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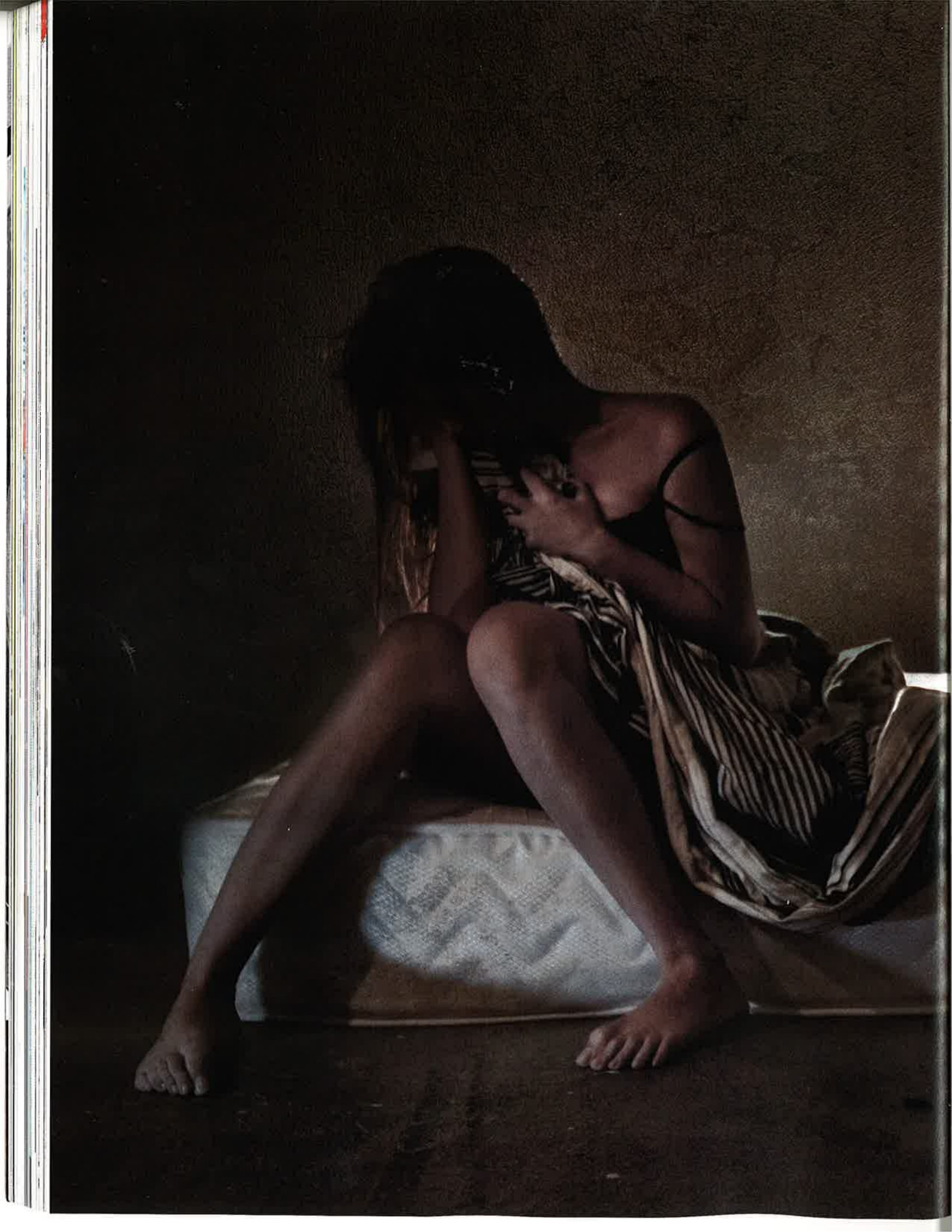
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SEX TRAFFICKING IN SOUTH FLORIDA

The tri-county area has become a hotbed for the commercial sexual exploitation of youth. In this special report, *Boca Raton* takes readers inside the world of modern-day slavery, including a rare interview with a victim of forced sexual labor.

Reporting by Lisa Lucas



The room had no windows, bare walls and a single red light bulb swinging precariously from a wire in the ceiling. There was no furniture save for a tattered, stained mattress on the cement floor, which was littered with empty beer cans and a few used condoms. The space smelled of cigarettes, perspiration and the lingering, pungent odor of sex.

This is where Aliyah would "prove" herself to two madams running a Miami whorehouse by servicing her first client—an obese man, dripping with sweat as he approached her. When the stench of his body odor reached her nostrils, Aliyah began to cry.

