

# Sex trafficking in America

Author details her terrifying two years of rape, drugs and beatings.

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"I like you," were the words that turned author Theresa Flores into a human trafficking victim at age 15.

Flores spoke Sept. 23 in the visual arts center about her real-life experience being trafficked out of a suburb of a major American city.

Her blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Midwest girl-next-door appearance is hardly the popular perception of the women and children trapped in sex trafficking. Americans hear about human trafficking around the world, but the images often show slight figures in traditional garb from developing countries who speak a variety of languages, just not English.

Today, Flores works as an advocate for human trafficking victims, building awareness in communities about the prevalence of the crime and pushing for the prosecution of people seeking services from "modern day slaves."

Flores earned a master's degree in counseling education from the University of Daytona and has been a social worker for more than 20 years in Ohio.

She was appointed to the Ohio Attorney General's Commission on the Study of Human Trafficking in 2009, which pushed for passage of SB 235, recognizing human trafficking as a crime in Ohio.

State laws addressed kidnapping, prostitution, assault and drug dealing, but no law named human trafficking as a crime.

Flores said Texas has the highest rate of human trafficking in the country. California, Florida, Minnesota and Ohio round out the top five.



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Activist and author Theresa Flores identifies factors that in combination indicate the likelihood of human trafficking developing.

=She said while people easily name the top three states for human trafficking, her audiences rarely guess the last two states.

An area's likelihood for human trafficking is based on a combination of factors such as international borders, tourist areas, state size and a large number of highways, truck stops, military bases, immigrant population, strip clubs and institutes of higher education.

Flores said the factors indicate the number of people who may be in a desperate, vulnerable or accessible situation for the temptations and dangers of trafficking.

In "The Slave Across the Street," her second book, she details her experience as a victim of human trafficking. It is being made into a film.

"It's not about sex. It's about money," she said. Money and services are typically exchanged among 24-hour parlors and spas, nail salons, Internet sites, ethnic restaurants, hotels or motels, factories, domestic workers, runaway children and among young women with older boyfriends. She also stressed the misconception of prostitution not being included with human trafficking. "In our country, we think of prostitution as an option," she said.

However, she said many prostitutes are controlled by pimps or involved in crime rings with few or no options to escape. The women are often beaten, murdered or drugged if they attempt to escape.

She said most trafficking victims survive an average of seven years in human slavery before dying from disease, violence or drugs.

That makes Flores lucky to be alive.

At the age of 15, she was blackmailed into becoming a trafficking victim, then beaten, raped and drugged for two years. To protect her family's lives, she submitted to the abuse.

Flores was an upper-middle class teen whose grandfather was a prominent judge and father an executive of an international corporation.

About 30 years ago, Flores did what many a giddy and innocent 15-year-old girl does: She accepted a ride home after track practice from a boy she had a crush on. Flores' inner warnings began when the boy made a detour to his house.

Her parents were strict and forbade her from dating or evening calling boys until she turned 16 so she declined his offer to enter the house.

However, those three little words eventually convinced her to go inside his parent's house, the biggest house she'd ever seen, she said.

She couldn't help it. He smelled like cologne and wore pressed slacks to school every single day. The rest of the boys at her high school wore jeans and flannel shirts.

He offered her a soft drink and she began to feel light-headed. The drink was drugged. He took her to a bedroom upstairs and raped her.

She said her parents are devout Catholics who stressed the importance of abstinence until marriage. She thought she could take care of herself, so she didn't tell her parents. "I wanted them to be proud of me."

A few days later at school, the rapist threatened to show pictures of the incident to her parents, priest and her father's boss and to post them around school.

His cousins had been hiding in a closet and took photos without her knowledge. He said she would have to earn them back. "I felt as if I had no options, no alternative," she said. "And I still had no clue what they meant."

She naively thought she'd have to do their chores or homework, but she soon found herself lost in a nightmare she couldn't escape.

Her dad, who traveled frequently for work, was gone about three weeks each month. When he was away, her tormentors told Flores to meet them in an alley behind her house. "They took me to nice houses in beautiful areas," she said.

In the basement of those homes, she was sold to men for sex and sometimes torture. She often wondered if people's wives or children were in those homes. "They had to have heard my screams," she said.

The men soon moved from threatening her with photos to threatening to kill her and her family if she reported them.

While her tormentors let her remain living in her parents' home, they stalked her every move. They loitered at her part-time job, parked cars randomly on her street and stuffed dead animals in her mailbox.

One night, she was driven to a seedy hotel room in inner city Detroit. She said she was dragged into a room by her hair where 25 men were waiting. "I figured I wasn't getting out of there alive," Flores said.

Her traffickers told the men she was their reward for a job well done and was sold to the highest bidders that night. She was repeatedly raped, beaten and drugged until she passed out.

She awoke naked with no ID or money. She didn't know if they thought she was dead or if they would come back to get her. "I didn't like either of those two options," she said.

She found her clothes in a water-filled bathtub and wandered off to find an angel in the form of a person she normally would not have associated with in her comfortable upbringing — a waitress working the third shift of a dirty, 24-hour diner in a high-crime neighborhood.

Despite Flores' insistence that she was all right, the waitress called the police, who drove her home. She planned to sneak back into the house and still be able to go to school.

The officer, who had suspicions about illegal activities involving her traffickers, told her he knew who was responsible and cautioned her about the dangerous situation she was in. He gave her a business card in case she chose to help the police prosecute them.

That night, she answered a phone call to a dead line, and moments later, she heard her dog whimper in the yard, followed by a gunshot. She threw the card away.

After two years of the abuse, her father's job abruptly moved him and her family to another city, and she was physically free of her tormentors.

"It's really a miracle I'm still here," she said.