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FEATURE // HUMAN TRAFFICKING

HEAVY TRAFFIC

Human trafficking is poised to overtake the illegal drug trade as the largest criminal enterprise in the world, according to the FBI. That's because a kilo of heroin can only be sold once—after it's been snorted, smoked or shot up, it's gone. But a human being can be sold over and over again.

Think slavery is something out of a history book? One expert estimates that if you live in Palm Beach County, you likely live within 10 miles of a modern-day slave.

By **Kristen Desmond LeFevre**
Photography by **Jason Nuttle**

The International Labor Organization estimates that there are nearly 21 million victims of human trafficking worldwide today. They are forced to provide labor or sex. They do not keep the money they earn. They are not free to come and go as they please. And only one percent of them will escape.

West Palm Beach resident Rosa Castillo, 34, is part of that one percent.

Castillo was only 12 years old when her parents fled Nicaragua in the 1990s, leaving her behind with her grandparents. To reunite their family, the Castillos paid a coyotaje (a Mexican border smuggler) $6,000 to bring their daughter safely to the United States. The journey was supposed to take Castillo two weeks. Instead, she was held captive for 14 years.

The coyotaje turned out to be a human trafficker. And although he delivered Castillo to the United States, she was anything but safe. "I was sold as merchandise in America, in the land of justice and freedom," she says. "And nobody did anything to help me."

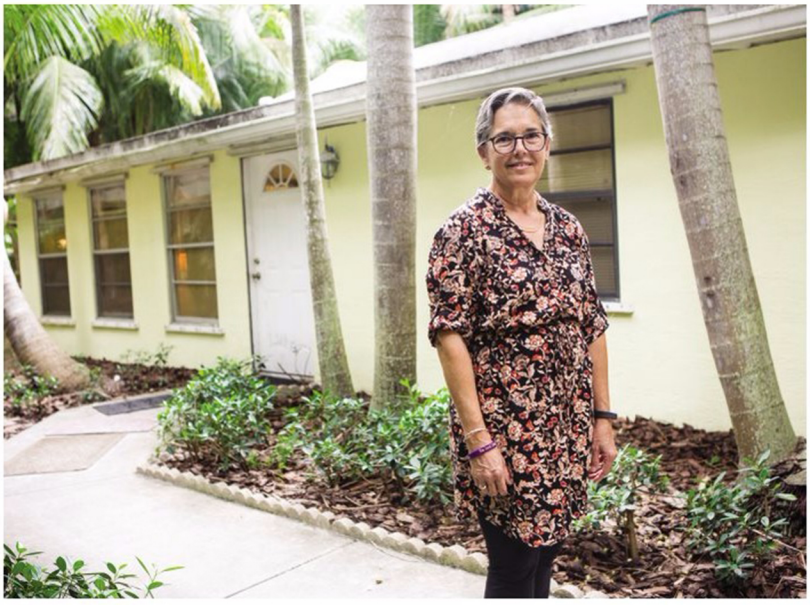
By day she was forced to work picking crops. "I was just a little girl, working 18 hours a day," Castillo says, describing her years in the fields of multinational produce companies with household names. "They're making millions of dollars. And they're buying into human trafficking to make their money."

By night she was forced into prostitution—both on the streets and in businesses like erotic spas and massage parlors.

When she wasn't working, Castillo was kept in a cage with 60 other women from Central America, the Caribbean and the United States. "All of us were there for 10 years or more. We grew up together in that cage, being fed twice a week, being raped, beaten and burned," she says.

Castillo watched as others tried to escape. When they were caught, they were tortured. Still, she made her own attempts. When she was unsuccessful, she was punished. "They used me as their personal ashtray," she says, pointing to burn scars on her arms and chest. "There are scars like these on places I can't show you."

Eventually, she lost hope. Castillo says she even stopped speaking for several years. "I gave up," she says. "I prayed to God to take my life. I couldn't take any more."



