

October 25, 2009

No way out for victims of human trafficking

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A year after Sun Media published a national series exposing Canada's shame in failing to address human trafficking, the Ontario government has yet to label the problem a priority, leaving victims -- and those desperate to help them -- to fend for themselves.

It has been 11 years since Timea Nagy walked off a plane from Budapest to Toronto, into the hands of traffickers who would change the course of her life.

Eleven years since her dreams of Canada, of learning English, of making enough money to avoid eviction were crushed with a cloak of captivity.

Eleven years since she was raped, dressed up and forced to smile so Toronto's clientele could believe she was selling her body because she wanted to.

Eleven years since all of this and countless stories just like it and yet, little has changed in the way we treat the slaves among us.

And for this, Nagy shares her story.

It was 1999.

Project Almonzo was well under way with cops across the Greater Toronto Area plucking foreign strippers and their handlers from clubs that were fronts for prostitution.

As Nagy grabbed a copy of the newspaper and used what little English she had acquired to read about Almonzo, University of Toronto researchers Lynn McDonald, Brooke Moore and Natalya Timoshkina placed ads in ethnic newspapers, calling for migrant sex workers to participate in a study that would reveal slavery on our soil.

Their ground-breaking, government-funded report was supposed to change the way human trafficking is addressed in this country.

It didn't.

"This phenomenon has been around for a while and information about this has been around for a decade already," Timoshkina says in her York University office. "The fact that there are so many people who don't know about it, I just, I don't know, are we living in a bubble?"

While the federal government dances around the issue of creating a national strategy to combat human trafficking, at the provincial level, you will be hard-pressed to find any mention of the term.

Non-governmental groups are scraping the barrel for cash to save victims, but even they remain unorganized, desperate for guidance, structure, even a mandate saying that slavery is a priority in



Timea Nagy was trafficked into the Canadian sex trade with threats made against her family in Hungary before escaping three months later. (SUN MEDIA)

this province.

As for police, the officers who are passionate about tackling trafficking admit they can't do it alone, though they feel as though they are.

She looked like a cool stay-at-home mom. With dyed red hair and a friendly demeanour, this was the woman who recruited Nagy for what she thought would be a summer of nannying, housekeeping or go-go dancing in Canada.

They met at McDonald's after Nagy answered an ad in a local Budapest newspaper -- "You know, 'Domestic work in Canada,' " Nagy recalls in her modest Toronto basement suite.

Life had been going in the right direction for 19-year-old Nagy. She had been a model student and at 14, landed an internship at a local TV station that would lead to her own show and music video production company. She had interviewed Hungarian and American stars alike: Akos, Backstreet Boys, Nagy smiles when she remembers these times.

But she and her brother weren't responsible with their money. And come April 1998, when the wheels of Budapest's music industry slowed down, the pair faced eviction.

The newspaper ad seemed to be just the ticket.

Nagy's excitement mingled with the culture shock of walking through Pearson airport where even the water fountains were different.

More of a shock was when the Hungarian men who met Nagy outside told her she would have to strip to pay back the cash they spent flying her to Canada and getting her a work permit.

At first, it was \$2,500. But they always found a way to make that number grow.

It would be easy to say everything has changed in the way victims are treated today, compared to the time when Nagy was trafficked.

A temporary resident permit is now available for victims brought from abroad who have no status in this country. And more and more, police and politicians are calling them just that: Victims.

A set of human trafficking charges have been enacted into the Criminal Code and a small, but growing number of police services are using them. There have even been some convictions.

Winnipeg MP Joy Smith tabled a bill earlier this year that calls for minimum sentences for child traffickers -- a bill that passed third reading Sept. 30.

But still, there are those who still see Nagy as just a stripper; the 15-year-old girl manipulated and controlled in a Mississauga motel room as just a hooker; the unpaid and abused nanny as just a nanny who is better off than she was before coming to this true north, strong and free.

What would Torontonians see if the veil covering human trafficking victims in this city was lifted?

"I think they would see a lot of human tragedy and hear a lot of gut-wrenching stories and they'll believe that it was actually happening for so many years right in front of their nose, here in Toronto, in Canada, one of the top seven countries in the world," Timoshkina says. "The fact that it's happening and it's happening right next door to you is a really scary thing. And again, the infuriating thing is that

so little is being done about it."

Through her most recent study, put out by The Wellesley Institute in August, Timoshkina found social service agencies that have seen "dozens" of family trafficking cases: Victims brought over on visitor or student visas from places like Thailand, The Philippines, Eastern Europe by relatives, only to be held as sex slaves across the GTA.

