



'Women Leading the Way' march in Naples joins national rally

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Slavery in the shadows

Forced labor, sexual servitude creep even into SW Florida

Alexi C. Cardona
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

They met at a club through mutual friends, so Sara thought she was safe with him.

He romanced her, quickly and smoothly. He'd surprise her at her job to say hello and learned her class schedule. His attention was absolute.

"He was literally a dream come true of a boyfriend, for any girl," she said.

She thought he was perfect; for the first month, he was. When he started withholding affection, she'd do anything to get it back.

She wouldn't understand the manipulation games he was playing until much later.

The day everything changed, her boyfriend persuaded her to audition for a modeling gig to make some extra money. He happened to know the guy who was looking for models.

She was going to college in Southwest Florida and had a part-time job at a mall, but he wanted her to do the modeling gig, so she did.

Her boyfriend drove her to a hotel and gave her specific instructions for where to go. He said he'd wait for her in the parking lot.

"That should have been a red flag, but I didn't see it as a red flag," she said.

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ILLUSTRATION BY YEWON KONG/USA TODAY NETWORK



DeSantis tells Senate he's withdrawing 46 of Scott's last-minute appointments

Ana Ceballos
Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

TALLAHASSEE – Gov. Ron DeSantis followed through on his promise Friday to withdraw 46 last-minute appointments made by Rick Scott

before he left office to become a U.S. senator.

Scott made a flurry of almost 100 appointments during his final days in office. The unusual move frustrated the incoming DeSantis administration, and the new governor said he likely

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DeSantis



Scott

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Forced servitude

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That night was the first night Sara was sexually assaulted. What followed was about six months of drug-hazed sexual servitude. The man she thought was her boyfriend became her trafficker.

Sara was trafficked for sex from the Naples area to Miami, Tampa and Orlando in 2012. She was 21 at the time. She shared her story with the Daily News for Human Trafficking Awareness Month (January).

To protect her identity, her real name and certain details of her life are not being printed. Her story was confirmed by Linda Oberhaus, CEO of the Shelter for Abused Women & Children, where Sara received help.

Human trafficking, a form of modern-day slavery, involves the use of force, coercion or fraud to exploit people for sex or labor. According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, millions of women, men and children are trafficked annually around the world, including in the United States. Human trafficking is considered among the most lucrative criminal enterprises, second only to drug trafficking.

Almost 100 cases over 4 years

People might think human trafficking is a far-away problem, but it can happen in any community.

The first documented case of human trafficking in Collier was in 1999. A man escaped from a trailer in Immokalee where people were being held and forced into labor, according to Sheriff's Office Detective Sgt. Wade Williams.

The man ran to a nearby home and called 911. He told investigators the trailer was padlocked at night and that the workers were released during the day to pick tomatoes.

The investigation was turned over to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Abel Cuello, the labor contractor accused in the case, ultimately was sentenced to federal prison.

The Collier County Sheriff's Office conducted 98 investigations into allegations of human trafficking between 2014 and 2017.

All of the figures for 2018 are not yet available. Of those, 93 cases were investigated as sex trafficking, and five were investigated as labor trafficking.

All of the sex trafficking victims in Collier have been women and girls. Investigators have identified male victims in labor trafficking cases.

The investigations yielded 20 arrests on human trafficking charges — 15 from one case.

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement in 2015 announced the arrests of 15 people suspected of running a human trafficking ring that operated in Collier, Lee, Hendry, Polk and Miami-Dade counties. The investigation launched in 2013 when a Collier deputy identified a sex trafficking victim during a traffic stop. Most of the victims in that case were brought from Mexico and Central America. The court cases for those suspects are still pending.

Williams said a total of 69 trafficking victims were identified during the course of those investigations from 2014 to 2017. Eighteen of the victims were juveniles.

Williams said the Sheriff's Office has seen an increase in human trafficking cases over the years but not necessarily an increase in activity. That's because in 2012, the Florida human trafficking statute was amended to strengthen the definition of coercion and make it more comprehensive.

