in October 2016 it Traffickers who target potential victims are often part of organized rings that include “Romeos,” or people who try to seduce vulnerable young people — for instance, those who have troubled family backgrounds, weak ties to the community, drug addictions, appear to have low self-esteem, or crave a father figure or friendship — into being sold for sex.

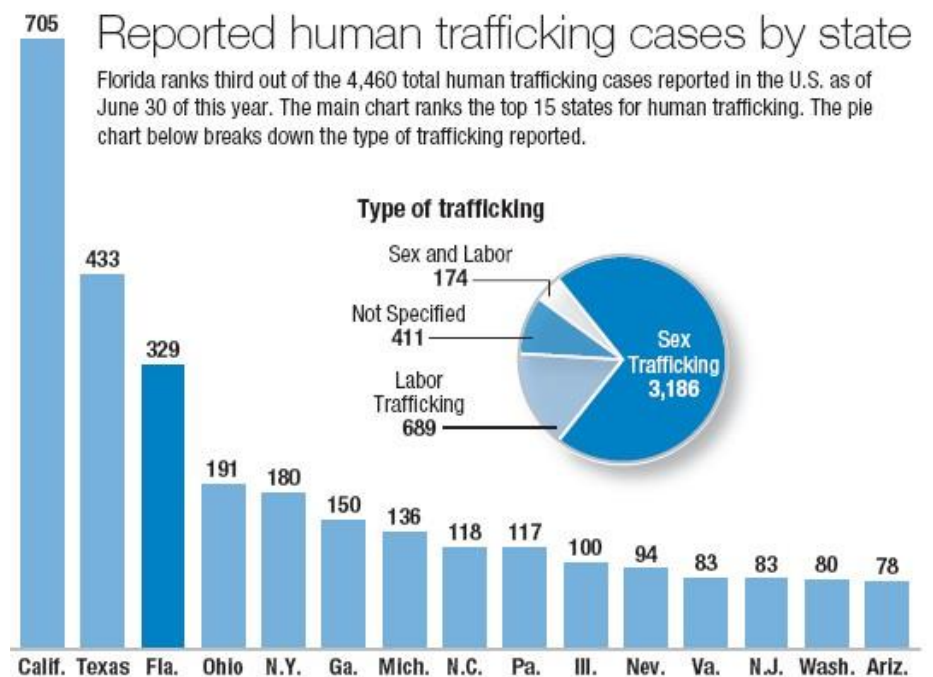
“These girls are coming of age, they’re just discovering their sexuality, they want the attention of boys, maybe,” said Linda Oberhaus, CEO of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Naples. “They want to be treated as adults. Maybe they don’t feel understood by their parents.”

Some of those factors played a part in drawing Ms. Rosenblatt into a trafficking ring as a teenager.

“They (traffickers) would tell me like, ‘you’re never going to see your family again, nobody loves you, nobody cares about you,’” she said. “‘We’re your family now.’”

Those tactics by traffickers are common. While traffickers are often strangers, they have also been relatives, friends or boyfriends in some cases. Victims have been recruited at public places such as malls and restaurants, by “Romeos” who appear to have a genuine romantic interest, advocates such as Ms. Oberhaus say, as well as through text messages and social media sites. For Ms. Rosenblatt, the first person to recruit her was a pretty young woman at a motel — someone she recalls wanting to “be just like” — where she was living with her family in Miami as a 13-year-old.

“The human traffickers select their victims purposely,” said Michael Dolce, an attorney in Palm Beach Gardens who represents victims of sexual violence. “They don’t just pick anybody.”



Runaway children who have been in the care of social services or foster care are especially vulnerable and make up a disproportionate number of victims of trafficking, Mr. Dolce said. He argues that when they go missing, there is often little effort to find them when compared to children from traditional families.

“Children disappear from foster care all the time and we never hear about it,” he said. “... I just don’t see the type of aggressive response from case workers and law enforcement when other children go missing.”

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children says one out of six of the 18,500 runaways reported in the U.S. in 2016 were likely sex trafficking victims; and of those, 86 percent were in the care of social services or foster care when they went missing.

“I’ve got absolutely no reason to believe that Palm Beach (County) is any different because the problem is systemic, nationwide,” Mr. Dolce said.

One young woman he represented, who was sexually abused in a foster group, ended up “in the clutches of a pimp” within only a few days after she left the home at age 18. She told him what she had learned in the group home: “I have a gold mine between my legs.”

Mr. Dolce said that although law enforcement has targeted trafficking rings, the number of missing children in the foster care system in the U.S. and Florida is creating a supply of victims that law enforcement and social services agencies have not focused on.

“We also have to consider where the supply of victims is coming from,” he said.

When sex trafficking victims do finally seek help, it is not uncommon for them to have been in a captive situation in which they have been sold for sex 20 to 30 times per day or more to Johns, social workers at the ACT Shelter in Fort Myers said. Many also have been convinced by their traffickers that they are guilty of prostitution or other crimes, advocates say. They require immediate and long-term physical and emotional care and have other needs such as jobs, transportation, and housing. There’s a good chance they didn’t finish high school and they often have bad credit.

They also suffer from mental health issues including depression, sleeping and eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress syndrome, said Liana Calderin, a licensed mental health counselor and clinical director of the ACT Shelter in Fort Myers.

“They panic a lot,” she said. “They are chronically depressed by the time we get to them and they have sleep issues... If they have kids they’ll probably be the most overprotective parents ever.”

The Naples Shelter reports that it has taken in 48 victims of human trafficking between 2006 and 2017.

“They arrive here traumatized and they arrive here, most of them but not all, with substance abuse problems,” said Lise Descôteaux, the Shelter’s residential manager of the Naples Shelter. “And not everybody wants to work the program right away. The first thing we must do is establish trust.”