"I begged him not to touch me," Aliyah says.

This was her lucky day. The man, apparently touched by her tears, gave her a small roll of bills and said they didn't have to do anything. Aliyah was 14.

Her luck, however, was about to run out.



Girls as young as 12 were forced to commit acts of prostitution inside this stash house in West Palm Beach.

Soon, this beautiful South Florida high school girl with braces, born to a middle-class Cuban-American family, was being forced by her keepers into acts of prostitution of which she could no longer cry her way out—in a house from which she could not escape.

Aliyah had become part of one of the largest criminal enterprises in the world, second only to the drug trade. Human trafficking, modern-day slavery by any definition, generates global profits of more than \$32 billion, according to the United Nations. Commercial sexual servitude, which too often claims the innocence of girls Aliyah's age, accounts for 1.4 million of the 12.3 million adults and children estimated by the International Labor Organization to be victims of forced labor around the world. The transient nature of South Florida, coupled with its standing as a prime tourist destination and its many ports of call, has made it one of the country's hotbeds for sexual trafficking.

Aliyah is one of hundreds of local girls who have been given a chance to heal emotionally and physically at Kristi

House, the Miami-based advocacy center for sexually abused and exploited children. According to Sandy Skelaney, who runs the anti-sex trafficking program Project GOLD (Girls Owning their Lives and Dreams) through Kristi House, Aliyah fits the profile of many victims of forced sexual labor.

"The girls are vulnerable; they've already been abused at home as children, they're living in unhealthy environments," says Skelaney, who arranged for *Boca Raton* to speak to Aliyah. "Ninety percent are runaways, 60 percent are foster children—and if they've been sexually abused in the home, they are four times more likely to be exploited."

Aliyah's older half-brother began sexually abusing her when she was 8. At age 12, Aliyah finally confided her nightmare to a friend, who told her mother. That woman immediately contacted Aliyah's mother. The police were notified, but the half-brother, by then in his late teens and on his own, was not arrested. Tensions mounted at home over the next year, and Aliyah began sneaking out at night to hang with girlfriends.

"My friends asked me if I wanted to make money so I wouldn't have to go home anymore and listen to all the bitching," Aliyah says.

That was all she needed to hear. Aliyah agreed to meet a group of girls at a Miami tattoo parlor. The tattoo artist, a recruiter for the two madams running the whorehouse, explained that Aliyah needed a tattoo, "like a brand," to gain entrance into a world that would guarantee freedom from her family and money to burn.

Once there, Aliyah quickly learned that the cost of that freedom came at a price she never could have imagined.

SILENT CRIMES

Aliyah, now 17, is one of the rare South Florida victims to speak on the record about her involvement in sexual trafficking—and even her interview came with conditions about what could and could not be discussed. There are local advocates, and several national and state agencies, working to combat this ever-growing epidemic, but details about investigations, arrests and victims

often are vague due to the high-level authorities involved, the lurid nature of sexual slavery and the ages of the victims. Agency officials interviewed for this story offered few specifics regarding actual cases and spoke more about raising awareness.

This much we do know. In 2009, there were 566 investigations into human and sexual trafficking in South Florida—and 165 convictions—according to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Some stories manage to find their way into the local press, although details are usually sparse and sketchy. In August 2010, the *Palm Beach Post* reported on two sisters lured from Honduras who came to South Florida expecting to clean houses and serve as nannies. Instead, according to the article, “the young women were forced to dance for groping men in grimy nightclubs and to sell sex in a trailer park nearby ... They suffered invisibly until one of them got pregnant, and the FBI started an investigation.”

Last May, the *Sun Sentinel* reported that an Oakland Park man and his girlfriend were arrested by federal officials for selling underage girls for sex at their home, aka the “Boom Boom Room.” Authorities told the *Sun Sentinel* that agents interviewed a 16-year-old girl, who offered details about the

marijuana while adult pornography aired on a big-screen TV.”

Like Aliyah, the girl was promised money for dancing in her underwear and more for sex. After smoking marijuana that she believed was laced with other drugs, the teen had two paid sexual encounters, including a threesome involving her 14-year-old cousin, as well as “orientation” sex with the

each year are drawn into the sex trade in the United States—with the average age of a sex trafficking victim 13 and 14. As noted in “Playground,” the 2009 documentary on child sex slavery executive produced by George Clooney, the number one destination for Americans seeking sex with a child—is America.

