

Preying on the vulnerable: Human trafficking prevalent yet elusive in the Big Bend

[Nada Hassanein](#), Tallahassee Democrat Published 6:00 a.m. ET Jan. 27, 2019

She wakes up crying from nightmares. She attempted to end her life. She struggles with eating disorders, the deep scars of emotional damage.

For more than a decade, a Tallahassee girl was trafficked by a woman in exchange for drugs. As a child, she was subjected to adult men for sexual activity.

At a court hearing earlier this month, the now-18-year-old girl — whose identity is being withheld because she is a victim of sexual assault — recounted to a judge the impact of the atrocities.

Breaking the heavy silence of the courtroom, she spoke into the microphone. Her victim advocates stood close.

“I will never know who I would have or could have been if this never happened,” she said. “I am different because of what Celeste put me through.”

Celeste Chambers, 37, faces life in prison for her role in the sexual abuse of the girl, which spanned 13 years.

“Celeste was in the room while they did it. She heard me scream, she heard me crying and she sat there,” the girl said. “She watched them beat me unconsciously and she just sat there and did nothing.”

The physical abuse hurt at the time. But the effect on her mind is profound and life-lasting.

“She also killed me inside. My mind is so messed up because of this,” she told the judge. “She never gave me a chance to be a normal kid. I never had a happy childhood because of Celeste.”

The young woman is far from the only trafficking victim in the Big Bend.

Preying on the vulnerable

Legally, human trafficking is defined as using people by way of force, fraud or coercion. It’s often referred to as “modern-day slavery.”

Sometimes, victims aren’t even aware they’re being trafficked.

In the past few years, victims included a group of male migrant farmworkers, and a Tallahassee girl living in the south side manipulated by an older man she called her boyfriend.

On Friday, a Tallahassee man was arrested on charges he trafficked a 14-year-old girl, holding her against her will and forcing her to have sex with men for money.

The issue knows no age or face. Last year, the National Human Trafficking Hotline received 14,000 calls and 5,147 cases were reported.

Many of the victims come from a lifetime of poverty or troubled homes. The traffickers promise a better life, but deliver one of cruelty and suffering.

“People who are vulnerable are preyed on by traffickers,” said Robin Hassler Thompson, executive director of the Survive and Thrive Advocacy Center. Homeless and runaway youth and immigrants here illegally are in particular danger.

STAC works with local agencies and law enforcement to identify victims and connect them with resources to get help. STAC also spreads awareness of trafficking, focusing events in January, which is recognized as Human Trafficking Awareness Month. The group has trained 2,000 residents to identify the signs of the problem.

Other groups that help victims include Capital City Youth Services and the Young Parents’ Program, which helps young mothers in the juvenile court system navigate parenting, overcome trauma and empower them to fulfill their goals. Several of the girls in the program are sex trafficking victims.

CCYS offers an emergency shelter, a transitional living program, a street outreach program and a drop-in center to help troubled or vagrant youth.

Taylor Biro, director of the street outreach program at CCYS, runs the center. Youth can come meet with a social worker, wash their clothes and receive free HIV testing and birth control.

Some traffickers set up house at hotels, Biro said. CCYS reaches out to hotel employees in the I-10 and Monroe Street area to train housekeeping staff to detect the problem.

But many victims are afraid to reach out for help due to traffickers’ threats. Building rapport with them is key, Biro said.

“A lot of the kids that are groomed for trafficking don’t have a positive adult figure in their life,” she said. “Trust is a big thing.”

A prevalent yet elusive problem

While those close to the issue say trafficking in the Big Bend is alive and well, its prevalence is not widely reflected in official reports.

Though Tallahassee Police Department records show seven human trafficking cases last year, four involving minor victims, a records request to the Leon County Sheriff's Office for the number of human trafficking cases it worked in the past two years turned up no results. The same request of the Second Judicial Circuit State Attorney's Office revealed one case in 2018 and one the year before.

A jury convicted Chambers of one count of capital sexual battery, two counts of lewd and lascivious battery, one count each of lewd and lascivious molestation, lewd and lascivious conduct, child abuse — and human trafficking.

While Chambers was charged with human trafficking, many traffickers are prosecuted for other crimes making the number of cases elusive.

“It is a uniquely difficult area to prosecute. It's so incredibly hard to track,” explained Assistant State Attorney Lorena Vollrath-Bueno. “Sometimes maybe you can prove this person was living off the proceeds, but you can't prove the relationship is that of human trafficking.”

The victim could also be afraid to cooperate with law enforcement, Vollrath-Bueno added, or unwilling to testify in court.

“They are afraid of retribution,” she said. “(The trafficker) is the boyfriend, the only stable person they've had, or they have kids with them or he has their passport or has threatened their family. A lot of these women have had lives that are incomprehensible to a lot of people.”

Still, in other cases, law enforcement may not see the case for what it is.

STAC's Thompson is among those lobbying for better data collection, specifically in Uniform Crime Reports. Activists say data is important to shed light on the problem's existence in a community, and to direct resources.

Outside the courtroom, after telling her story publicly, Chambers' victim lingered by the elevators with her advocates. They clustered around her and chatted as she opened a gift they gave her.

The young woman is still grappling with her trauma, but she graduated high school and landed a job. She's trying to turn a new page in her life.

“After everything, I still have a heart... I do not want anyone to feel the pain I feel,” she said. “Celeste Chambers may have taken my childhood and left an impact on my life, and on my adult life. But I will make sure that I'm OK.”

If you or someone you know is in danger, call the National Trafficking Hotline at 1-888-3737-888 or text “HELP” to 233733.