

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children support human trafficking victims

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Human trafficking. It's a term we hear quite often these days referring to the use of force or fraud to draw a person into slave labor or sexual exploitation. Typically, half of the victims of this form of modern day slavery are under the age of 18, and the average age is 13.

Unfortunately, human trafficking isn't a new problem. And sadly, the crime is being committed and victims are being harmed globally, including right here in Collier County.

The Shelter for Abused Women & Children of Collier County is on the forefront of the effort to deal with the local human trafficking problem with the work being done at its new Shelly Stayer Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking & Domestic Violence in Immokalee.

"Human trafficking can happen to anyone, anywhere and in any situation," says Linda Oberhaus, the Shelter's CEO. "Few victims come forward for fear of retaliation, shame, or lack of understanding of what is happening to them, and for way too long, victims have been treated like criminals instead of being given the help and support they need. It is important for all of us to learn to recognize the signs of human trafficking and do our part

to report and combat this horrific crime."

What are the signs? Here's a direct link to a list of signs and indicators located on the shelter's website: www.naplesshelter.org/signs-of-ht/.

Should you suspect human trafficking based on the signs, the Special Crimes Bureau - Exploitation Section of the Criminal Investigations Division of the Collier County Sheriff's Office thoroughly investigates all human trafficking related complaints. Since 2014, there have been 139 local human trafficking investigations and Det. Sgt. Wade Williams is responsible for such investigations. To report alleged human trafficking activity, call the CCSO dispatch center at 239-252-9300.

"Much like the domestic violence movement of the 1980's, today's push to raise awareness of human trafficking will hopefully bring about the social change needed to provide victims with the services they need to heal and return to society as free and productive citizens," says Ms. Oberhaus.

Ashley and Ellie are two such victims. Their specific names are not being used in this column to protect their identities and safety.

Ellie, age 16 at the time, thought she'd won the lottery when she answered an ad on Craigslist and received a one-way plane ticket to Florida, along with promises of her dream job in modeling. Instead,



COURTESY THE SHELTER FOR ABUSED WOMEN & CHILDREN OF COLLIER COUNTY

Alina Donahue, a human trafficking specialist with The Shelter for Abused Women & Children of Collier County's new Shelly Stayer Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking & Domestic Violence in Immokalee, meets with "Ashley," a human trafficking victim currently being helped by the shelter.

she was forced into a living nightmare of sex trafficking and violence until, three years later, sheriff's deputies brought her to the Shelter. It was there that she found clothing, counseling and safety. She was also reunited with her mom.

Then there's Ashley, who has a long history of sexual trafficking and severe trauma. Coming to the Shelter she knew she was being given a fresh start, but she'd been let down by fresh starts before.

"My life has been full of broken dreams and squashed potential," said Ashley. "I just couldn't find a way out until now. I no longer feel like I have to do things I don't

want to do to survive."

Ashley has stopped a habit of pacing, she's sleeping through the night, doing yoga, eating healthy, taking part in art therapy and meeting with her case manager while learning how to enjoy each day in a productive way.

"With the help of everyone here at the Shelter, I believe I can be a better version of me. I'm just so grateful and blessed to be given the chance to fix myself," Ashley says.

The Shelter has served 60 victims of human trafficking since 2012, and they're standing by to serve others who may come their way.

"Bringing much needed hope, safety and peace to Ashley, Ellie and other victims of human trafficking is why we are here," says Alina Donahue, the Shelter's human trafficking specialist. "We are fortunate to be part of such an involved community that supports our daily efforts in this fight."

To learn more about the work of The Shelter for Abused Women & Children, or to find out how you may donate or volunteer, visit www.naplesshelter.org. ■

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