

Rally planned at Miami Dade College to campaign against human trafficking

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STARTED NONPROFIT: Katariina Rosenblatt, a survivor of human trafficking and now an activist against it, will share her story at the MDC rally on Friday.

To Katariina Rosenblatt, news about a 13-year-old who was prostituted and who danced naked at a Miami Beach club is much more than an alarming headline.

It is an echo of her own life.

Like the minor who worked as an exotic dancer at Club Madonna, Rosenblatt was recruited for prostitution at the same age.

In the next four years, Rosenblatt said, she was sold and raped multiple times and became addicted to cocaine, which made her dependent on her “pimp.”

That is why Rosenblatt was not surprised when she heard the news of a Broward woman arrested in New York in late January, charged with setting up her 15-year-old daughter for prostitution during the Super Bowl weekend.

“This news saddened me, but unfortunately, it is a common problem in our communities,” said Rosenblatt, now an activist who works with victims of human trafficking. “Victims may be sold by a pimp they met on the street, or even by their own parents.”

Rosenblatt finally escaped her abusers and slowly began to recover.

She recently completed a doctorate from Nova Southeastern University. She also is the founder of There is H.O.P.E. For Me (thereishopeforme.org), a nonprofit organization that helps victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Rosenblatt will share her story Friday night at the One Billion Rising For Justice movement at the Wolfson campus of Miami Dade College. The event will be from 4-7 p.m. and will be commemorated worldwide by supporters demanding the arrest of those who participate in domestic violence and trafficking.

The recent human-trafficking cases show an increasing trend. Last year, cases of trafficking in children and adults - mostly women - were reported in all 50 states. Florida is

the third state in the nation in the numbers of calls to federal tip lines reporting cases of human trafficking.

Like many people who are being marketed for sex, Rosenblatt did not see herself as a victim.

“I thought [the pimps] were my family,” she said. “Once I managed to get home and my mom took me to the police but they said I was a juvenile delinquent. I smoked cigarettes, had a drug problem and had dropped out of school. They said no one would believe me.”

Luckily for Rosenblatt, her mother persisted in her efforts to get her daughter out of the human trafficking business.

In the past two years government agencies have gained ground in the fight to stop human trafficking. In 2012, Florida legislators made changes in the human trafficking law to strengthen it.

Those convicted of human trafficking can now get up to life in prison.

Also in 2012, Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle’s office created a special task force of federal and state law enforcement agents to investigate human trafficking crimes.

In early 2012, there were no cases directly related to human trafficking. By January 2013, about 35 cases were reported. Today, there are more than 50 ongoing investigations.

Because of these changes, a trafficker named David Salomon was sentenced in Miami-Dade to 65 years in prison after his December conviction on one count of human trafficking involving commercial sexual exploitation of a minor. It is believed that his case was the first in Florida where someone was indicted, prosecuted and convicted under the new statutes.

The investigation originated when a 15-year-old girl offered to perform sexual acts on two undercover Miami police officers. Police determined that Salomon was nearby, giving the girl instructions through a cellphone. Police seized the phone and arrested him.

Despite the progress, activists stress that more changes are still needed to punish those who practice modern slavery.

Also, law enforcement officers need to be trained on how to recognize the difference between victims and offenders and educational programs, resources and shelter are needed to help those rescued heal and reintegrate into society, activists say.