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Human Trafficking All Around Us

What would you say if I told you that a modern form of slavery exists all around us today and we don't even realize it? Or that, right now, thousands and thousands of people are currently being exploited sexually and/or physically throughout the world after being taken from their homes and sold into an underground trade? I bet that you would be shocked to learn about such acts. Modern slavery is better known as "human trafficking," and it happens all around the world. This illegal trafficking and resulting exploitation of victims absolutely destroys their lives and results in an average life span of seven years from the date of initial trafficking (United Nations). Human trafficking is a very real problem all around the world and we need to come together to help and support the victims as well as successfully prosecute those who have caused the victims so much harm and suffering.

According to the United Nations, up to 2.5 million people are being illegally trafficked around the world, with approximately 95% of those victims experiencing physical or sexual violence while they are being trafficked. Furthermore, the UN claims that between 18,000 and 50,000 of those people are being trafficked into the United States. One of the major hotspots for human trafficking in the United States is Florida-and more specifically-Tampa. The Clearwater Area Task Force on Human Trafficking (abbreviated CATFHT), a special organization of the

Clearwater Police department, is the main fighting force against human trafficking in the Tampa area and the CATFHT states that Florida is such a trafficking hotspot because of “industrial sectors such as a large service industry, agriculture and the presence of large airports, coastlines and other transit ports that make our state attractive to traffickers.” Also, the CATFHT asserts that human trafficking creates astonishing annual revenue of \$32 billion USD, while the average cost of one person sold into slavery is an equally-astonishing \$90 USD. After completing my social action project, I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with a victim of human trafficking alongside her counselor/mentor who she’s been working with since she was freed by local authorities. She requested that I use a fake name and that I not identify her country of origin, which I understandably complied to, and I informed her that she did not have to answer anything she wasn’t comfortable answering and that I would leave at any time should she want me to. After sitting down across from Karen and introducing myself, I could see some kind of depression in her eyes and feel a sadness radiate off of her very quickly once we started discussing her experiences being trafficked. Karen said that her family was very poor and fragmented. Karen’s dad had abandoned her family, and her sisters were gone from home a lot of the time- causing Karen to be out fending for herself for a lot of her childhood. She was drawn into the world of prostitution within her city when she was 18 after developing a mild drug addiction to cocaine. She said that after she had worked as a local prostitute for “a few years,” she was drugged and taken to an unknown place. When Karen finally came to and realized she had been kidnapped, she tried to bust out, but she was beaten down by the guards. “That was the first of so many beatings. I can’t even tell you how many times I was hit and assaulted so I’d do what they wanted me to do,” Karen said. Karen said that she was taken and forced to work in a brothel or prostitution ring, while “they’d beat us every once in a while and tell us that if we ever

tried to escape or tell someone about where we were that we would get killed.” While being enslaved, Karen had thoughts of suicide constantly, but never went through with it because she hoped to one day see her distant family again, “I regret not staying closer to my family. We had our fights and disagreements, but we loved each other even if we never showed it. I kept thinking about them, what if I stayed closer to them? Would I be here now? I just kept hope of someday walking away and getting to go see them again; I wanted to repair my relationship with my family and I wanted to live like a regular person.” One day five years ago, while being trafficked through the Port of Tampa, Karen was freed by Tampa PD who was searching for drugs onboard a shipping container. She recalled, “I remember seeing the badges and hearing ‘Police! Police!’ while they opened the container and took us out. It was the happiest moment of my life because I knew they saved me. I was going home.” Karen was placed into a program that helped her get the required documentation to live legally in Tampa. She soon got a job working with other women who were victims of human trafficking and eventually saved up enough money to go back and find her family members that she left behind. “I sat down and talked to my mother for the first time in what seemed like 100 years. It was a great experience and something that I’ll never forget. When I came back to the US, we got my mom’s application for citizenship here in America processed and sent to the government to be approved. I want to get my sisters citizenship here too but we are still waiting on that.” Throughout the interview, lots of tears were shed and the whole thing took a little over three hours, but Karen’s insight and selflessness in her answers allowed me to peer into the mind of a human trafficking victim, as well as get a small sliver of a taste as to how truly awful and horrific the human trafficking trade is.

You would think that such a large and worldwide criminal trade such as human trafficking would have a number of agencies, task forces, and prosecution teams dedicated to

ending human trafficking, but there are only a handful of law enforcement agencies dedicated to stopping human trafficking. In the United States, only 10% of police stations have any kind of protocol to deal with human trafficking in their jurisdictions (C.A.T.F.H.T.). Even worse, is that there is no federal government agency dedicated to stopping human trafficking and prosecuting the traffickers themselves. While many victims of human trafficking are freed every day, they are usually found while authorities are conducting drug busts or raiding prostitution rings. In 2006, there were only 5,808 prosecutions and 3,160 convictions throughout the world; this means that for every 800 people trafficked, only one person was convicted in 2006 (United Nations). Part of this anomaly, as identified by the United Nations is because victims of human trafficking are very often not identified as victims of a crime, but rather considered as persons who have violated migration, labor and/or prostitution laws. A large responsibility falls on everyday citizens to assist in the freeing of human trafficking victims currently sentenced to the shackles of modern slavery. One phone call to authorities can save countless lives, and can lead to the prosecution of those responsible for these heinous crimes. If you suspect that someone around you is currently being trafficked, please call the Clearwater Area Task Force on Human Trafficking's tip line at (727) 562-4917 or e-mail them at humantrafficking@myclearwater.com. If you would like to approach someone you know to see if they are currently a trafficking victim, the CATFHT has an entire web page dedicated on how to interact and softly question the person on their website: <http://www.catfht.org/>. If you would like to learn more about human trafficking specifically in the Tampa area, you can visit the Tampa Human Trafficking Awareness Facebook page and share it with your friends. Every person that becomes informed of this awful crime happening all around them is another person ready to assist the authorities and serve justice.

Human Trafficking is one of the great tragedies occurring throughout our society. Modern day slavery has taken the lives of countless innocent people who were taken in and systematically suppressed through many forms of abuse. While great law enforcement teams such as the Clearwater Area Task Force on Human Trafficking are doing everything they can to free those who are under the heavy spell of never-ending slavery and prosecute those traffickers responsible for so much suffering, they can only do so much. That is where well-informed citizens come into play. The key to ending human trafficking lies in an educated base of citizens that is able to assist a necessarily and significantly heavier law enforcement presence all around the world, so that we can bring these innocent victims back home and give them normal lives.

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