Becky Dymond, president and founder of Hepzibah House

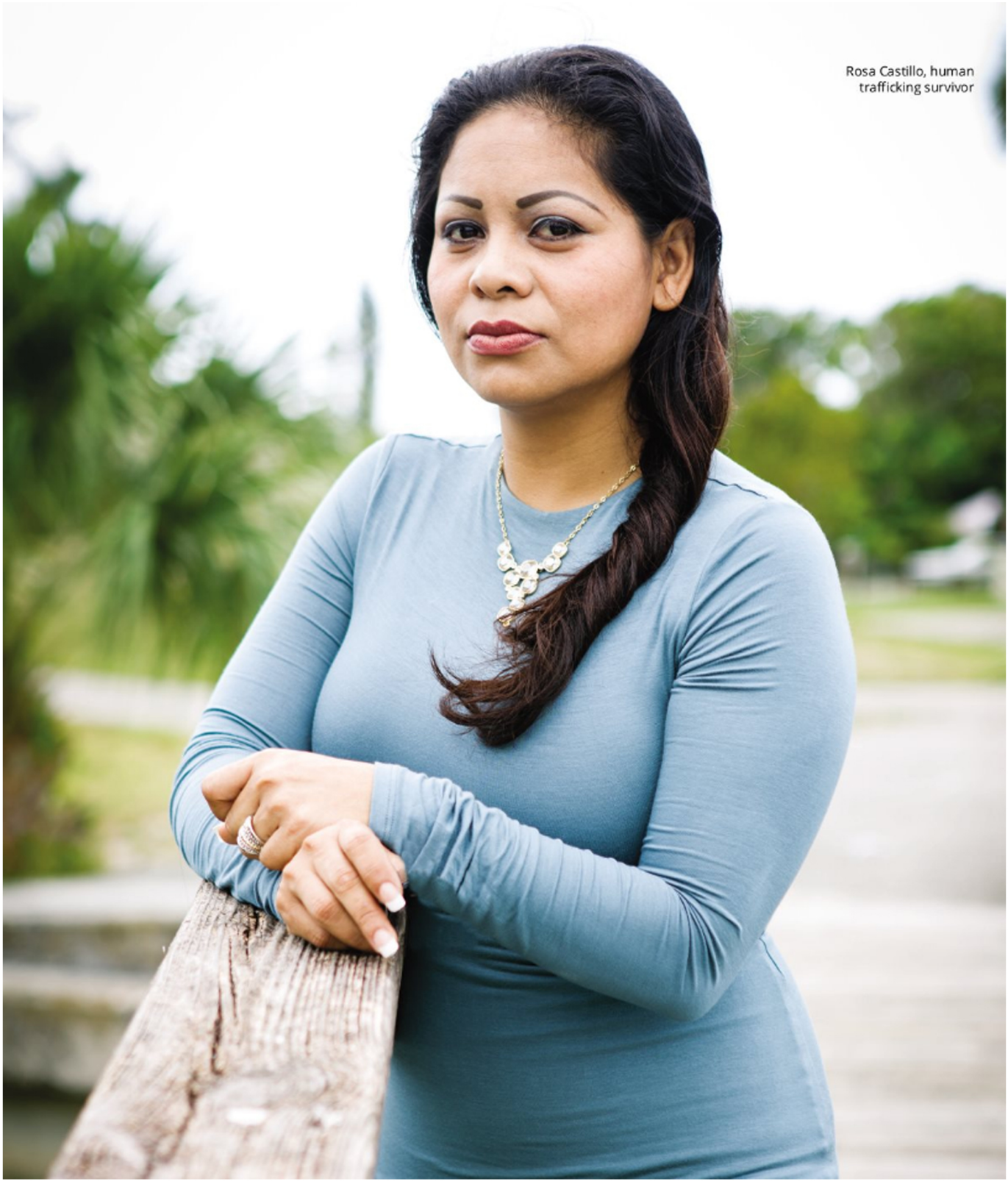
THE MODERN SLAVE TRADE

Human trafficking is more than a buzzword. In general, it's an umbrella term for the modern slave trade. More specifically, it's the act of "recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud or coercion," according to the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, passed by Congress in 2000. It encompasses several forms of slavery, including forced labor, domestic servitude and sex trafficking. And it's a booming business.

