

Nationwide human trafficking sting rescues 168 juveniles

Law cracks down on problem; local organizations raising awareness

By Alison Fox
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MILWAUKEE — In a nationwide operation, law enforcement officials have arrested 281 pimps and rescued 168 victims of human trafficking.

Over a four-day period, six juveniles were rescued and 21 pimps were arrested in Wisconsin, according to a press release from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Wisconsin Law Enforcement Operation Cross Country.

The purpose of Operation Cross Country, which is part of the Innocence Lost National Initiative, is to address the growing problem of domestic child sex trafficking in the United States.

Robert J. Shields, Jr., special agent in charge of the Milwaukee Division of the FBI, partnered with numerous Wisconsin law enforcement and social service agencies to participate in the operation, which was held last week in 106 U.S. cities.

"The FBI and its partners recognize that human trafficking and crimes against children not only impacts metropolitan areas such as Milwaukee but affects communities across the whole state," said Shields. "Although we participated in Operation Cross Country Eight, we will remain vigi-



Submitted photos

Serve Marketing founder Gary Mueller tells the public about being aware of human trafficking and the many ways the problem can be prevented.

lant with our federal, state, and law enforcement partners in bringing those individuals to justice who prey on our most vulnerable citizens."

Angela Mancuso, executive director of The Women's Center Inc. in Waukesha, said human trafficking has been an issue in Waukesha County, as well as all counties in Wisconsin, for years. She said every county has had reports regarding human trafficking cases.

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While law enforcement continues to crack down on this underground problem, nonprofit organizations are working together to prevent it by raising public awareness.

Serve Marketing, a nonprofit ad agency, and Clear Channel, an outdoor advertising company, partnered with the city of Milwaukee and various Milwaukee organizations, including the Human Trafficking Force of Greater Milwaukee, to launch the "Unlucky 13" campaign at a press conference Tuesday morning.

Debbie Zwicky sits on the Human Trafficking Force Committee and is the human trafficking coordinator for Lad Lake, a Dousman organization that helps youth with troubled backgrounds. She said the campaign's title derives from research released by the FBI, citing that 13 is the average age a person starts being trafficked for sex.

April Bentley, a human trafficking survivor, said she was lost in the world of trafficking for 19 years. She said she left home at a young age to look for love and came across a woman whom she felt comfortable with. The woman eventually betrayed Bentley's trust by introducing her to drugs and persuading her to use her body to help pay the bills.

"Thirteen — unlucky — that is the number of the average age," Bentley said. "It's the age we rebel and don't want our parents telling us what to do. It's so easy for someone to open up their house and say 'Here, you can do whatever you want to do' — and then you're gone."

Bentley said she barely spoke in those 19 years. She said she did what she was told and was afraid to leave. After looking at the person she had become, she finally found courage to break away and get the help she needed.

"I used to sing, I had a lot of life," she said. "I wanted that back."

Zwicky said the campaign is being launched the first week of summer because it's the season where children are always outside playing and often under supervised. She said the purpose is not to scare parents, but inform them that human trafficking exists and should be on their radar.

The number "13" was spray-painted around Milwaukee by Serve Volunteers, and ads superimposed with "13" and children's faces were placed on 60 bus stops throughout the city. Digital billboards will be also be running in the Waukesha County area.

"This is the only graffiti that I have ever gotten excited about," said Bevan K. Baker, Milwaukee's commissioner of health, who spoke at the press conference. "Seventy-two counties in Wisconsin, not one was not impacted at some time by human trafficking."

Serve Marketing founder Gary Mueller said the "Unlucky 13" campaign was created because the organization found a majority of people don't realize that human trafficking is a problem on a local level.

"We are here because we are sick and tired of hearing people say there is not a human trafficking problem," Mueller said. "The major question to ask now is how to prevent it, and we all know prevention starts with awareness and that's the key to what 'Unlucky 13' is all about."

Mueller said he encourages parents to be nosy when it comes to their children. He said parents should know where their kids are, what they are doing and monitor their phones and social media pages.

The campaign also launched a website, www.unluckythirteen.org, that displays facts and warning signs related to human trafficking. Mueller encourages people to explore the site and get on social media outlets to help spread the word on the issue.

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