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Behind human trafficking in Chicago

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“Prostituting was like snatching the soul of my body. Every time I would sleep with a stranger, I turned into an icebox, and the more it happened, the colder I became.”

These are the words of Genesis Durr, 20, a survivor of human trafficking. Born in Mexico to a 15-year-old mother, she described herself as a runaway girl, who fell for the lies of a sick-minded man who abused her both mentally and physically.



Chicago is among the top 10 cities in the U.S. for human trafficking. Sara Mays THE CHRONICLE

With tall buildings housing citizens' every need, a police force numbering in the thousands and jobs giving a sense of security, most people probably feel safe in Chicago. But within those high-rises, downtown neighborhoods and quaint suburbs lies the dark secret of human trafficking, which Illinois statutes define as forced labor and the involuntary servitude of a minor.

Chicago is ranked among the top 10 cities in the U.S. for

human trafficking, according to Ashley Pitariu, anti-trafficking advocate and store manager at Naperville's Women At Risk Chest Boutique, 4 E. Jefferson Ave. The U.S. is ranked after Germany as the second highest destination and market in the world for trafficked women.

“Human trafficking is the number one form of organized crime right now,” Pitariu said. “Weapons and drugs you [sell] one time; humans you can sell multiple times and only have to purchase them once.”

Women At Risk International was founded in Rockford, Mich., in 2006 by Rebecca McDonald, whose goal was to create an organization of protection and hope for at-risk women and children all over the world. What started as a desire to help turned into a project in which women learned life skills through the creation of arts and crafts.

Many of these projects involve the crafting of fine jewelry from pearls, sterling silver, semiprecious stones and beads, as well as bags, shawls and pillows. These items are put into stores called Women At Risk Chest Boutiques and used as a source of income for women so they are able to stay out of the sex-trade industry.

The Naperville boutique opened in June 2011 and is in the process of partnering with a Chicago safe house. Currently, women in safe houses in Michigan and Atlanta create the domestic items, while women in Nepal, Thailand and other Far East countries make the international products.

“Rescued women are literally piecing their lives back together bead by bead and being paid a fair wage,” Pitariu said. “They also get a GED [diploma], health care and childcare and counseling while in the safe houses.”

Even with numerous approaches by different anti-trafficking organizations in the city, completely wiping it out is nearly impossible.

“On any given day in Chicago, there are at least 16,000 women and girls involved in prostitution,” said Kristin Claes, spokeswoman for Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation. “Many are there because they have no other choice. Someone is taking their money and keeping them in the trade.”

CAASE's campaign, End Demand Illinois, partnered with the Cook County State's Attorney's Office to pass the Illinois Safe Children Act, which ends the practice of prosecuting minors for prostitution, Claes said. Now anyone under the age of 18 who is in the sex trade is considered a crime victim who deserves support and services. CAASE



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also helped pass the Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act in 2011, which allows survivors who have prostitution convictions on their record while being trafficked to petition to a judge to have the convictions overturned. Claes said the majority of women in prostitution entered it before their 18th birthday.

"Illinois is leading the way in finding ways to address demand," Claes said. "We must hold pimps, johns and traffickers accountable for the harm they cause."

There is no single cause of human trafficking, with 10 percent occurring on the streets and 90 percent behind closed doors. Some reasons are the high rates of homelessness, poverty and gang activity, said Laura Ng, executive director of External Relations and Shared Services at Traffick Free, a nonprofit organization that works to bring awareness to human trafficking.

"[Chicago has] all of the above," Ng said. "We have people that run away to the city all the time. The size of Chicago and how hidden you can be in certain neighborhoods completely blows up the issue."

When Durr was 5 years old, she was brought to Chicago to live with her mother, who had remarried, and moved to the U.S. with hopes that it would give her family a better life. But alcohol and drugs destroyed the family, and she grew up resenting her mother. She felt abandoned, neglected and abused.

"This made it easy to get involved with the wrong crowd," Durr said.

When she was 15, she was approached by a 24-year-old man she described as very "suave." She said he gave her the attention she craved, so she trusted him and quickly fell in love.

She felt a connection with him, Durr said. They both came from torn families ridden with drugs and jail time.

"He felt neglected like me and wanted someone there for him," Durr said. "He asked if I could be the person to comfort him."

Four days after her 16th birthday, Durr decided she was ready to move in with the man she had met only months before. He was moving in with his brother, and he told her to stay with him. She said the first few weeks were pleasant, but everything changed when they got an eviction notice.

"He told me of a way to make money, to sleep around," Durr said. "I knew it was something I didn't want to do, but I had to do it in order to stay."

She said when her boyfriend set up her first date with someone, she got as drunk as she could so that she would not remember the sexual act. However, she said no amount of alcohol could erase the feeling of the john's ashy hands on her body.

A few weeks later, her boyfriend was arrested and imprisoned for 14 months for violating his probation.

"I remained on the streets refusing to return home," Durr said. "I continued the lifestyle [because] I was physically and mentally torn down."

When she found out she was pregnant, she discovered the driving force to change her life. She was desperate to get out of prostitution for the safety of her baby.

She opened up to a friend also trapped in prostitution who told her about the Dreamcatcher Foundation, a small nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering and motivating the lives of young women through education and prevention of exploitation. Durr attended a session where she listened to a speech by Brenda Myers-Powell, co-founder of Dreamcatcher.

"Although I did not know [Myers-Powell], I could understand and feel a connection with what she endured," Durr said. "She had been through so much and stood strong sharing her story. [Listening to] the changes she made brought a glimpse of hope to my life. I felt like if she was able to make a positive change, I could too."

Myers-Powell, a survivor of prostitution, started the Dreamcatcher Foundation in 2008 after meeting with fellow survivor Stephanie Daniels-Wilson.

"Prostitution stems from a low self-esteem because it comes as something accessible and easy to do to get things," Myers-Powell said. "Even young ladies who come from great homes call it 'getting money' because of the culture of what we have going on in our society right now."

Myers-Powell knew that the practical, clinical approach of the foundation would be the best option for women looking for guidance because she and Daniels-Wilson had gone through similar situations and knew how to interact with victims of prostitution.

After months of counseling sessions at Dreamcatcher, Durr was given a job as a peer

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advocate helping with outreach. She also had the opportunity to share her story with the Illinois Senate and House of Representatives, which she said helped enact the Illinois Safe Children Act.

“People need to know that human trafficking is taking place in their own backyards,” Durr said. “It’s time to break the silence, acknowledge there is a problem and work together to find a solution. We need to come together to raise the voice of the unheard.”



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