The global value of human trafficking is estimated at $150 billion—so lucrative that it recently outpaced the illegal arms trade as the world's fastest growing criminal industry, according to a report by the United Nations. The domestic value of human trafficking is harder to pin down, but the U.S. intelligence community puts its estimate at $9.5 billion. That's the same valuation many Wall Street analysts give the domestic bottled water market.

Human trafficking is market-driven, and demand is high for cheap labor and easy sex. Despite recent crackdowns by law enforcement, many traffickers are willing to risk prosecution for earning potential. A 2014 study by the Urban Institute reveals that domestic sex traffickers make a monthly average of $27,000—more than $300,000 per year.

The state of Florida is a human trafficking hot spot, reporting the third highest



Rosa Castillo, human trafficking survivor

Human Trafficking: **Myth Vs. Fact**

COMBATING ANY PROBLEM BEGINS WITH REPLACING MYTHS WITH TRUTHS. CONSIDER THESE COMMONLY HELD MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

Myth:
Human trafficking is a new term for prostitution.

Facts:
Worldwide each year 4.5 million people are trafficked into sex work; and 16.4 million people are victims of labor trafficking. Common types of labor trafficking in the U.S. include farm work, domestic servitude and factory work. Victims are frequently found in businesses like sweatshops, massage parlors, farms, restaurants, hotels and domestic service.

Myth:
Human trafficking is the same as human smuggling.

Facts:
Human trafficking is based on exploitation and does not require movement across borders. Smuggling can turn into trafficking if the smuggler uses force, fraud or coercion to hold victims against their will for the purposes of labor or sexual exploitation.

Myth:
Equating human trafficking with slavery is an overstatement.

Facts:
Buying and selling human beings for any purpose or period of time is slavery. The U.S. Department of State estimates there were more people in worldwide slavery in 2013 (20 to 30 million enslaved persons) than during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade from the 1400s to the 1800s (more than 10 million enslaved persons).

Myth:
Human trafficking doesn't take place in the United States.

Facts:
There are an estimated 250,000 slaves in the country today, and verified cases of human trafficking per year in the United States are on the rise. The count has raised from 3,409 verified cases in 2012 to 8,042 verified cases in 2016.

Myth:
U.S. citizens are rarely human trafficking victims.

Facts:
Sixty-seven percent of people trafficked for labor in the country go undocumented. Among domestic sex slaves, 17 percent are legal or illegal immigrants. Eighty-three percent of domestic sex slaves are U.S. citizens.

Myth:
Only adults are trafficked.

Facts:
Globally, Shared Hope International estimates that 1.2 million children are trafficked each year, and more than 100,000 children who are U.S. citizens (about the population of West Palm Beach) are exploited through sex trafficking during any given year without ever crossing a border.

Sources include the Polaris Project, International Labour Office; Hepzibah House; Polaris Project, National Human Trafficking Hotline Cases; Bureau of Justice; Polaris Project, Shared Hope International; Shared Hope International; US. Department of State; UNICEF; Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign

number of cases in the country (behind California and Texas), according to a 2016 report by the National Human Trafficking Hotline. Last year alone, the Florida Department of Children and Families counted nearly 1,900 confirmed trafficking cases statewide, up 54 percent from the preceding year.

> *"Being abused is the only way of life many of these boys and girls have known."*
>
> *- Joan Reid*

Wifredo Ferrer, former United States attorney for the Southern District of Florida, says the state's status as a tourist draw and transplant-heavy population provide fertile ground for human trafficking to flourish. "We have a booming tourism industry. We have a very active transient male population, where guys come and go," Ferrer says. "If they are here for sporting events, for example, a lot of these victims are used, so to speak, to service them."