MYTH VS. REALITY

One of the biggest misconceptions associated with sex trafficking is the false belief that victims are criminals. The myth, according to Skelaney, is that children or adults who are recruited for commercial sex are prostitutes or “street walkers.”

“That couldn’t be further from the truth,” Skelaney says. “They are forcefully being prostituted and sexually exploited. They are not doing this on their own. It’s sexual abuse.”

Tyson Elliott, human trafficking coordinator for the state’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) in Tallahassee, dedicates considerable time to training law enforcement officials and juvenile facilities about the distinction between prostitution and trafficking.

“With prostitution, the girls have the ability to consent,” Elliott says. “Even if they have a drug habit or need money,

SIGNS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

HERE ARE SIX TIP-OFFS COMMONLY ASSOCIATED WITH VICTIMS OF SEXUAL SLAVERY.

- [] Evidence of being controlled
- [] Evidence of inability to move or leave a job
- [] Bruises or signs of physical abuse
- [] Fear and/or depression
- [] Not speaking on their own behalf
- [] No paperwork or identification

If you think you have encountered a victim of trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at 888/373-7888.

“If you didn’t obey, one of the madams would beat you with a broom handle or starve you.”

—Aliyah

April night that she sold her body at the house. The girl described a room, according to the article, with “10 to 15 women and girls—some naked, some in their underwear—who were dancing before a group of men in the living room ... [people] were drinking and smoking

Oakland Park man arrested by the FBI task force.

Although most stories like this go unreported, the numbers suggest that the tales are far too familiar. According to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, an estimated 100,000 children



Local activist Renee Morrison launched *In My Backyard* to combat child sex trafficking in the county.

they do it willingly. They have a choice. With sex trafficking, they are physically and emotionally manipulated—they don't have a choice. It's very similar to the stereotype of domestic abuse [where victims won't leave an abusive relationship]."

Just ask Aliyah.

INSIDE THE NIGHTMARE

After crying her way out of her first encounter, Aliyah was told by her handlers that she could keep every dollar handed to her by the obese "john." That was the last time she was permitted to keep any cash earned during a sexual transaction. "[The madam] made me believe that I could make a lot of money," Aliyah says.

It was one of many methods used by the madams to keep Aliyah and the other four girls in the house under their collective thumb. Soon, Aliyah was not only being forced to have sex with men of all ages and sizes, she was expected to "follow the rules." That meant washing sheets, cleaning common areas and cooking meals in the whorehouse. It meant never leaving the property and never questioning authority.

"If you didn't obey, one of the madams would beat you with a broom handle, slap your face, starve you—or

all three," Aliyah says.

Physical abuse, malnourishment and psychological games are the typical tools that handlers use to maintain power and control over their indentured sexual servants. Victims during the trial of Amador Cortes-Meza, who was sentenced to 40 years in federal prison last spring for sex trafficking minors in Norcross, Ga., testified that he beat them with his fists, belts and sticks, and dragged them around by their hair in order to exert his control. One victim testified that when she refused to prostitute herself, Cortes-Meza threw an iron that sliced open her head—and then denied her medical care.

"The girls become brainwashed," says Adriane Reese, head of the Broward Human Trafficking Coalition. "Then there's Stockholm Syndrome, where they start to relate to their exploiter or handler. Then there is the shame factor. They blame themselves, and they think no one will understand them."

Even if the victims want to, escaping is easier said than done. Traffickers threaten to harm their families, or they hook their sex slaves on drugs or alcohol to create a double dependency. In what is known in trafficking as a "pimp circle," captors will surround a new girl and verbally

and physically attack her until she understands that, if she tries to leave, there are other "pimps" in the brotherhood waiting to enslave her. The handlers stop at nothing to ensure that the girls are totally dependent on them for survival and therefore willing to "behave."

The cash that Aliyah received from her first encounter was an anomaly; traffickers are known to dole out prepaid money cards with meager amounts (such cards can't be traced) so that victims have enough funds only to purchase essentials and nothing else. The girls have no money, and they're isolated from friends and family. They are emotionally, financially and physically imprisoned.

"One girl had just had a baby," Skelaney says, "and the pimp would hold the baby [and threaten to kill it] until she did what he wanted. ... Traffickers abuse their victims until they 'break a bitch.' At that point, the girls are willing to do whatever their captors say."

