

GUEST COMMENTARY

Human trafficking safety tips

BY LINDA OBERHAUS

CEO, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

At 15, Theresa Flores was an All-American girl in an upper-middle class family, when she accepted a ride home from a popular boy at school. Instead of taking her home, he took her to his house and invited her inside for a soda. The soda contained a rape drug and that is exactly what the boy did to her. The next day, he blackmailed her with photos of the encounter, stating she would have to “work” the pictures off or they would be posted publicly. Terrified that her family, school and church communities would see the photos, Theresa did whatever she was told to do.

What followed was two years of heinous sexual exploitation. At least three times a week, she was taken to basements and hotel rooms where she was forced to have sex with hundreds of boys and men, all the while keeping the secret from her family. To ensure she wouldn't tell, her traffickers killed her dog and threatened to harm her little brothers. It wasn't until her father was transferred to a job in another city that she was free of her traffickers and began the long silent journey toward healing.

Human trafficking can and does happen to anyone. During January's Human Trafficking Awareness Month, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children urges all parents to talk with your children about human trafficking the same way you would talk to them about drugs and sex. Otherwise, they may not see it and, like Theresa, fall victim to it. Because these talks can be challenging, many parents avoid them. Talking to your children about body safe-

ty, boundaries, healthy relationships and human trafficking will help them protect themselves and others.

The following are personal safety tips you can use with your children:

- Create an open channel of communication that continues as your children grow. Let them know that they can talk to you about anything. Teach them to not keep secrets from you.

- Teach your children about the human body, consent and respect. Help them understand that sexual abuse is never a child's fault.

- Teach your children to trust their instincts. If something feels wrong or seems too good to be true, it probably is. Make a secret signal (code word, code text message, hand signal, etc.) they can use to tell you they're in danger.

- Explain that most victims of trafficking are not kidnapped by strangers, but exploited while they live at home and maintain contact with family and friends. Traffickers are skilled at tricking and controlling victims through lies and forcing persons to perform sex acts against their will.

- Sex traffickers target teenagers from all backgrounds and neighborhoods. Other teenagers can also bring their peers into the sex industry. Make sure you know your teen's friends, boyfriends and girlfriends. Know your child's internet, texting and phone history.

For more information, go to www.naplesshelter.org/trafficking. If you, or someone you know, is impacted by human trafficking or domestic violence, call the 24-hour helpline 239-775-1101 in Collier County or 239-939-3112 in Lee County. ■

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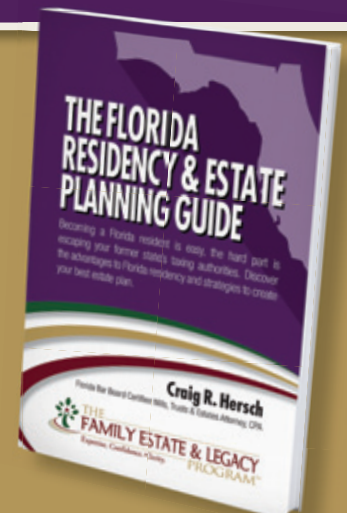
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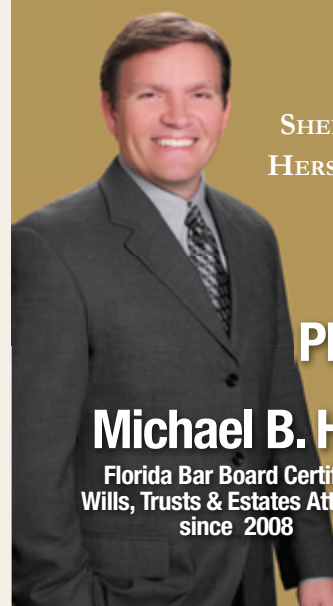
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