Coercion is now defined by activities such as using or threatening to use physical force; restraining, isolating or confining someone, or threatening to do so, against their will; destroying or withholding someone's passport; lending money to establish a debt that must be worked off through labor or other services; causing or threatening to cause someone financial harm; and providing drugs to someone for the purpose of exploiting them.

The changes also clarified that using any form of coercion to force someone into commercial sexual activity was considered trafficking.

Williams said the statute changes essentially redefined what used to be considered prostitution. For example, before 2012, it wasn't considered trafficking if a pimp provided a woman with drugs to get her to engage in commercial sex.

Now law enforcement looks at many prostitution cases as potential cases of human trafficking.

"We have a better understanding now that we didn't before," Williams said. "The law has accurately redefined what we have learned over time as the true nature of what's going on."

How trafficking works abroad, in U.S.

Williams said trafficking rings that are brought to the United States from other countries, as was the case with the 2015 human trafficking bust, are generally tied to organized crime. The operations are more complex and operate as brothels.

Exploitation lies in manipulating a person's vulnerabilities. Foreign traffickers are able to manipulate victims by instilling fear about their immigration status or making them dependent by

Indications someone might be a victim of human trafficking

- Not allowed to speak for themselves.
- Not free to come or go at will.
- Shows signs of being denied food, water, sleep, or medical care.
- Works excessively long and/or unusual hours.
- Is fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, nervous, or paranoid.
- Has few or no personal possessions.
- Has bruises in various stages of healing.
- Avoids eye contact.
- Owes a large debt and is unable to pay it off.

Source: Florida Department of Health in Collier and the Polaris Project.

bringing them to a country where they don't understand the language and customs, according to Williams.

Trafficking operations in the U.S. can be less complex. The vulnerabilities are different, too. Traffickers target and manipulate people who have experienced sexual and physical abuse, according to Williams. They also exploit the vulnerabilities of people who are addicted to drugs, have run away from home or suffer from mental illness.

In Williams' experience, many of the victims who have been rescued from traffickers in Collier have experienced sexual and physical abuse, sometimes from a young age. Williams said traffickers sometimes try to create a false perception of family among people they target.

He said traffickers will sometimes sweet talk targets and make them believe they're in a relationship in the beginning stages. They'll psychologically manipulate victims and threaten them with violence to keep them in line.

"They'll give the girls the boyfriend experience, give them love and attention and affection," Williams said. "All the things they want that the pimp can exploit. The pimps will say, 'I'll take care of you, I'll love you.'"

The girls just have to do one thing for them, and they'll always be taken care of.

"They'll get their drugs, they'll get their protection," Williams said. "They don't have to worry about anything."

Human trafficking can sometimes go hand-in-hand with drug trafficking. Traffickers will ply victims with drugs to addict them and keep them compliant. They will sometimes buy in large quantities.

"They use multiple levels of coercion to keep control," Williams said.

Local human trafficking cases

One prominent case in Collier County involved two men, Gregory Hines and Keith Lewis, who were arrested in 2016 on suspicion of trafficking at least four women.

The Sheriff's Office started investigating Hines in July 2015 after receiving information that he may have been involved in selling women for sex. They later identified Lewis as a possible accomplice, according to court records.

The women were advertised on Backpage, a classified ads website that was known to be used by traffickers to find buyers. The website is no longer working. It was seized by the federal government last year and became the subject of an investigation into whether the site willingly promoted sex trafficking, including of underage girls.

The Sheriff's Office received information during the investigation that Hines and Lewis were holding a woman who was overdosing in an East Naples hotel room and needed medical attention.

The investigation would have continued if it had not been exposed by the rescue, but by then authorities said they had enough probable cause to arrest the men.

Investigators said Lewis and Hines preyed on at least four women, giving them heroin and cocaine in exchange for sexually servicing customers. The women were addicted to drugs, according to the Sheriff's Office, and the men withheld drugs at times to keep them compliant, sending the women into severe withdrawal. Lewis and Hines kept the money the women made from servicing clients, according to the arrest report.

Both men face charges of human trafficking, racketeering, drug trafficking and deriving support from the proceeds of prostitution, court records show.