TRAFFICKERS AND THEIR LOCAL PREY

Nearly half of the state's runaways fall into the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transsexual category. These youngsters, the highest

risk group for engaging in "survival sex," have become easy prey for traffickers. According to Skelaney, the current demand in local trafficking circles is for transient boys, fertile ground in South Florida given the young, foreign-born laborers working in agriculture, construction and tourism.

While the targets of sex traffickers may come as no surprise, those running the businesses certainly defy the stereotypes of pimps and/or madams. They can be family members or next-door neighbors, older father figures or young women. Locally, authorities have shut down trafficking rings run by Japanese gangs, Russian crime organizations and Mexican cartels like the one run by Juan Cadena-Sosa.

In the late 1990s, Cadena-Sosa ran one of the largest prostitution rings in recent Palm Beach County history. According to prosecutors' documents, the organization brought women and girls into the United States, told them that they had incurred a debt and that the only way to pay off the debt was to become a prostitute in one of the many brothels run by the cartel. Many of the handlers were just teenagers—and often victims of abuse as well.

"This isn't a case where [the pimps] are black guys wearing bling and fur," says Elliott of the DCF in Tallahassee. "It's all about making money. These are street-savvy people who will use whatever angle they can to get someone dependent on them."



Adriane Reese of the Broward Human Trafficking Coalition

CONTINUING EDUCATION

THE FOLLOWING NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL WEBSITES PROVIDE DETAILED INFORMATION ON SEX TRAFFICKING, SPECIALIZED SERVICES FOR VICTIMS AND MORE.

DCF HUMAN TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE

WHAT: Reports and resources involving human trafficking in our state

SITE: dcf.state.fl.us/initiatives/humantrafficking

BROWARD HUMAN TRAFFICKING COALITION

WHAT: Raises awareness about human/sex trafficking through outreach, training seminars, networking and more

SITE: bhctc.us

KRISTI HOUSE

WHAT: Provides a safe haven and treatment center in Miami for child victims of sexual abuse; created in the name of a 9-year-old girl who was impregnated by her stepfather

SITE: kristihouse.org

IN MY BACKYARD

WHAT: Foundation launched by Renee Morrison to educate the public and raise awareness about the rising tide of child sex trafficking in Palm Beach County

SITE: imbyfoundation.com/index.php

CAMPAIGN TO RESCUE & RESTORE VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

WHAT: Run through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Administration for Children and Families; provides overview, fact sheets, resources and educational material on trafficking-related issues

SITE: acf.hhs.gov/trafficking

WOMEN IN DISTRESS

WHAT: State-certified full-service domestic violence center that serves Broward County

SITE: womenindistress.org

POLARIS PROJECT

WHAT: National nonprofit initiative, including a national human trafficking resource center, created in 2002 to combat human trafficking and sex slavery.

SITE: polarisproject.org

According to Elliott, traffickers have honed their recruiting methods, and technology has played an increasingly large role in their success. There are the "old-fashioned" recruiting techniques like cruising parks, malls or street corners. Some recruit through fake talent agencies, others by hosting events that promise prizes. That leads to just enough small talk between traffickers and potential recruits to start the initiation process.

"The goal of the pimp is to gain the trust of the recruit," says Reese of the Broward trafficking coalition. "A savvy pimp gets the girl to fall in love with him and keep her afraid and keep her trying to please him. They offer her a place to stay, protection, money, clothing, the basic necessities."

However, the most common form of recruitment is through the Internet.

"[Traffickers] find young vulnerable girls online, and they start grooming them," Elliott says. "They get them to fall in love with them, they even get them to

come to another state. Girls post inappropriate pictures, and then the pimps use that to extort or threaten the girls."

The Internet also is the primary vehicle for soliciting clients. Some (not all) of the escort ads on backpage.com, which

conceal the escort's face. In trafficking-related ads, the contact is typically a disposable cell phone number. The ads also incorporate code that lets potential clients know what to expect; "new in town," for example, indicates that there is fresh

“ Sex trafficking is on the rise because the product, unlike drugs, can be sold and resold. ”

—Tyson Elliott, human trafficking coordinator,
Florida Department of Children and Families

is similar in structure to craigslist.org, are tied to sexual trafficking, according to authorities. Tip-offs include ads with pictures that are cropped or blurred to

and young talent for sale.

Think an affluent area like Boca Raton is somehow immune to such lurid pursuits? Think again. On a random Tuesday in May, 17 of the more than 70 listings on backpage.com for West Palm Beach-area escorts made specific references to Boca Raton.