Those services regularly take place at local businesses that may appear to be on the up-and-up—including hotels, strip clubs, massage parlors and escort services, says Becky Dymond, president and founder of Hepzibah House, a Boynton Beach program for women escaping human trafficking.

Dymond estimates through research that 3,500 women and girls are being trafficked for sex in the Palm Beaches. That doesn't include women trafficked through streetwalking or porn production, nor those being trafficked in underground clubs or on websites. "That data is harder to come by," she says. But if Dymond could quantify those hidden victims, she figures her estimate could easily double. "If you live in Palm Beach County," she says, "You probably live within 10 miles of a modern-day slave."

PREDATOR AND PREY

Behind the statistics, it's the people who make the industry go 'round. The cycle starts with the traffickers, including pimps, gang members and mafiosos. And then there are the victims—drawn from all genders, races and walks of life. Still, they share a key characteristic that traffickers are uncannily able to sniff out: vulnerability. That's because the more vulnerable a victim is, the easier they are to control.

"I'm counseling a woman now who was kept in chains," Dymond says. "But that's not typical." Instead, she says, the psychological ramifications of childhood abuse are what most often keep individuals from rebuffing a trafficker's advances, or from trying to escape once they've been recruited.

Dymond also notes that a majority of adult victims of sex trafficking have been molested as children. "When that quintessential boundary violation happens to you, silence becomes your voice," she explains. "It becomes dangerous to say 'no.' It's a mentality that you never outgrow."

New research by Joan Reid, assistant professor of criminology at the University of South Florida-St. Petersburg, supports Dymond's claims. In a 2016 study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Reid and her co-authors examined the histories of more than 900 adolescent human trafficking victims in Florida. What they found was troubling: All of the

trafficked children had experienced some kind of abuse. But when compared with children whose abuse did not include sex acts, sexually abused boys were found to be 8.2 times more likely to be exploited in human trafficking, and sexually abused girls were found to be 2.5 times more likely to be similarly exploited.

"Being abused is the only way of life many of these boys and girls have known," Reid's report concludes. "They may possess very little hope of escaping to something or someone better."

In essence, by recruiting from the most vulnerable among us, traffickers have created what Reid calls a "safe crime." "The trafficker is at a very low risk to be told on," she says. "And because of their abusive pasts, many victims have the mindset that they freely chose this life. They don't run or try to get help, because they don't view themselves as being exploited."

A VULNERABLE VICTIM

Reid's findings resonate with Brenda Smith, now 52 and living in Boynton Beach. In 1983, Smith was abducted at age 18 and forced into prostitution across the northeastern United States for two years.

Smith's father left when she was just a toddler, and her mother struggled to raise four kids alone. A family acquaintance took an interest in Smith, offering the treats and attention she craved. But when she was only 3 years old, he began molesting her.

"That started me on a journey of sexual awareness at a very early age," Smith says. Soon her older brother's friends became her molesters. When she was 12, her mother remarried, and her stepfather began sexually assaulting her. When her mother found out, she accused Smith of trying to break up her marriage and sent her to live with her father.

It was anything but a fresh start. Smith began drinking and abusing drugs. "I was in a bad place. I hated life," she says. When she returned to her father's house from a weekend getaway, she found all of her possessions piled on the front porch.