Lewis is scheduled to take a plea Feb. 28. Hines' trial is set for Feb. 11.

Help for survivors

Williams said one of the biggest challenges of investigating human trafficking cases is working with victims. Sometimes they're uncooperative, sometimes they're terrified. Sometimes they've been so beaten down, physically and mentally, they don't know how to function on their own and accept help without strings attached.

Sometimes, to be rehabilitated, they need everything from intense psychological therapies to drug treatment to job training.

"Sometimes it's like rebuilding a human being from the ground up," Williams said. "Only it's worse than that, because you're trying to give a clean slate to someone who was wired in such a terrible way."

The Sheriff's Office partners with various local agencies to provide services for victims — Catholic Charities, the Florida Department of Health in Collier, the Children's Advocacy Center and the Shelter for Abused Women & Children.

The shelter is the county's dedicated service provider for human trafficking victims. Staff members provide emergency shelter, emotional support, safety planning, individual and group counseling, legal support and housing assistance.

The shelter has housed or provided services to 55 victims over the years, according to Oberhaus, the shelter CEO. It provided emergency shelter to 16 trafficking victims in 2015 and to 19 victims between 2016 and 2018.

Most victims are referred to the shelter by law enforcement when detectives arrest traffickers. Victims sometimes aren't aware of the shelter or don't feel they're in a safe enough place to call and ask for help.

"And sometimes they don't identify themselves as victims at all," Oberhaus said.

Victims have sometimes returned to traffickers, Oberhaus said, because the "trauma bond" between traffickers and those they target is strong.

"Traffickers are master manipulators," she said.

She sometimes hears from people in the community that the shelter seems like a sad place to be, she said.

"But really everyone who's here today, they're safe," Oberhaus said. "We're all about transformation and getting past the point of trauma. I can only imagine how many people are outside our gates who are victims of human trafficking and can't access us."

Sara, the woman who was trafficked in 2012, didn't know what happened to her was considered trafficking until she met Oberhaus at a local networking event. Sara shared her story with Oberhaus, and they went to the Sheriff's Office together to report Sara's trafficker.

According to Williams, the man had been under investigation for years. Authorities identified a few possible victims, but some were uncooperative and some said they were too scared of his violence to talk about him. Detectives were in the process of working with the trafficker's victims when he died last spring, Williams said.

"I no longer have to look in the shadows and check my back," Sara said.

She said she knows she's a survivor, but sometimes she doesn't feel that way. She still feels shame and embarrassment over what happened. She was raised by conservative, Catholic parents, she said, and was very innocent. She said she thinks her trafficker took advantage of that. He told her they would travel and be a team and live a good life, luring her with the promise of adventure and independence.

The day Sara got away and never looked back, she finished serving a year-long sentence at the Collier jail on charges related to credit card fraud. She took the fall for her trafficker when she was arrested.

She went back home to her parents after being released and tried to go back to a normal life.

"I just wanted to move on with my life," Sara said.

Sara is now married and told her husband about being trafficked. She said he's been supportive and understanding of her.

One day she hopes to identify herself as a trafficking victim, write a book and do public speaking to help others who have been trafficked.

"One day I won't want to be anonymous anymore," Sara said. "I'd want my story to help, even if it's just one person. I just have to overcome my own obstacles of shame and embarrassment."

She said she knows what she could possibly face if she writes a book or speaks publicly about what happened to her. People can be cruel, she said, but it's all about who you want to be and how much you want that for yourself.

"Who cares what they say and think?" she said. "What matters is you and only you."

She said she wants anyone who has been in her situation to know that recovery is possible.

"You don't have to be broken," she said. "It's not the same recovery road for everyone. Not everyone will feel how I feel. Not everyone will surpass trauma the same way. It's about how bad you want out."

If you are or know a victim of human trafficking, call the national Polaris Project hotline at 1-888-373-7888 or the Shelter for Abused Women & Children at 239-775-1101. For the National Domestic Violence Hotline, call 1-800-799-7233. For the Florida Domestic Violence Hotline, call 1-800-500-1119.