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# Group strives to help victims of forcible sex trafficking

By Josh Boatwright

ASHEVILLE – Emily Fitchpatrick hopes her personal journey will help her draw frightened victims away from their own troubles.

Having recovered from alcohol and drug addiction nine years ago, Fitchpatrick said she believes God can help her rescue women who have fallen prey to sex trafficking.

The crimes have gotten national attention, Fitchpatrick said, but little notice locally. Asheville police twice found evidence of young girls forced into prostitution in 2007 but were unable to make arrests, according to police.

“People think this (sex trafficking) happens in other countries, and they don’t want to see that it happens here,” said Fitchpatrick, 30, the director of the Hope House project, a planned home that would provide long-term care for victims.

## Hope House

Fitchpatrick, who recently left a job as program coordinator at the Billy Graham Training Center at The Cove to spend more time with her two young children, is raising money to buy a house for long-term counseling, job training and spiritual restoration for women and girls.

Fitchpatrick and other members of her group, On Eagle’s Wings Ministries, have crafted a business plan for the project, which they’ve named the Hope House. They have consulted with a security company, a licensed counselor, an attorney and national trafficking experts.

Fitchpatrick envisions a place of peace where victims from across the country would stay for 12 months as they try to rebuild their lives.

Only a few groups in North Carolina are equipped to help trafficking victims, including World Relief in High Point, an international aid organization.

Fitchpatrick said she would rely mostly on churches and private donors to raise the more than \$500,000 needed to get the project under way.

She is joining with groups including the Carolina Women’s Center at UNC Chapel Hill, which works to raise awareness about sex trafficking.

Center director Donna Bickford said trafficking victims’ needs are not met at conventional women’s shelters or other places designed for short-term stays.

Government agencies can help foreign victims obtain a visa and other legal help, but their personal well-being is often left up to a handful of nonprofit groups, Bickford said.

Legal Aid of North Carolina recently received a \$281,000 federal grant to support domestic violence shelters and others that provide services for victims.

## Proving a need

Anywhere from 14,500 to 17,500 people are brought into the country for forced labor or sex every year, primarily from East Asia, Mexico and Central America, according to estimates in a 2006 State Department report.

Enticed with promises of work or money, victims find themselves in unfamiliar places, threatened with harm by their captors if they try to escape.

“It’s like if we took you to Venezuela and locked you in a house, what choices would you have? If you got out the door, you wouldn’t know where to go or who to call,” said John Price, civil rights agent with the FBI in Charlotte.

The U.S. Attorney’s Office convicted two Mexican nationals in recent months on charges they were operating a sex trafficking ring in South Carolina and North Carolina.

Price said he is not aware of any other trafficking convictions on the state or federal level.

## Asheville cases

Asheville police investigated two suspected sex trafficking operations last year.

In one of the cases, a man contacted detectives in March 2007 and said his niece had been brought to Asheville from Mexico and forced into prostitution.

When the girl escaped, she said her captors made her and another girl serve alcohol and perform sex acts with male patrons at a now-shuttered billiards hall on Haywood Road in West Asheville, police said.

She and her uncle disappeared when police started investigating, said Asheville Police Officer Tammy Bryson, who worked on the case. The alleged traffickers also fled the area by the time police mounted an extensive investigation.

Officers in November 2007 also discovered an abandoned Emma Road trailer near the city-county line in which a woman and young girl reportedly were forced to have sex with numerous customers, Bryson said.

A woman reported the operation to police after she found out her husband had been there.

The girl and woman would not discuss what happened, though the man who operated it admitted they were being prostituted, police said.

Immigration Customs Enforcement deported the man and the girl because they didn’t have enough evidence for criminal charges, Bryson said. The woman, who was a U.S. citizen, disappeared.

“It breaks my heart to think there are young girls out there who need our help, but we can’t help them because we don’t know where they’re at,” Bryson said.

## Raising awareness

The first step toward helping trafficking victims is to find them.

Karen Arias works with the Latino communities of Haywood and Jackson counties as a court victim advocate, offering legal help to immigrants, especially domestic violence victims.

Only one person has told her she suspected a family member was trafficked. She is trying to build trust with people in the immigrant community, whom may be afraid to speak out.

When Arias talks to women at the Jackson County Health Department about various health concerns, she tries to ask subtle questions to determine if they might be victims of abuse or if they are being held against their will.

One of her goals, both for the community and among possible victims, is to remove the stigma of the sex trade so the women can be seen for what they really are.

Fitchpatrick said she thinks many women whom society despises as prostitutes may in fact be victims of sex slavery.

“We can’t just view this person as, ‘Oh, that’s just a prostitute.’ I want people to view them as they are a person,” Fitchpatrick said.

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