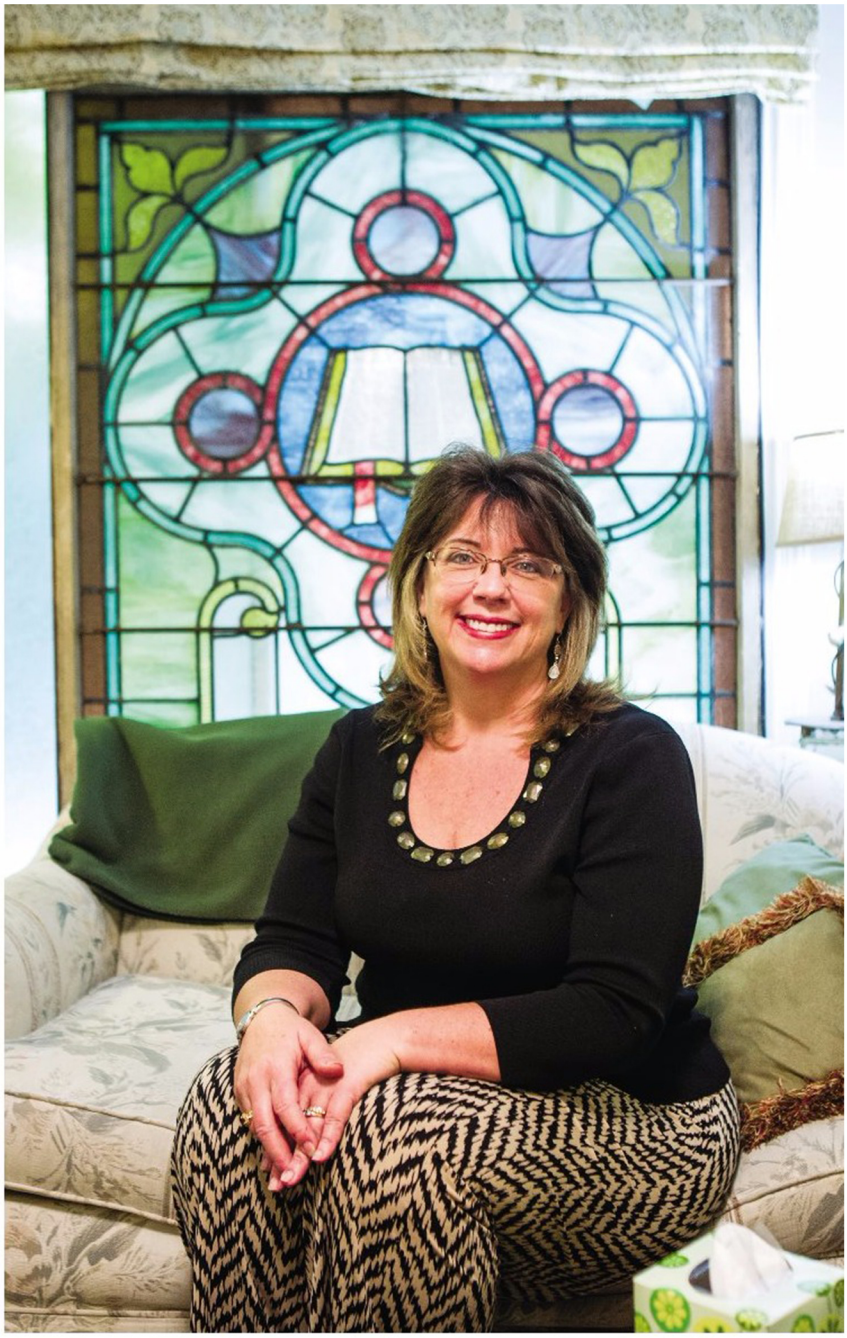
Smith grabbed what she could. Leaving the rest behind, she drifted, living with her brother and hitting the bar scene. That's when she met James. "He acted like he was so interested in me," she says. "But I kept my distance." Still, when James asked her on a lunch date, Smith accepted.

Instead of taking her to lunch, James drove Smith several counties away and revealed his plan. "He said, 'You're going to be making some money so we can be together,'" Smith recalls. "When I figured out he was talking about prostitution, I said, 'No way.' But he said, 'This is what's going to happen: I'll tell you where to stand and what to do. I'll be right there.'"

Smith first realized James was serious when she met what's known as the "top wife"—the woman in charge of keeping a trafficker's stable of victims in line. "He left me with her and told her to watch me," Smith explains. "She started describing this hierarchy where I was supposed to be the wife-in-law, the next one down. So I played it cool. I said, 'Listen, I ran out of cigarettes, and I'm just gonna go down to the corner and buy a pack.' But in my head I was like, 'I'm getting the heck out of here,'" Smith says.

