

STREETS OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Cruising the wild side, to aid exploited girls

■ A small, eclectic advocacy group tackles the tough streets of South Florida, looking for young victims of sex traffickers.

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The outreach workers and volunteers fan out in some of the toughest, most unforgiving neighborhoods of Miami, searching neon-lit streets, darkened corners and alleys, and motels for victims of sexual trafficking.

Too often, it is a search for baby faces.

“You look in their eyes • TURN TO TRAFFICKING, 20A

and you know they are young and scared and they have no business being there,” says Sandy Skelaney, program manager of Project GOLD, a Miami-based, anti-sex trafficking outreach program. “You know they are living a life of chaos.”

As part of Project GOLD, Skelaney leads a changing



STREET OUTREACH: Sarah Cox asks a motel desk clerk if she has spotted any of the runaway girls on the group's radar this night.

ARKASHA STEVENSON/
MIAMI HERALD STAFF

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— Sandy Skelaney, program manager of Project GOLD, a Miami-based, anti-sex trafficking outreach program



WATCHFUL EYES: Sandy Skelaney, who survived her own difficult youth and now works with young, troubled victims of sexual exploitation.

ARKASHA STEVENSON/
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A RIDE ON THE SEAMY SIDE

• TRAFFICKING, FROM 1A

cast of community volunteers — a ballerina, an attorney, a teacher, a Marine, students and mothers — in an ambitious effort to reach minors in crisis and shift the thinking that underage prostitutes are criminals rather than victims. Twice a month, the group heads to the streets to find the underaged and victimized, home-grown or brought to South Florida by force or false dreams, only to become sex workers.

The volunteers often face girls in denial, steered against strangers. Rescues are more about laying the groundwork to help girls find a way out than whisking them away from it all. And if the girls do take that first step, it takes fortitude and a whole lot of assistance to help restore their lives, rebuild their self-esteem and establish stability.

It's difficult to pinpoint statistics but authorities and advocates rank South Florida among the nation's hotspots for human trafficking. Nearly every area law enforcement agency has tackled the problem through individual initiatives, partnerships or task forces including government and social-service agencies.

FORGING TIES

On this Thursday night, the volunteers include a cop, a social worker, a homeless advocate and a student. They descend on the seamier stretches of Biscayne Boulevard, 79th Street and State Road 7 in North Miami-Dade. Each tract, divided by the group, is distinguished by cheap motels, hookers and hustlers amid the drive-thrus, laundromats and food markets.

The mission is to find underage sex workers and missing children, even those who may seem to be walking the streets voluntarily. They also hope to forge relationships with hotel and motel staffs, business owners and members of the community who may come in contact with young victims.

"Our greatest challenge is finding the victims. We know they are there," Skelaney says. "We have dealt with more than 100 clients in two years, so we know they are here, somewhere, holed up in hotels or strip clubs. Maybe crashing on somebody's couch."

It's just before 11 p.m. and one of the eastern blocks of 79th Street is buzzing. A male, in heavy make-up and feminine clothing, paces and talks on a cell-phone. Two school-age boys, still in uniforms, walk by. A small grocery store is full of customers buying cigarettes and lottery tickets. Ami Lawson, a longtime homeless advocate, photographer and volunteer outreach coordinator, walks into the store carrying pictures of missing teenage girls and toting her pet Maltese Rufus, a help in disarming strangers. She waits for the clerk as he makes change behind a bullet-proof window. She shows him photos of 18 faces, all from Miami-Dade.

"We are out here looking for these girls," Lawson says unflinchingly. "We are hoping they aren't in trouble."

A PROMISING LEAD

The clerk says he doesn't know them. But a teenager standing nearby points to a girl missing from Homestead. She recognizes the face.

"I swear I was in foster care with her," she says, pointing to the last girl on the last row. "Let me text someone and try to get some information."

It is the first promising lead of the night — and a familiar mo-



FACES OF THE MISSING: Armed with a gallery of photos, the team talks to street kids, hotel clerks, business owners and anyone else who might offer useful information.

ment in these encounters.

Night after night, the group is faced with navigating audiences that may be especially helpful or hostile. Help from a member of the community can be crucial.

"You have 30 seconds to two minutes to get your message across that we are here to help. Sometimes that is said as much with body language [as] actual words," Skelaney says. "You have to fine-tune your senses so you can connect to the streets."

When team members do identify a potential victim, he or she is given an innocent-looking business card — featuring a picture of shoes, or flowers, or a young woman — with a rescue hotline number discreetly listed. They only approach girls who are alone, never those in pairs for fear one of them is acting as a "manager" to the pimp and will report back.

Those who want help or call the hotline are offered a safe place to stay at a shelter near the Miami River, where they receive support services.

Preparation for the volunteers includes three hours of training, two street outreach sessions, a background check and watching *Very Young Girls*, a film that documents the sexual exploitation of children.

Morgan Soumah, a mother and graduate student, went on her first street outreach last month.

"I knew I wanted to be on the ground working with people," says Soumah, of Coral Gables. "When you are trying to help victims, you have to go to them."

Skelaney, 38, launched the street outreach arm of Project GOLD a year ago as a direct way to reach victims. GOLD — which is a program of Kristi House, an advocacy center for sexually abused children — provides specialized services for commercially sexually exploited girls in Miami-Dade, age 11 to 18, including case management, therapy and youth leadership programming. It is funded primarily through the Department of Justice, private grants and individual donations.

DEBUNKING MYTHS

Project GOLD includes a partnership with Miami Bridge, which offers emergency shelter for victims, but also connects with local students in middle and high schools.

