

Human trafficking horror stories shared at program

By TRACY X. MIGUEL

Thursday, March 1, 2007

They heard a recording of compiled stories of three Guatemalan women who were human trafficking victims in Southwest Florida.

Tears rolled down several people's faces as they heard how the women, whose names were not released because of the nature of the cases, were forced to have sex with the "coyote" — slang for the man transporting them — and other men.

Penny Rambacher, founder of Miracles in Action, a Naples-based nonprofit organization, spoke to about 50 people Wednesday during a program titled "Human Trafficking in Our Backyard" at the East Naples Library.

Traffickers often lure people with the promise of a better life but enslave them once they cross the border into the United States.

The recording of the women, who at the time they arrived in the U.S. were 12 to 15 years old, warns parents that their daughters could become human trafficking victims and get raped. It was aired in Guatemalan radio stations two weeks ago in two of Guatemala's indigenous languages and Spanish.

Rambacher's goal Wednesday was to increase community awareness of human trafficking and gain community support for Miracles in Action.

Miracles in Action has built seven schools in rural Guatemala and has three more in the works.

"People can make a difference in reducing the desperation and the need for people to want to come to the U.S.," said Rambacher, a 49-year-old flight attendant from East Naples.

Miracles in Action has been raising awareness and funds to help poor families help themselves through education and vocational training.

In Guatemala, 75 percent of people are below the poverty line, according to U.S. government reports.

Among solutions are improving borders and supporting projects that help poor people to help themselves, Rambacher said.

Instead of building walls in the borders, which is an ineffective solution, Rambacher proposed to build schools.

Rambacher continues to stress the importance of parents sending their girls to school.

"If you educate them, they will educate their children," she said.

Among attendees were Cynthia Riker and Dede Stariha, both of East Naples.

After listening to Rambacher, they were pleased with the idea of solutions.

"It's a problem that affects everybody, especially in this area," Riker, 65, said.

During the presentation, John DeStefano, who recently founded a school in Guatemala, announced he would found another school.

DeStefano, 92, visited the primary school he funded for \$20,000 in a remote mountain village of Tierra Colorada, Guatemala, for the first time.

The East Naples resident said he cried when more than 250 students welcomed him.

It still tears him up.

"It was the happiest moment in my life," he said.

He describes the children's faces full of gratefulness and happiness.

Through Miracles in Action, DeStefano, who has lived in East Naples for 17 years, learned about the extreme poverty of the Mayan people living in rural villages without schools and decided to join the organization's efforts to support education.

"They love their country and they want to stay there," DeStefano said. "We are trying to educate them so they can make their own living."

DeStefano battled prostate and bone cancer and has been in remission for one year.

"If it helps just one person I would be very happy," DeStefano said. But he knows that the schools will help a multitude.

The organization also was selling handcrafted items, including colorful beaded jewelry, hand-woven scarves and purses.

Proceeds help support the cottage industry, which enables women to work at their homes. Mayan handcrafted items are available at the gift shop at Unity of Naples Church, 2000 Unity Way, off Davis Boulevard.

“It’s been quite an eye-opener,” said 65-year-old Judy Code, a seasonal resident from Minnesota.

Rambacher is scheduled to speak on human trafficking at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Marco Island Library, 210 S. Heathwood Drive, and 2 p.m. April 3 at Headquarters Library, 2395 Orange Blossom Drive, Naples.



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online