James had unwittingly left Smith near a house where some of her friends lived. She hurried to their front door and begged them for a ride. But James followed her and demanded she return with him. "He was 6-foot-8-inches," Smith says. "Nobody was willing to say: 'Move along and leave her alone, dude.'"

Like Rosa Castillo, Smith was punished for her escape attempt. "He didn't trust me or leave me alone for a long time after that," she says. "He took me out of town again and kept me moving to keep me from running to someone who could help me. I was trapped."



Brenda Smith, a human trafficking survivor, and a board member and mentor at Hepzibah House

Telltale Trafficking Signs

Look for these common signs of human trafficking. Victims of modern-day slavery may:

• have bruises, black eyes, cuts, marks, scars or other signs of physical abuse and torture. Victims of human trafficking are often beaten in areas that will not damage their appearance, such as their lower back or the back of their head.

•show signs of being denied food, water, sleep, or medical care.

• provide answers that sound scripted or rehearsed when they are questioned about their lifestyle or wellbeing.

• give false information when asked for details like age, name or date of birth.

• be accompanied by a controlling person, or may not speak for themselves. Instead, they may consistently defer to another person.

• keep late-night or unusual hours.

• be transported to or from work by their employer. They may also live with their employer or other fellow employees, or they may live in the same place that they work.

• be unable to keep or control their earnings, which are withheld for "safekeeping" or to "repay their debts" to traffickers.

• have no identification, or may not be in control of their identification documents.

• be frightened to talk to outsiders and authorities, since they are closely monitored and controlled.

• be depressed, tense, paranoid, hyper-vigilant, overly submissive or distrustful toward anyone who offers assistance or attempts to converse with them.

• have tattoos or brands that they are reluctant to explain. Traffickers often tattoo or brand victims, particularly girls. Youth are commonly branded with their exploiter's name or the word "Daddy" tattooed on the neck, chest or arms.

• have a cell phone or an expensive designer handbag despite a lack of other basic belongings.

• demonstrate affection toward their trafficker. Many victims develop Stockholm syndrome, in which victims, over time, become sympathetic to their trafficker.

Source Materials: Adapted from several sources, including Hepzibah House, Joan Reid and *myflfamilies.com*

THE NEW ABOLITIONISTS

"When you say 20 million slaves, most people's instinct is to switch off," says Jupiter resident Ellen Coleman. "But," she says, "a problem this big is going to take all of us doing something." Coleman was "shaken" in 2012 when she first discovered the magnitude of the human trafficking epidemic. She now works as a program ambassador for the A21 Campaign, raising awareness and funds for the worldwide anti-trafficking organization.

"A21 is leading the global charge in terms of abolishing modern slavery," Coleman says. "But there are amazing organizations in Palm Beach County that are doing impactful work too."

One of those organizations is Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Palm Beach. In January, the group was awarded a $1.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to partner with the Palm Beach Sherriff's Office in addressing local human trafficking. As part of that initiative, Catholic Charities has established a 24-hour tip line and an education campaign aimed at teaching local residents to identify human trafficking when they see it. "This is a crime that can go on right before your eyes and you might not recognize it," says Sheila Gomez, Catholic Charities' executive director. "When people know what to look for and who to call, that can be a powerful tool in the fight."

Palm Beach Gardens-based Christ Fellowship Church began funding its anti-human trafficking outreach program known as Hope for Freedom through hundreds of yard sales in 2009. Today, Hope for Freedom supports Hope House, a safe house for girls 12 to 17 who have been victims of sex trafficking. Operated by Place of Hope in Palm Beach Gardens, Hope House serves five girls at a time, featuring an all-female roster of counselors and support staff, as well as on-site schooling.

Place of Hope's CEO Charles L. Bender III says it's the "family feel" that makes Hope House one of the most successful recovery operations in the state. Since 2012, it's housed and rehabilitated nearly 30 girls. "We try to emulate a healthy family environment," he explains. "Our model helps victims feel like there's something better they can move toward."

