

Zonta Speaker on Human Trafficking

11-25-07

Submitted by Ruth Woodham

### **Moldovian student tells Zontians about volunteering to prevent human trafficking**

Mariana Oprea, an exchange student from the Republic of Moldova who is spending the academic year at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU), spoke at a recent meeting of the Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva. Zontian Carolyn Gray, director of global initiatives at FGCU, introduced the delightful young speaker who is participating in a US Department of State program that hosts college students from the former Soviet Union who demonstrate leadership potential. In Moldova, Ms. Oprea is majoring in English and German. She is studying elementary education in the US.

Her presentation focused on her "real life experiences" during the past two years as a student volunteer with the International Center for Women Rights Protection and Promotion "La Strada." The non-governmental human rights organization is part of an international network of Prevention of Trafficking in Women in Central and Eastern Europe including the Netherlands, Poland, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Byelorussia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Moldova, La Strada counteracts human trafficking in women through prevention, education, victim services and assistance, research and lobbying. La Strada operates a drop-in center, a shelter and a hot line to help victims and to verify whether work being offered to Moldavians abroad is legitimate.

Ms. Oprea told Club members that educational seminars in schools and other public forums are the primary tools of prevention. During the first half of 2007, she was actively involved in nearly 150 seminars attended by more than 2,500 participants aged 15-25. The seminars are conducted by young people like her in a peer-to-peer effort to expose the myths surrounding trafficking and to give potential victims tools to recognize and resist the actions of the traffickers.

Located between Romania and the Ukraine, Moldova became an independent republic from the USSR in 1992. According to the speaker, 99 percent of Moldavians are literate, educated people but have few job prospects. The economy, unemployment, poor health care and social

problems have resulted in the country becoming a top human trafficking location. While traditional female sexual exploitation is most often associated with trafficking in the country, other widespread forms include forcing victims into labor, begging, and housekeeping in Europe, Asia, and Russia. Help is not as available for the latter groups since the general public does not consider them part of trafficking and victims of these categories are blamed for creating the problems. Increasingly, children are being trafficked to Russia for illegal adoption or to become street beggars. The Orient is another popular destination.

In addition, trafficking in human organs in both children and adults is prevalent. Unemployed, destitute men and women are encouraged to sell their dispensable organs for money which is often not delivered. In many cases the health of the donor is compromised following the removal. Ms. Oprea cited a recent case where a man agreed to sell a kidney and during the procedure he also had a portion of his liver removed. Returning to Moldova in poor health, he was refused payment for his sacrifice. The case is currently being investigated by the government.

Mariana Oprea feels that her work with "La Strada" is extremely fulfilling. She plans to use her educational skills as a teacher in her native county to help more young people find alternatives than succumbing to the traffickers.

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva is a service organization of professional women working together to provide hands-on assistance, advocacy and funds to strengthen women's lives on the islands, in Lee County and around the world through Zonta International. Additional information about Zonta is available at [www.zontasancap.com](http://www.zontasancap.com).

# # #

**PHOTO CAPTION:**

Exchange student Mariana Oprea, center, recently spoke to Sanibel-Captiva Zonta members about her volunteer work fighting human trafficking in Moldova. Zonta member Carolyn Gray, left, introduced Mariana. At right is Sue Denham, Zonta Club president.



## Side Bar

### **16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence: November 25-December 10, 2007**

An initiative of Zonta International, the 16 Days Campaign helps raise awareness about gender violence and its effects on women globally. This year the 16 Days of Activism is dedicated to the theme of overcoming challenges and obstacles that hinder the progress of activists, networks and organizations that campaign to end all forms of violence against women. In collaboration with others, the 16 Days Campaign seeks to help dismantle barriers posed by social attitudes and policies that condone and perpetuate gender based violence.

"The UN secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, warned that violence against women had reached 'hideous and pandemic proportions' in some countries attempting to recover from conflicts, and the UN Security Council demanded an end to impunity for rape and other forms of sexual abuse." (The Associated Press, October 24, 2007)

November 25 is officially recognized as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and is the beginning of the 16 Days Campaign. The campaign ends on December 10, International Human Rights Day. For additional information, view the 16 Days website at the Center for Women's Global Leadership at Rutgers [www.cwrgl.rutgers.edu](http://www.cwrgl.rutgers.edu).

# # #