

Education is protection from human trafficking

BY LINDA OBERHAUS

CEO / The Shelter for Abused Women & Children

Sara was a smart, middle class college student with a bright future when Paul, her boyfriend of two months, suggested she tryout for a swimsuit photo shoot, telling her she had plenty of potential and the money was good.



OBERHAUS

He dropped her off at a hotel to meet with the photographer, but instead of a swimsuit shoot, the photographer ordered Sara to remove her clothing. When she refused, he said she could not leave until she did everything she was told. After taking compromising photos, the photographer raped her. When Paul returned, Sara tearfully told him what had happened. Instead of consoling her, he slapped her, called her a whore, and said the photos would be posted online and sent to her family if she didn't do whatever she was told. Even as he sold her for sex, it was difficult for Sara to comprehend that Paul had never been a boyfriend, but a sex trafficker — one who had meticulously groomed her for financial profit.

This story happened here in Naples, and it happens every day throughout Florida, the United States, and the world. Like Sara, anyone can be targeted. A trafficker chooses most victims based on vulnerabilities, such as loneliness, homelessness, substance abuse, or mental health issues. Once caught in their trafficker's web, victims are exploited through a myriad of

bodily threats, intimidation and coercion.

Today, Florida ranks third in the nation for calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, preceded by Texas and California. Over 70 percent of Florida's calls to the hotline pertain to sex trafficking, mainly in the Miami/Fort Lauderdale, Naples/Fort Myers, Tampa, and Orlando areas. Although the venue of most reports was not specified, the top three were illicit spas and massage parlors, motels/hotels, and private residences. In 2020, strip clubs and street-based solicitation fell to the bottom of the list, as the pandemic shifted trafficking from the streets to online venues, strengthening it by making it more difficult to detect.

During January's National Human Trafficking Awareness Month, The Shelter for Abused Women & Children urges all residents to educate themselves, and their children, on the signs of this horrific crime, and ways to protect themselves. We know that public awareness is working, as calls to the Trafficking Hotline have increased 35% since 2016.

The Shelter is proud to be Collier County's official service provider for human trafficking victims, offering long-term therapeutic care at our Shelly Stayer Shelter in Immokalee as well as prevention education in Collier County schools. To educate yourself on human trafficking or schedule an awareness presentation, call 239-775-3862 or go to www.naplesshelter.org/trafficking

If domestic violence or human trafficking has impacted you or someone you know, call The Shelter's Crisis Hotline at 239-775-1101 or visit www.naplesshelter.org



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