

# FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF DECEMBER 6-12, 2017

www.FloridaWeekly.com

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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  
ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

**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

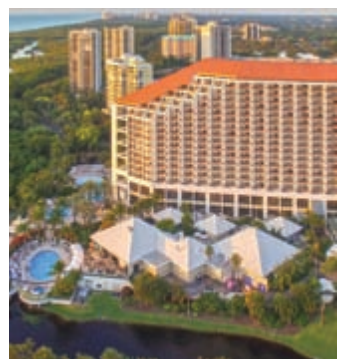
**INSIDE**



**On Seraphic Fire**  
Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church is a heavenly venue for music that's out of this world. **C1 ▶**



**Networking**  
Santa arrives at the Bell Tower Shops. **A30 ▶**



**A Grande reopening**  
Naples Grande set to reopen following Irma damage. **A26 ▶**



**Stephanie Davis**  
Lessons learned during a quick trip to Key West to recharge. **C2 ▶**

## Going to the movies is still a holiday tradition

BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
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The weeks between Thanksgiving and Jan. 2 are a strange twilight period that, you could argue, resembles a movie. The public suspends disbelief for a month-long holiday haze filled with alternately hectic schedules and lazy in-between times with family and friends mixed with deep-seeded childhood nostalgia and traditions that give everything a heightened sense of meaning, expecta-

tion and emotion. Maybe this is part of the reason for the many coming-of-age stories, including excellent movies such as 1980's "Ordinary People" and this year's "Lady Bird," that are set during this period. It has built-in drama, an easy to follow time-frame, and also capitalizes on the still extremely lucrative holiday film-going crowd.

The era of the big-screen, 90-minute to three-hour feature film now seems to be in



COURTESY PHOTO

Plenty are enjoying movies at Regal Belltower Stadium 20 this holiday season.

SEE MOVIES, A14 ▶

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# TRAFFICKING

From page 1

“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.



ROSENBLATT

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 closed a case related to Backpage. Gary “Nutt” Cherelus was convicted of sex trafficking women on Backpage and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The age of sex trafficking victims reported by Southwest Florida shelters ranges from early teens to middle-aged adults. Law enforcement agencies and advocates in South Florida say that victims of sex trafficking are increasingly local girls and women, as well as boys and men, who grew up in the United States rather than international victims who came here or were brought to the



FROM THE MOVIE “I AM JANE DOE”

Children trapped in sex trafficking was the subject of the dramatic documentary “I am Jane Doe.”

in the know



## Start-ups and initiatives to help trafficking victims

>> **Catch the Wave of Hope** (catchthewaveofhope.org) formed in 2015 as a group of civic leaders in Martin and Palm Beach counties to network with churches, businesses and other local groups to “abolish human trafficking” through education, promoting legislation, and programs that help victims heal. One of the organization’s members, artist and teacher Lynne Barletta, created a curriculum called The Power of Art to help sex trafficked survivors overcome mental illness such as post-traumatic stress syndrome.

>> **In 2015, Uber began to educate drivers with basic information on how to identify the possible signs of human trafficking and report it.** A spokesperson said the company had reached more than 500,000 drivers in over 70 cities in North America, notifying them about the problem, including in Florida. “Victims can include adults, girls, boys and transgender youth,” an in-app message for Uber drivers says.

>> **Traffickcam.com** is a website and phone app that formed in 2015 by Exchange Initiative that asks people to upload photos of their hotel rooms to their website, then uses them to help find where sex trafficking victims are being sold for sex.

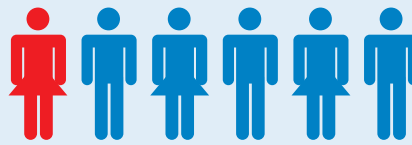
>> **Human Trafficking Awareness Partnerships** based in Lee County Florida this year released its ARTREACH book featuring 64 pages of paintings created by youth age 8 to 18 in Southwest Florida from 2010 to 2016 based on what they had learned about human trafficking.

“We want the book to get into the homes of as many families as we can so everyone can learn from the work of these young students,” said Nola Theiss, founder and director of HTAP (humantraffickingawareness.org).

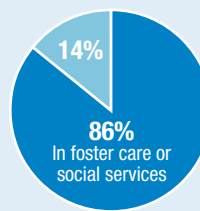
>> **Christy’s Cause** (Christyscause.com), based in Estero, began in 2015 “to eradicate child sex trafficking through education, public awareness, restoration projects and justice initiatives.” A recent press release by the nonprofit aims to highlight male victims of sex trafficking.

## Child sex trafficking

One in six of the 18,500 runaways reported to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children® in 2016 were likely sex trafficking victims.



86% of these likely sex trafficking victims were in the care of social services or foster care when they went missing.



If you suspect a case of child sex trafficking, call 1-800-THE-LOST or make a report at [www.cybertipline.org](http://www.cybertipline.org).

SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN

U.S. illegally.

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 strang-

ers, 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.

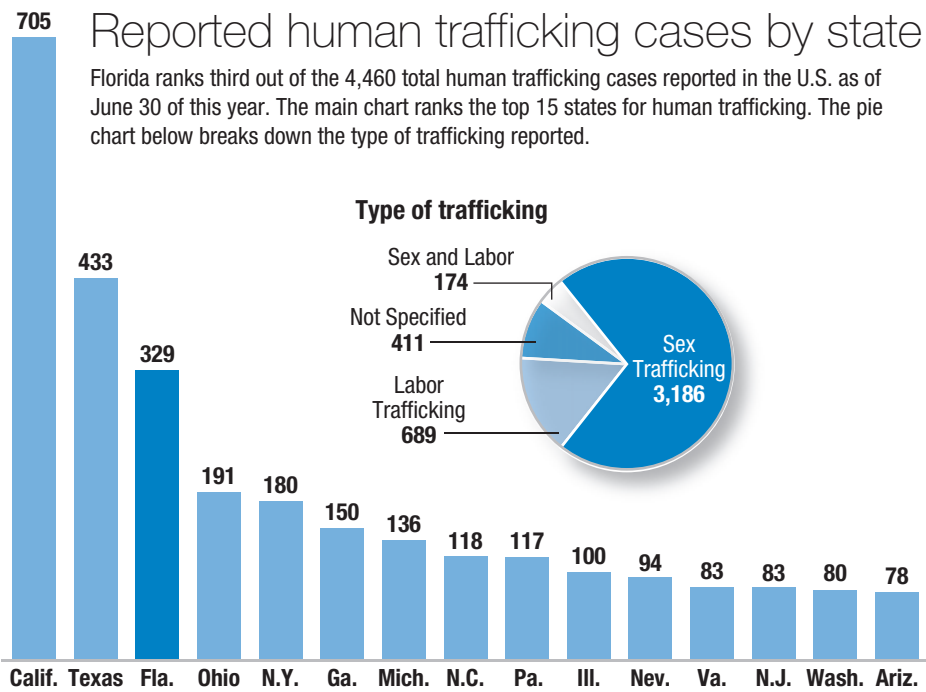
"They panic a lot," she said. "They are chronically depressed by the time we get to them and they have sleep issues... If they have kids they'll probably be the most overprotective parents ever."

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

"They arrive here traumatized and they

## Reported human trafficking cases by state

Florida ranks third out of the 4,460 total human trafficking cases reported in the U.S. as of June 30 of this year. The main chart ranks the top 15 states for human trafficking. The pie chart below breaks down the type of trafficking reported.



SOURCE: NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE

FLORIDA WEEKLY GRAPHICS

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."

### Stories of victims

The following are stories of human trafficking victims who sought help at ACT Shelter in Fort Myers, as told to Florida Weekly by staff who worked with them directly. Their names and other information have been changed to protect their identity.

## Mary

A YOUNG GIRL, WHOSE RELATIVE convinced her that life in Southwest Florida would be better, was forced into a life of sexual slavery as soon as she arrived. For years, she was kept captive and unaware of her surrounding by being blindfolded when she was taken to brothels. Her relative had moved to the United States first. After he found out that he could make money by trafficking her, he convinced the girl and her parents to let him pay for a coyote to smuggle her into the U.S. He rented a house in Lee County from a member of the trafficking ring he had joined.

The girl was lost and disoriented from the time she arrived, not knowing what city she was in. He told her there was no money and she had to do this. He got a percentage of the fee for which she was sold for sex. She would never be left alone at her "home." The brothels were located in houses often outside Lee County, possibly sometimes as far as Tampa or Miami. Inside, rooms were divided into separate private sections with twin beds, and Johns would pay for 15 or 30 minutes in which to have sex. A man at the house handed out condoms and kept track of the time. She was supposed to knock on the door if the man didn't wear the condom to help insure she wouldn't get sick and need hospital attention. She might be sold for sex with 20 to 30 Johns per day. Some had specific requests, including having sex with her while she was on her period.

She was allowed to call home once a month and was coerced into telling her family that everything was OK with her relative. He told her she was a criminal and reminded her that she knew no one, had no friends outside the slavery she was trapped in. She did all the cooking at home. One of the few things she enjoyed, or that she could do during her free time, was experimenting with makeup or her hair. She was told she had to look good. Her days off were sporadic and typically took place when the brothels were moved to a different house to avoid detection.

As the years went by, she began to realize her relative was fearful of her growing bitter and she tried to be sweet with him. Eventually, he became slightly more lenient, leaving her alone when he went to get groceries. She worked up the courage to run away one day even though she didn't know where she was. She had never seen her immediate surroundings beyond the walls of the house in Lee County, and didn't speak English. Someone picked her up and brought her to a nearby authorities who brought her to a safe place at ACT. When she first came to the ACT Shelter in Fort Myers, she wouldn't tell them the truth. It took her time to open up.