"In some scenarios, the women were used as 'housekeepers during the week and whores on the weekends,' " the report notes. "In other scenarios, the women were kept essentially as sex slaves: They were locked up in the basements, fully controlled, not given any money, and abused. If the women managed to escape, it was usually by chance, and they had to leave behind all their possessions and documents."

But then where do these victims go after slipping in and out of shelters and medical centres, leaving nothing behind but their stories? They don't want to tell on the family members who have hurt them. And they don't want to shame the ones who have not. Nobody seems equipped to help them.

And then there are the domestics, the Canadian women and girls holed up in Canadian motel rooms, Canadian strip clubs, doling out sex for Canadian clientele.

"We have always said that we were a country of freedom, a country of growth and prosperity, but you can't have that when our most vulnerable group, our children, are being exploited and that's being accepted," Smith says in an interview after an anti-trafficking rally in Toronto. "It's not acceptable and it shouldn't be under the public radar screen. It should be right on top."

"Unless you understand what human trafficking is and what can be involved, you wouldn't believe some of the stories," says Brenda Wootten, director of Florence Booth House, a downtown Toronto Salvation Army shelter. "That's the one thing I've found since educating myself, that there's no story that's too far out there."

Nagy says she lost herself in the first half hour after walking into a strip club the night she landed in Toronto.

Clothes, make-up and high shoes were given to this young woman who always dressed so conservatively. Another Hungarian girl joined her on stage. She showed Nagy how to take her clothes off, how to be sexy.

The gravity of the situation sunk in when she turned to the mirror at the back of the stage and saw herself in only underwear and heels, the young woman she once was, buried under layers of make-up.

In the coming months, she would be forced to dance through her period and survive off a grilled cheese sandwich and iced tea per 12-hour shift, shaving her once attractive figure down to just 80 pounds, she says.

And there was sex.

There was sex when she was raped by her driver -- the man who kissed her goodbye when he left, "as if I wanted it," leaving her to scrub him away with a cheap motel towel until the skin along her body was as red as the skin on her face, scratched as it was by his whiskers.

There was sex at the massage parlour where, upon her arrival, a young woman showed her the towels, the shower and the menu of massages -- topless, bikini, just in case the cops came -- before telling her that really, it was this much for 30 minutes and this much for an hour.

What happened during the purchased time was up to the customers.

About two and a half months in, Nagy told one of her handlers she was excited to go home in two weeks when her work permit was up. But would she come back? he asked. No, she didn't want to.

But she had to come back, he said. And that's when she realized, she had to escape.

She used a dictionary to communicate with employees at a club where her handlers weren't allowed inside. A plan was concocted to whisk her away.

Threats followed her to Budapest. Turmoil led her back to Toronto.

She returned to a strip club -- what else did she know? -- this time scrubbing floors, selling shooters and waiting tables. Months passed before the DJ came in with a newspaper article detailing Project Almonzo. Hey, that story was about her. Nagy went to the cops.

Fast forward 10 years, through the failed relationships and hidden past, to the decision, now, to step out from her dark corner. She even made a website, walk-with-me.org.

Nagy knows there are other victims out there who are hurting, who feel they have nobody to talk to. This is who she wants to help.

"There's no nightmares, just the feeling of being really lonely, just really lonely," Nagy says of the demons she hopes will leave after she is able to help others like her. "I just need to get it out of me and once it's out, it's out and I'll just deal with it and go back to the normal life eventually."

"But it feels good to be me, the true me, for the first time in a very long time," she says. "I feel good. I feel so good."

LANDMARK STUDY LARGELY IGNORED

In November 2000, a landmark federally-funded study on human trafficking, titled "Migrant Sex Workers from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: The Canadian Case," was published. Among its recommendations:

- "... a more visible, more inviting and active network of services solely devoted to their needs seems necessary. Traditional services do not seem to work."

- "Promote further development and provide funding for existing social service agencies that are solely devoted to the sex trade. These agencies must become an integral component of the sex industry, engaging in very active outreach in the clubs and the massage studios. Their access to clubs and studios should be mandated by law."

- "Develop and fund interdisciplinary, joint service operations similar to the successful Project Almonzo which works to combat organized prostitution."

In August 2009, another report penned by two of the original authors, titled "Building Partnerships for Service Provision to Migrant Sex Workers," was put out by The Wellesley Institute. Among its findings:

- While there has been a "dramatic increase in the number of organizations that provide(d) or could provide services to migrant sex workers" since the last study, those organizations lack funding,

training and organization

- There is a "pressing need for co-ordinated efforts in the development and delivery of services to migrant sex workers."

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