

Theresa Flores, World-renowned Anti-human Trafficking Activist Speaks to Island Zontians.

Jan. 23, 2012

Submitted by Dalia Jakubauskas

Her story is almost too horrifying to stomach. Theresa Flores, mother of three, social worker, author and anti-human trafficking activist, was enslaved as teenager in the 1980's and forced by classmates she considered friends to service countless men who paid her tormentors to rape her night after night for nearly 2 years.

Flores, a world-renowned speaker on the subject of human trafficking, recounted her story to island Zontians, who gathered to hear her story at several events during January. Flores spoke at Zonta's District 11, Inter-city dinner held at Doc Ford's Restaurant on Ft. Myers Beach on January 17 and at a January 18 membership meeting for the Zonta Club of Sanibel /Captiva.

Some Zontians sat in stunned silence, others choked back tears or stifled shocked gasps as they absorbed Flores' dreadful story.

As a teenager, Flores fell for a boy who drugged, raped and blackmailed her with photos of the crime into sexual servitude. The boy threatened to show the photos to her father, his employer, her family, her teachers and even her priest if she did not "work off the debt."

Initially she thought working off the debt meant washing his car or doing his homework. But what started as a desire to protect her family, turned into a nightmare of coercion, degradation and violence.

For 18 months, the then 15-year-old Flores was required to be on call anytime the traffickers wanted her. The calls came mostly at night when Flores would slip out of her family's expansive house in an upper-middle class suburb of Detroit.

Often barefoot, wearing no make up, clad only in pajamas, she never knew where she was going. She only knew there would be men waiting to do unspeakable things to her young body. When they were through, her traffickers would return her to her home before dawn, when Flores would rise and try to carry on normal days at school.

All the while, no one noticed something was wrong. Her father worked and traveled a great deal as an executive for a fortune 500 company and her mother was often busy with social clubs and events. Neither noticed she was gone during her night-time absences and teachers never asked why a good student would suddenly be sleeping through classes or had become withdrawn.

To keep her quiet, her tormenters followed her every move, threatened her young brothers with physical harm and, as a warning, left dead animals at her home. As she later found out, these young men were part of a crime family that operated in the Detroit area.

The abuse only ended when her father was transferred to a new job and the family moved away. It was years later before she confided in anyone and only recently began to speak publically about her ordeal.

“The three words I hear the most when I tell my story is ‘I didn’t know,’ ” she said of her audiences. “This is happening to American kids, not just foreign kids. I was a normal teenager from a normal, Irish-Catholic family.”

While statistics are hard to come by because human trafficking is largely and invisible crime, approximately 325,000 children are subject to sexual exploitation every year, according to government data. The average age of entry into the commercial sex industry is 11 to 12 years old.

Flores said she was stirred to action several years ago as her daughter approached the age that she was enslaved. She has since authored a book “The Slave Across The Street” and founded TraffickFree.com, an organization dedicated to ending slavery.

Flores travels the world to raise awareness of human trafficking speaking to any group that wants to hear her story, including an appearance on The Today Show in 2009. She was sponsored by the Zonta Club of Sanibel/Captiva and its service partner The Human Trafficking Awareness Project (HTAP) to attend a series of events surrounding Human Trafficking AwarenessMonth in January including aclass on the subject at Big Arts on Sanibel and public forum hosted by Edison College in Ft. Myers. Both events were held on January 19.

Raising awareness is the first step to ending this heinous crime, she told island Zontians. She noted that many volunteer opportunities exist locally as well as nationally for those seeking further involvement including HTAP and forums like the ones at Edison that drew hundreds of people looking to help.

“Educate yourself,” Flores implored. “Talk to your kids. Don’t ignore the red flags. Be aware because now you can’t say ‘I didn’t know.’ ”

For further information about combatting human trafficking, visit the websites TraffickFree.com or HTAP at humantraffickingawareness.com.

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. For information, visit www.zontasancap.com.