SEE TRAFFICKING, A10 ►



COURTESY PHOTO

Liana Calderin, a licensed mental health counselor and clinical director of the ACT Shelter in Fort Myers.

### in the know

#### Are you a victim or do you suspect human trafficking? Who to call:

"It's better to report and be wrong than not to report it and be sorry."  
— human trafficking survivor, author and victim advocate Katariina Rosenblatt

- >> If a person is at immediate risk, call 911
- >> National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888
- >> Polaris BeFree Textline: Text "BeFree" (233733)
- >> The Florida Department of Children and Families Abuse Hotline: 1-800-96-ABUSE, TTY 1-800-453-5145

#### Recognizing the signs of human trafficking

These red flags indicate further assessment may be needed to identify a victim, according to the National Human Trafficking Hotline. In addition, federal law states that any minor under age 18 engaging in commercial sex is a victim of sex trafficking, regardless of the presence of force, fraud, or coercion.

##### Common work and living conditions:

- >> Is not free to leave or come and go as he/she wishes
- >> Is in the commercial sex industry and has a pimp / manager
- >> Is unpaid, paid very little or paid only through tips
- >> Works excessively long and/or unusual hours
- >> Is not allowed breaks or suffers under unusual restrictions at work
- >> Owes a large debt and is unable to pay it off
- >> Was recruited through false promises concerning the nature and conditions of his/her work
- >> High security measures exist in the work and/or

living locations (e.g., opaque windows, boarded up windows, bars on windows, barbed wire, security cameras, etc.)

##### Poor mental health or abnormal behavior:

- >> Is fearful, anxious, depressed, submissive, tense, or nervous/paranoid
- >> Exhibits unusually fearful or anxious behavior after bringing up law enforcement
- >> Avoids eye contact

##### Poor physical health:

- >> Lacks medical care and/or is denied medical services by employer
- >> Appears malnourished or shows signs of repeated exposure to harmful chemicals
- >> Shows signs of physical and/or sexual abuse, physical restraint, confinement or torture

##### Lack of control:

- >> Has few or no personal possessions
- >> Is not in control of his/her own money, no financial records, or bank account
- >> Is not in control of his/her own identification documents (ID or passport)
- >> Is not allowed or able to speak for herself or himself (a third party may insist on being present and/or translating)

##### Other:

- >> Claims of just visiting and inability to clarify where he/she is staying/address
- >> Lack of knowledge of whereabouts and/or of what city he/she is in
- >> Loss of sense of time
- >> Has numerous inconsistencies in his/her story

Source: National Human Trafficking Hotline

#### TIPS: Trafficker recruiting techniques to watch out for

- >> **Traffickers are master manipulators.** They are experts at persuading you to do things you never thought you would do.

- >> **Traffickers will tell you** that parents, teachers and other adults don't understand or appreciate you.
- >> **If you are with friends,** traffickers know how to get you to leave your friends. Look out for your friends and talk to them about trafficking.
- >> **Women and kids your age** can be recruiters for traffickers.
- >> **You can't tell a trafficker** by his/her looks, age or clothes.
- >> **If an older guy tells you** that you are mature for your age, he probably wants something you're not old enough to give him.
- >> **The people you care about the most** will be the first to help you when you get in trouble so the trafficker will try to get you to turn against them first.
- >> **If you look needy,** a trafficker will figure out what you need and offer it to you.

Source: Human Trafficking Awareness Partnerships

#### Most common type of trafficking reported in the US (2016)

- >> Sex trafficking (5,593 reports)
- >> Labor trafficking (1,064)

#### Human trafficking cases reported in Florida and the U.S. to the National Human Trafficking Hotline

- >> **2012:** 237 FL 3,272 US
- >> **2013:** 371 FL 4,854 US
- >> **2014:** 360 FL 5,041 US
- >> **2015:** 410 FL 5,575 US
- >> **2016:** 556 FL 7,621 US
- >> **2017 (through June):** 329 FL 4,460 US

#### Top venues/industries for sex trafficking in the U.S. (2016)

- >> Hotel/motel-based (588 reports)
- >> Illicit massage/spa business (561)
- >> Online ad, venue unknown (411)
- >> Residence-based commercial sex (366)

#### What is human trafficking?

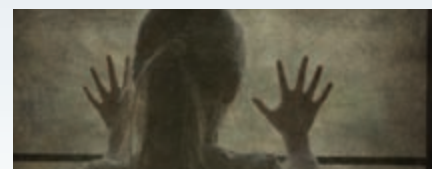
>> Human trafficking is a crime that involves exploiting a person for labor, services or commercial sex. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its subsequent reauthorizations define human trafficking as:

- a)** Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
- b)** The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery.

