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Child sex trafficking in Los Angeles: 'It happens way too often'

By Susan Abram, Staff Writer

Posted: 05/05/2012 05:25:57 PM PDT

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He plied her with pot and promises.

"I'll give you a car, he told her, an apartment of your own. I'll protect you from the streets.

She was 16. He was 30.

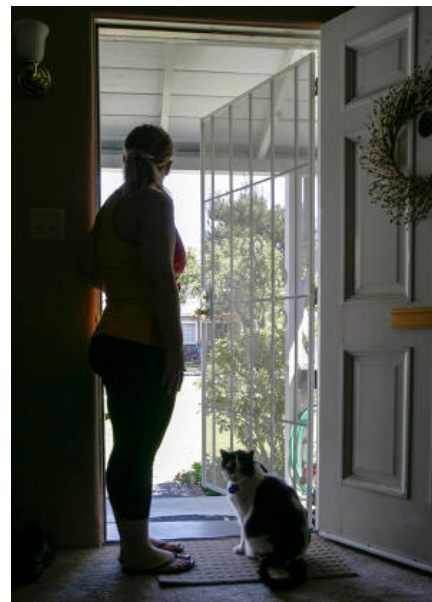
For Matilda Evans (a pseudonym to protect the identity of a sexual assault victim) those two weeks spent in Michael Mersola's Burbank home, manipulated into having sex with him, left a scar on her heart. Instead of learning algebra in a high school classroom, she was taught that acts of kindness only came at a cost.

"I developed a terrible distrust of people," Evans, now 22, said. "I felt alone, because no one believed me."

Evans told her story to the Burbank Police Department in 2007, but it was a Los Angeles Police Department detective who linked Mersola to an ongoing investigation into a larger problem in Los Angeles: sex trafficking.

Mersola was arrested for pimping and pandering runaway girls in Hollywood. One was 13 years old. He was imprisoned for those and other offenses.

"He was lending out one of the girls," said LAPD Detective Dana Harris, the acting officer in charge of the department's Human Trafficking Unit. "These guys use the



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child as property."

Harris is also one of the supervisors at the Los Angeles branch of the Innocence Lost Task Force, a national program formed in 2003 with the FBI, Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The program has 44 initiatives throughout the country that work with local law enforcement such as LAPD and groups such as Children of the Night, a Van Nuys nonprofit that rescues children from prostitution.

While most of the public believes that child prostitution and sex trafficking are endemic to poor countries, it also occurs in areas throughout the United States.

Since it began, the Innocence Lost Task Force has rescued more than 1,800 children and arrested more than 800 pimps, madams, and associates nationwide who exploit children through prostitution, according to the FBI.

In Los Angeles, at least 33 people are arrested annually for pimping and pandering underage youth, Harris said. Among those arrests last year, four were women.

"There really is no difference between pimping and pandering and human trafficking," Harris said. "All involve the force, fear and coercion of their respective victim."

Girls, pimps and tracks

Human trafficking is defined as the movement and control of the victim from location to location for the purposes of sexual exploitation, Harris said.

Some experts say there is a circuit of at least 17 tracks or main boulevards where pimps rotate prostitutes throughout Southern California. Many are in Los Angeles County, from the San Fernando

Valley to the border with Orange County.

"We're definitely a major hub of trafficking," said Hania Cardenas, director of placement community transition services for the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

"It's a very lucrative business," she said. "A trafficker can make \$140,000 on just one girl annually. No trafficker has just one girl."

And no girl is left undamaged, Cardenas said.

She and Probation Department colleague Michelle Guymon wanted to find a better way to help girls who were in the system because they were arrested for prostitution, and learn why they were out on the streets.

They also wanted to change the perception within the Probation Department from viewing the young girls as criminals to developing a program to protect them.

"We've always had these kids in our system, but we were looking at them as kids who were on the streets by choice," Cardenas said.

The two women studied those in custody in 2010 and found that 33 percent of those girls had ties to the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services.

The data also showed that of the 174 girls brought in for prostitution, 92 percent were African American, while 84 percent were from the Long Beach, South Los Angeles, Hawthorne, Inglewood, Compton and Torrance areas.

But Cardenas said they could have been trafficked

anywhere in the county.

"It's so heartbreaking," Cardenas said. "One of the girls in our system was beaten and the pimp put a tattoo over her eyebrow to mark her, as if to say 'next time you get out of line, this is what's going to happen to you'."

Most of the girls are also between 13 and 17, but many enter prostitution at age 12, Cardenas said. And the form of exploitation continues to grow.