While Hope House works with human trafficking's underage victims, Becky Dymond's Hepzibah House provides a safe house for adult victims. "We offer a highly trained therapeutic team and a safe place to live during recovery," Dymond says of her four-bed facility that opened in late 2015. Since then, Dymond says the organization has sheltered six women and supplied therapy, mentoring and career counseling for more than 40 others.

For many of these local abolitionists—Dymond included—the calling to fight human trafficking first came as a wave of anger that such an industry could exist in modern times. But Dymond says a deeper emotion needs to be tapped to affect lasting change. "Righteous anger can spur action," she says. "But it can't sustain the kind of action it will take to end human trafficking. Only love can do that."

LEAVING IT BEHIND

For both Brenda Smith and Rosa Castillo, it was love that spurred their final escape attempts.

After more than a year of working as a sex slave, Smith discovered she was pregnant. Up to that point, she'd used both drugs and alcohol freely, trying to numb her pain. But the pregnancy was a wake-up call, and Smith quit cold turkey. "I told myself, 'I don't care what I'm going through. I'm not going to put a baby's life at risk,'" she says.

Ditching the drugs and alcohol had a bonus effect. "It got my head clear," she says. "I started thinking of ways to run."

When James found out about Smith's pregnancy, he demanded she "get rid of it." But Smith stalled for time. "I knew that I needed to get free before he would force me to end my pregnancy," she says.

Smith's chance came when James inadvertently dropped her off for a night of trick-turning just three blocks away from her aunt's house. "When I knew he was gone, I hid on the back porch until I got up the courage to go inside and call my mom," she says.

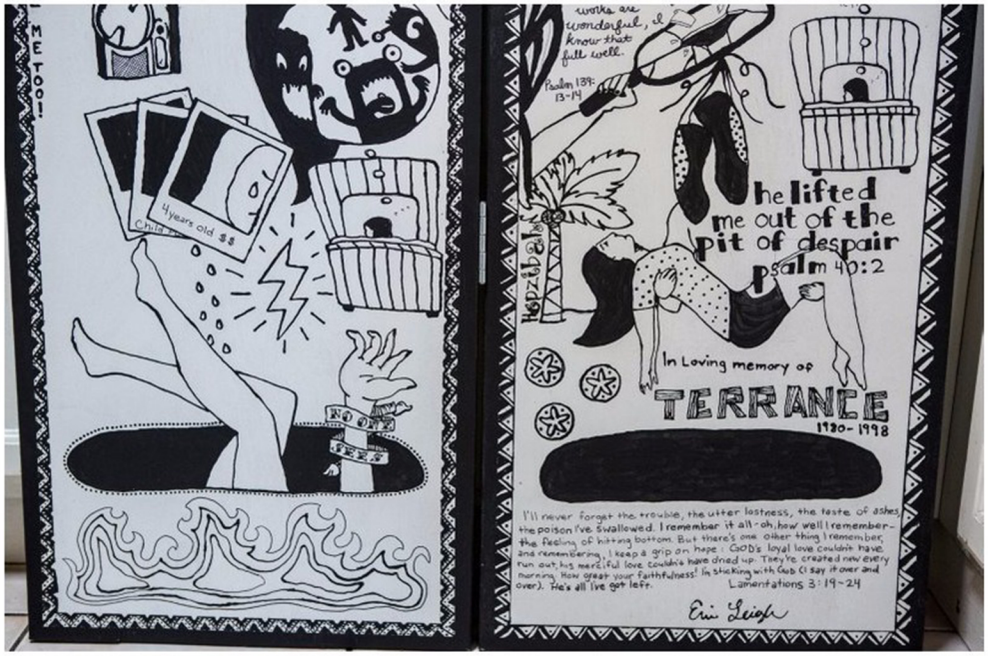
On the other side of freedom, Smith's mother urged her to have an abortion,

but she refused. "I told her, 'I'm having this baby. He's my gift. He's my collateral beauty," she says of her son Ryan, who is now 32. "I didn't have value or love enough for me," Smith says. "But for him? I could see his value was limitless."