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

Skelaney blames the proliferation of trafficking on sites like backpage.com, in part, on pop culture's glorification of pimping and prostitution. "There are books about how to be a pimp available online," she says. "There are pimp awards, pimp conferences. Our society has glamorized pimping; it's the subject of movies, rap songs."

Not all pimps, however, are willing participants when it comes to sexual trafficking.

Two years ago, ICE agents busted a trafficking ring that stretched from South Florida to Fort Myers. One of the child prostitution stash houses—a small cottage with a white picket fence, no less—was located at 1704 Lake Avenue in West Palm Beach, across from the Armory Art Center. Inside, while the trafficking ring flourished, girls as young as 12 were forced by their Mexican pimps to service as many as 20 johns a day at \$125 for 15 minutes. Three of the six men charged with trafficking listed the Lake Avenue house as their residence, including Sergio



Sandy Skelaney runs Project GOLD at Kristi House in Miami.

Gonzalez Ramos, who is currently serving a five-year sentence.

Appalled that sexual slavery was going on just miles from her home, local activist Renee Morrison launched the nonprofit In My Backyard Foundation to educate people and combat child sex trafficking in Palm Beach County. Morrison calls herself a "Lone Ranger" when it comes to shedding light on the problem. "Most people are in denial, and even those who want to get involved are afraid of retaliation," she says.

But not Morrison, who, among other things, organized a vigil at the Lake Avenue house last year to keep the issue in the news. Her interest in the subject led to a meeting with Ramos—and a revelation about trafficking.

"The tragedy is that even the traffickers are sometimes victims," Morrison says. "I went to see Ramos in jail, and he cried. He comes from a small village in Mexico. A cartel raided his village and forced him to come to America and oversee the 12-year-olds at the stash house. If he didn't do as he was told, the cartel said they would kill his family."

STARTING OVER

Depending on the source, Florida typically ranks third behind California and Texas when it comes to the highest incidents of sexual trafficking. In South Florida, which hosts its share of major conventions and national events, the problem shows no signs of diminishing. At the last Super Bowl hosted by Miami, in February 2010, state officials had to create a special task force to respond to the influx of indentured escorts, which were brought in from all over the country by traffickers to meet the high demand.

"Sex trafficking is on the rise," Elliott says. "Because the product, unlike drugs, can be sold and resold."

Thankfully, with the help of local organizations like Kristi House, a fortunate few are able to put an end to that cycle.

In the case of Aliyah, it wasn't easy. She would hook up with another trafficker, who got her pregnant (she terminated the pregnancy) and took her to another state. After the police busted the trafficker's brothel, and handcuffed Aliyah to a pole for two hours, her parents were notified. Soon, she would return to South

WHAT'S BEING DONE

HERE ARE JUST SOME OF THE WAYS THAT STATE AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES, AS WELL AS LOCAL ADVOCACY GROUPS, ARE WORKING TO STEM THE TIDE OF SEX TRAFFICKING.

[] The South Florida Human Trafficking Task Force, made up of law enforcement and governmental agencies like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the FBI, was formed in 2008 to combat the rising statistics of trafficking.

[] Broward, Dade and Palm Beach counties each have Human Trafficking Coalition organizations; their goal is to create awareness, work with the juveniles, help identify the youths who are targets, train law enforcement to ask the right questions, and rescue and rehabilitate victims.

[] The Department of Children and Families (DCF) in Tallahassee is pushing legislation and immigration bills that would curb trafficking-related practices.

[] State and federal officials conduct sting operations, including busts of escort services. DCF teams proactively follow repeat runaways with abusive histories, and by following the money trail on Internet escort sites like backpage.com.

[] This summer, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation awarded Kristi House a \$500,000 grant (matched by local private funders) for its various programs.

Florida and meet Skelaney and the team at Kristi House, which recently received \$1 million in grant support to continue and expand its program for local victims of sexual trafficking.

Today, Aliyah calls her life "awesome." "I feel like a superstar," she says. "My family life has improved, and I like being at home now. I'm doing much better."

Aliyah recently graduated high school, and she hopes to begin college this year and pursue a career as a social worker. In the meantime, she's already thinking like an activist.

Before the interview ends, Aliyah speaks at length about rap music and how lyrics "degrade women and glamorize pimping." She cites specific lyrics to songs by Trick Daddy and Jay-Z and shakes her head.

"These rappers are encouraging worthless sex and how it's so cool to 'break a bitch,'" Aliyah says.

She pauses for a few seconds. "After college, I plan to campaign to put sanctions on what these rappers can say.

"If it can help one girl from being a victim, it will be worth it." ☺