"Online exploitation has increased," Cardenas said. "I think that the pimps are getting younger. Some of them are in gangs. And many of them will promise girls to be in videos. There's all kinds of recruitment tactics."

Awareness, prevention and treatment

Cardenas and Guymon traveled across the United States but found no city that offered comprehensive programs that can deter youth from pimps.

"We decided to develop a model, to bring all the (service) partners all together to talk about awareness, prevention, and early intervention," Cardenas said.

The women applied for a federal grant, and this month will start "My Life, My Choice," a program that targets girls



"Matilda" with her cat. She is recovering from being sexually exploited. (David Crane/Staff Photographer)

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"Matilda" swings in her backyard. She is recovering from being sexually exploited. (David Crane/Staff Photographer)

in the foster care system. The goal is not only to raise awareness among girls about trafficking but also to break the spell pimps may already have over them. Women from the Van Nuys-based Mary Magdalene Project, an agency that works with older prostitutes, will facilitate.

More than 500 staff and community providers also have been trained. Under the initiative started by Cardenas and Guymon, girls who wish to testify against pimps will be offered protection, even if it means they are housed in detention or sent to a juvenile camp.

More laws to punish perpetrators

Cardenas and Guymon also presented data to the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. The board in April voted unanimously to support the Californians Against Sexual Exploitation Act, a state ballot initiative to strengthen penalties against human traffickers, add fines to fund victim services, and require that all sex offenders disclose Internet accounts.

"These girls should be worried about their algebra problems and not worried about how they're going to make the money that night so that they won't be beaten or so that they can have some food to eat," Daphne Phung, executive director and founder of California Against Slavery, told the board.

If passed by voters in November, CASE would be the toughest human trafficking law in the country, said Supervisor Don Knabe, who supported the measure.

"What we discovered was happening was that these young girls were being arrested then getting a slap on the wrist for prostitution, then walking out," Knabe said. "Their scummy pimp was waiting for them in the parking lot."

Knabe acknowledged he and others likely have no idea of the extent of sex trafficking, but they know that California and Los Angeles play a significant role.

"What we know is there is an issue out there," he said. "It's horrible what the poor kid has to go through, especially the trauma that the kids suffer. They all have trauma."

Burbank's own trafficker

Evans, who wasn't trafficked to others, said she had no idea Mersola had been pandering other girls.

Mersola, once a prominent developer in Burbank, had been arrested in the early 1990s for paying four teen girls for sex, according to published reports and court files.

In 1993, Mersola was convicted of pandering and attempting to bribe a witness. He pled no contest and served three years of a five-year sentence.

Evans acknowledged that before she met Mersola, she had been acting out, rebelling against her parents and in school. Drugs were involved and she had run away from home. A relative introduced her to Mersola.

But after two weeks with him, she realized she was being manipulated and walked away.

Still, she was unable to talk about her experiences until her parents forced her into a treatment facility in Reno, where she finally told a therapist about her encounter with Mersola.

Evans then went to the Burbank Police, but no charges were filed against Mersola. So Evans' mom called the LAPD, and Detective Harris connected her case with Mersola's other victims.

Mersola was eventually arrested and charged with committing lewd acts on a child and pandering.

During the criminal trial, Burbank Superior Court Judge Patrick Hegarty called Mersola "a major predator."

"He prays on runaway girls that are in rehab," Hegarty said in court documents.

He again served three years of a five-year sentence and was released last summer, according to the state Department of Corrections.

Mersola, who is registered as a sex offender, did not respond to requests for an interview.

After Mersola was sentenced, Evans filed a civil suit against him in Los Angeles Superior Court.

That makes the case fairly unusual, because victims of sexual predators rarely pursue civil damages, Harris said.

"It was the most interesting thing I did in my career," said Adam Zolonz, the attorney who represented Evans.

"Mersola was such a sick person, that he really didn't think what he did was wrong. What we were doing was we were going to show this guy that we're going to stand up to him."

Evans said she and her parents pursued the civil trial to help pay for medical expenses that went toward her treatment.

In November 2011, three years after Mersola was sentenced, a civil jury found him guilty of negligence, emotional distress, outrageous conduct and sexual battery on Evans. Mersola was ordered to pay \$250,000.

Evans said she knows she may never see that money. But what the case did was expose that anyone, even in quiet suburbs like Burbank, can come across a sex trafficker.

"I just wanted it to be brought to light," Evans said. "People think, 'Oh it can't happen to me.' But it happens way too often."

susan.abram@dailynews.com

818-713-3664

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