

Raising Awareness of Human Trafficking

Record Bee

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On June 30 at the Lodge at Blue Lakes, Soroptimist International of Clear Lake is hosting an event to raise awareness about human trafficking. Elle Snow, trafficking survivor and founder of Game Over, an anti-trafficking organization, will be the featured speaker.

At the June 30 event, Snow, a Soroptimist member, will share her story and explain what she is doing to spare others from falling victim to trafficking. She will also take questions from the audience and discuss the work of Game Over, the nonprofit she founded to combat sex trafficking.

A sad commentary on society and a tough subject to tackle, human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud or coercion to lure women, children and men of every age and background into slavery, often sexual. It's hard to accept as a reality in our community but according to sex trafficking survivors and officials in several north state communities, rural areas are becoming prime targets.

Soroptimist members have been discussing the issue of trafficking since the decision to feature Snow at the annual Spring Fling — held last March at the Twin Pine Casino Event Center in Middletown.

Through her presentation, Snow helped the group understand the nature of the problem, its reach into our communities, and the impact on our children. She also provided a glimpse of how hard it is to escape, once under control of this form of enslavement.

At the conclusion of the event, Snow stayed on to speak with a long line of guests who wanted to meet her. Many expressed an interest in having her back for a more in-depth conversation. That conversation will take place when Snow returns to Lake County on June 30.

The subject has legs. According to the Northern California Anti-Trafficking Coalition, a non-profit organization based in Shasta County, human trafficking is the second largest and fastest growing criminal enterprise — just below drug trafficking.

Recently, at a meeting of the Rural Counties Representatives of California (including Lake County), the elected officials discussed trafficking as a specific topic on their agenda. In Humboldt County, the issue was discussed in a recent Board of Supervisors meeting.

Closer to home, in Mendocino County, the Rotary Club of South Ukiah began a Human Trafficking Prevention Campaign in 2016. According to its president, Salvadore Rico, the campaign has drawn the interest and support of Ukiah law enforcement entities, the California Highway Patrol, Redwood Community Services, the Ukiah Soroptimists as well as several businesses and the Greater Ukiah Chamber of Commerce.

On a local level, I recently attended one of the Exploitation Prevention Workshops sponsored by three of the campaign partners, the South Ukiah Rotary, Ukiah Chamber and Redwood Community Services, Inc.

Providing tools to identify this menacing problem is one way to prevent it from taking hold in our communities and the workshop focused on the importance of prevention programs. Workshop facilitator, Guido Hajenius of iEMPATHIZE, a non-profit dedicated to eradicating exploitation, explained that traffickers are masters of disguise; they blend in, lurking on the Internet and in the fabric of our communities.

At particularly high risk of being victimized are homeless youth and run-aways. With an estimated 500 children considered to be homeless (see May 4, 2017 Record-Bee article by Zack Jordan) here in Lake County we are surely vulnerable to trafficking.

If prevention is key to protecting our children its logical precursor is awareness.

So please save the date for our June 30 event at the Lodge at Blue Lakes. Planning is underway and ticket information will be available soon. In the meantime, if you are interested in attending, partnering with Soroptimist International of Clear Lake or sponsoring the event, please call 707-998-1302.

<http://www.record-bee.com/lifestyle/20170519/raising-awareness-of-human-trafficking>