Like Smith, Castillo became pregnant while in captivity. It was 2003, and at 22 years old, she had lived as a slave for a decade. Suddenly, she no longer wanted to die. But first, she had to beg to carry her pregnancy to term.

Castillo had seen how her trafficker had beaten pregnant women to make them spontaneously abort. So she told him, "You don't have to do this to me. I've been here for so long, I'm not going anywhere. I would like to have the baby."

The trafficker relented, and in 2004 Castillo gave birth to a daughter she named Louvia. "It was the first time in my life that I had something that was mine," she says. "I decided that I will do whatever it takes to set us free."



Artwork at the Hepzibah House

Freedom came four years later, in June of 2008. According to Castillo, her trafficker and his gang threw a party outside Corpus Christi, Texas. Castillo and a fellow captive—a woman who had been taken from her home in Cuba—had been left outside the cage. When many of the men were either drunk or passed out, Castillo says her Cuban friend turned to her and said, "Today we will be free or we will die trying."

Castillo recounts how they formed a quick plan, wrapping Louvia in towels and zipping her inside a suitcase. When Castillo hoisted the suitcase over a wall of the compound where they were staying, Louvia started crying loudly. Terrified, Castillo told her friend, "I gotta go! Hold the ladder for me!" As she climbed and her friend stood below, Castillo says one of the enforcers spotted them and began to shoot. "She was hit four times in the chest," Castillo explains. "She died where she fell." Shot once in the forehead, Castillo fell, too—not inside the wall, but outside of it, where she played dead, laying on top of the suitcase with Louvia still inside. Eventually, she says, she dragged the suitcase to the edge of a highway, where a truck driver spotted her and brought her to a hospital. After surgery to repair her fractured skull, law enforcement placed Castillo and her daughter in protective custody until she was brought to West Palm Beach to be reunited with family members.

Since her escape, Castillo has undergone intensive therapy to restore both her voice and her life. "I have worked hard to come back to myself, to forgive myself," she says. Still, she struggles. "It took so much from me," she says. "There is nothing that removes the marks from my body. There is nothing to wipe away my memories. I still have flashbacks. There are still days I feel my spirit is broken."

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For Smith and Castillo, there's life after trafficking. You can't call them lucky. But you can call them free, unlike the 99 percent of victims who never escape.

Today, Smith serves as a board member and mentor at Hepzibah House, sharing her story to raise awareness and to bring hope to the hopeless. "Hepzibah House is a life-giving community," Smith says. "Its passion instills courage, hope and change."

In her advocacy work through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Blue Campaign, Castillo collaborates with lawmakers to develop new legislation and gives first responders key insights into the minds of traffickers and their victims. "What happened to me is still happening. Traffickers are preying on our local kids. Why are we not talking about this? Why are we silenced?" she asks.

Castillo refuses to be silenced again. "I have so much to say. Sometimes I feel like my heart is going to spill out of my body," she says. "But speaking up is a way to protect my daughter, a way to protect every child. For that, I will continue to speak forever." ■

If You See Something, Say Something

Never attempt to confront a potential trafficker directly or alert a possible victim to your suspicions. Instead, use the following hotlines to report any suspicious activities that may resemble human trafficking. By reporting tips, you can do your part to help law enforcement rescue victims and bring traffickers to justice.

To report information regarding suspected human trafficking of child or an adult in South Florida:
Catholic Charities 24-Hour Incident Abuse Hotline: 561.598.9848

To report suspected human trafficking of a child or an adult anywhere in the United States (outside of Florida):
National Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline: 888.373.7888

Other useful numbers:
Be Free Trafficking Text Line: 233733

Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation, Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Exploitation: 800.633.3572

Sources: Adapted *frommyflfamilies.com*, Hepzibah House, The Blue Campaign and Place of Hope