—SOURCE: US Department of Justice

#### By the numbers

- >> **20.9 million:** victims of human trafficking globally
- >> **\$150 billion:** what the human trafficking industry is worth world wide.





# TRAFFICKING

From page 9

At that time, her relative (who was later arrested along with other members of his trafficking ring) was desperately looking for her.

Although years have passed, she is still sometimes gripped by panic that people she knew from her days confined as a trafficking victim will find her. Recently, she hid for hours in a grocery store bathroom after hearing someone in line mention her name. She struggles with long-term physical and mental health issues that many human trafficking victims face, 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."

Many also struggle with eating disorders, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress syndrome, conditions that require ongoing therapy and medication management. Some become "cutters," wounding themselves as a way of feeling grounded and in control.

Even so, after being relocated a number of times for her safety, the woman, now in her mid-20s is getting on with her life with the help of ACT and other advocates. She has a daughter and a job at a local business to which she rides her bicycle, one of the things that helps her take close stock of her surroundings. It's a coping mechanism after her years lost in captivity.

"It's important for her to know what's around her," Ms. Calderin said.

## Lisa

A SEX TRAFFICKING VICTIM, WHO WAS treated at the ACT Shelter in Fort Myers, she initially planned to discuss her experiences with a reporter but thinking about them made her feel sick to her stomach. It had been months before she had even begun to open up to therapists, who still don't know her full story. "Whenever we mention this, I feel very bad. I don't feel comfortable mentioning those experiences," she said through a translator. She has had ongoing problems eating and sleeping after seeking help, and often feels afraid that someone is following her.

*These stories were told, compiled and written by advocates and staff at The Shelter for Abused Women & Children in Collier County. The victims' names and other identifying information has been changed.*

## Marie

OFFICERS RESCUED MARIE FROM her traffickers after a report of suspicious activity at an area trailer camp. She was found inside a dingy travel trailer, trembling, hungry and very weak.

At The Shelter, Marie shared that her traffickers had forced her to have sex with up to 40 men a day. If she did not perform as directed, she was beaten or went without food. As the trailer moved from one unknown camp to another, Marie's only view of the outside world was the tops of palm trees passing by.

Due to the trauma she had experienced, Marie had nightmares every night

and was terrified of the dark. She was haunted by the smell of the trailer and the rooms in which she had been sold. She found tremendous solace in having access to a shower and a variety of fresh-scented soaps.

Although safe in shelter, Marie feared that she would be found by her traffickers if she stayed in Florida. She dreamed of moving to a place where she would no longer see palm trees. With her advocate's help, Marie created a personalized plan to begin her life anew in a safe location out of state.

## Destiny

A 22-YEAR-OLD SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVOR named "Destiny" came to the shelter seeking safety. She was being trafficked from state to state and exchanged amongst pimps. Destiny reached a point where she couldn't stand daily beatings, verbal abuse and rape any longer.

During our first meeting Destiny disclosed to me that she tried to escape several times and even got out of the state, but each time she was found by the pimp and returned back. She was sold or exchanged many times among pimps to either pay off a debt or strike a deal.

She shared that for the longest time she thought it was a norm as she was sold by her mother for drugs several times during her childhood years. Destiny was arrested several times for unrelated crimes and it was "the most peaceful time" she had in a long time.

She came to the shelter with one backpack and small purse; her entire life was in those two things. Upon her arrival, Destiny received clothing, toiletries, food and lots of TLC. She had an opportu-

nity to learn the dynamics of domestic violence as well as sex trafficking, and enjoyed healing arts as she always wanted to try painting. She told staff that Shelter's twin-sized trundle is the most comfortable bed she had slept in in years.

While at the Shelter, Destiny and I identified obstacles, many emotional, that stood in her way to safe and positive life. Destiny did not stay with us longer than a month as she decided it would be best for her to get into long-term dual diagnosis center. She continues to stay in touch with The Shelter and shared that she's so much happier and feels as she has something great ahead of her.

## Sandy

DRIVING THROUGH THE FRONT GATES of The Shelter, Sandy, a human trafficking victim, looked back through the window of the squad car and watched the gates close. When they closed and no one followed, relief blanketed the fear she constantly felt.

At the age of 18, Sandy had already seen and been forced to do things no one should ever experience. Upon arrival at The Shelter, she was slow to unlatch her own emotional gates and trust her advocate. When she did, she spoke for a long time about the extreme sexual and physical abuse that several people had inflicted upon her. At the end of the conversation, Sandy's flood gates opened, releasing a wave of relief and gratitude. In that moment, she asked her advocate, "May I hug you?"

Gates open and close. They can keep us safe and they can keep us confined. Sandy is learning to make her own choices and she is choosing to fight for her life. ■

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