Teresa Guzman, of Miami Bridge, conducts weekly workshops about runaway prevention but also works to debunk myths about glamorous street lifestyles.



WORKING AS A TEAM: Volunteer and Barry University student Morgan Soumah (taking notes) with Sandy Skelaney, program manager of Project Gold, and Emily Penna, right, another volunteer.

"I am very realistic about the kind of life they are facing when they run away or get in the life, and also help them to understand the signs of sex trafficking," she says. "If I am dealing with them by the time they are at the shelter, one of the most important things is to make sure they do not feel like we are passing judgment in any way."

Skelaney brought her own story of trouble and triumph to the program. She dropped out of college, then spent three years in the streets, squatting in an abandoned building in New York, panhandling for spare change. Skelaney says with the help of therapy, she returned to college and went on to earn a master's degree from Yale. Her experiences drew her to the field and she later worked for anti-trafficking organizations in Bangkok and New York before starting Project GOLD in 2007.

"I have not experienced sexual exploitation but I know what it feels like to be desperate or to be abused or have my own past weighing me down," she says one afternoon in her Miami office. "I also know about overcoming circumstances and healing and that is probably the best part of my story that I can offer these girls."

She points to the success stories. One Miami girl was prostituted at 14, working the 79th Street stretch and traveling to Orlando and Atlanta with her pimp. She came to Project GOLD as a referral after a few run-ins with police who were looking for missing children. After intense therapy and counseling sessions, the girl left the life, finished high school, is applying for college and has even told her story to professionals who combat sex-trafficking.

"This was someone who didn't want help from us. Now

she is one of our youth leaders and often helps us with our outreaches, giving us insight and advising on how to approach the victims," says Skelaney. "Now she wants to use her own story to empower others."

LONGER ROAD

For others, the road is much longer.

Ann, a Miami-Dade runaway, walked a stretch of Flagler Street west of downtown. A john became her pimp. She was 14 years old.

"He started to sell me a dream that I could make tons of money. Not long after, he started hitting me, beating me and forcing me to work the streets," she says. "I was extremely depressed and it took a while for me to see what I was doing to myself."

Ann joined Project GOLD in 2008 but has had setbacks. Still, she is attending counseling sessions.

"I want to better myself," says Ann, now 18. "I am struggling to get back on my feet."

In 2008, the South Florida Human Trafficking Task Force was formed to police the southern end of Florida, from Fort Pierce to Key West. That year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement made 126 convictions on human trafficking charges, including sex trafficking. In 2009, the number of convictions increased to 165. In the fall of 2008, ICE rescued two girls, ages 14 and 16, who were working at an escort service operated by David Pierre out of his Fort Lauderdale home. He was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of sex trafficking of minors and later sentenced to 120 months in prison. The investigation was part of Operation Predator, a national ICE initiative targeting human traffickers, including those who prey on

children. Since its launch in 2003, more than 12,000 have been arrested.

HIGH NUMBERS

Since 2004, the FBI has recovered 147 children in Miami, Tampa and Jacksonville as part of its national Innocence Lost Initiative, aimed at addressing domestic sex trafficking. Miami and Tampa are among 13 hubs of child prostitution, the FBI says.

"This is a major destination for pimps to bring the girls. We saw it last Super Bowl, where we had arrests of people here from as far away as Hawaii," said John Gillis, FBI Miami Division Special Agent in Charge.

In the United States, the average age of entry into prostitution is 12 to 14 years old and the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children estimates there are about 100,000 to 150,000 American children exploited in the sex trade annually.

"We are fighting two distinct forms of sex trafficking here. One is the high end, more sophisticated escort services. The other is lower end, where you have children — international and domestic, runaways and those abducted who are being trafficked," says Assistant Agent in Charge Carmen Pino, of ICE Homeland Security Investigations. "Our own children are being sold over and over like commodities."

In May 2009, the Florida Department of Children & Families began tracking human and sex trafficking victims through its agency's hotline. To date, the agency has received nearly 400 phone calls, with about a quarter from Miami-Dade or Broward counties.

Last year during Super Bowl week, eight teams from a coalition of groups including GOLD canvassed the county — from South Beach to downtown Miami to Hialeah — for underage girls who had been trafficked by pimps to South Florida as sex workers. The groups found six missing children and removed two girls from "dangerous situations."

BACK TO BISCAYNE

On this evening, after a run to State Road 7 to talk with a series of motel clerks, the outreach group, including volunteers from StandUp For Kids, split into two cars and return to the Biscayne strip.

The neon \$35-a-night sign beckons visitors into the Camelot Inn off Biscayne. Inside, a television blares from a television in the foyer as Skelaney and Lawson patiently wait for the hotel clerk to scan the pictures of the missing girls.

"I've seen her," he says, gesturing to a photo of a round-faced, doe-eyed girl. He leans in, brings the paper closer, squints. "Her too."

Luis Fernando remembers seeing the two girls on the flier walking the streets, separately and always at night. He says one is now a blonde — an important detail in the search — with a cigarette habit. He remembers the other one jumping in and out of men's cars.

The next week, Skelaney is following up on the leads, trying to piece together the short, troubled lives of the girls. She typically shares the most solid tips with law enforcement and juvenile authorities who help with the searches.

"As much as you want to help, you can't jump out of the car, follow them and harass them into getting in your car," she says. "You have to approach in a way that engages so they want your help. And you have to know that it may be long term, but that your efforts are worth it."