

ACTUALIDAD

Talking about Freedom

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When he was still in Mexico and planning to come to work in the U.S., "Ramón" would never have imagined hunting deer in the middle of a New York winter to feed himself. When he arrived however, Ramon found himself in this exact situation, not due to lack of work but because he had landed in the wrong job.

The labor contractor Ramon trusted could have found him decent work on one of the 36,000 farms our northern state has. Instead, he forced Ramon to work on one where the contractor was able to garnish his earnings and threatened to harm Ramon's family if he did not comply.

As part of that perverse arrangement, the contractor denied his "employees" enough food, offering them instead a shotgun and entrance to the woods where they would have to hunt their dinner. When a local Sheriff saw Ramon with weapon in hand, he began to investigate the situation. It was the first of various interventions that eventually led to freedom for the workers and jail for their traffickers.

"Ameesha," from India, also would have never thought that by accepting domestic work with a New York City diplomat she would end up enslaved in a mansion closer to Red Hook than to Manhattan. In addition to working for a fraction of the eight dollars per hour required by law -- cleaning and preparing meals -- Ameesha was forced to hide when there were guests. She was banned from using the telephone and the front door. The only visitors to the mansion who insisted on seeing her were also the last: a team of federal enforcement agents.

When I started to see cases like those of Ramon and Ameesha here at the Worker Justice Center, they led me to wonder: How could it be that such things could take place here, in this

Hudson Valley, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty?

Today we get so many tips about local cases of human trafficking that it is no longer their existence that gives me pause, but rather knowing that the WJC, located between a barbershop and a Tex-Mex at 9 Main Street in Kingston, is one of the few organizations in all of New York State with the explicit purpose of interrupting the purchase, sale and rent of people.

Our Work

I am not the only human trafficking specialist, true. But it is also true that I can count my colleagues in this, from White Plains to Buffalo, with my left hand. Between the Worker Justice Center and a few sister organizations, we provide all forms of assistance a victim of trafficking may need, from helping them create a safety plan to finding them a transitional home to rebuild their lives. Our legal team seeks remedies, such as the recovery of stolen wages and the adjustment of status of victims who are undocumented. We also have the support from various governmental and private groups, who lend their resources to this fight.

Nonetheless, we are very few boots on the ground for such a big problem. Only after Florida, New York is the state with the most cases of forced labor in the country. A border state and home to 4 million immigrants, New York serves as site of origin, transit, and destination for the groups that profit from this heinous criminal enterprise. Our roads, hotels, and farms are the stage for their business; force, fraud and coercion are their tools; and any of us can become their product.

Modern day slavery, in stark contrast to that of the 18th Century, no longer has the official backing of the law. For that reason, the traffickers of our time depend on a tremendous amount

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of communal blindness and complicity to operate. The complicit are those who knowingly patronize the services of victims of sex trafficking, and those who, sometimes less knowingly, consume the products of forced labor. The blindness is universal.

To wake up to the reality of modern day slavery is not to march towards the future with a detective’s magnifying glass, but to accept that we have been letting the freedoms of others be curtailed for ages. For each new case I open with the Worker Justice Center, another comes back to me from the edges of my memory. They are experiences whose gravity I did not know to identify at the time.

Blind?

As a child, for example, I was told it was better to give food to children who begged in the streets, because to give them a coin was to give it to the adult who controlled them. ¿Why were they there and not in school?

Then came the jokes, that if I misbehaved my parents would sell me to an Egyptian trader in exchange for two camels. That is where I must have picked up the myth, in which so many still believe, that the trade of persons only takes place abroad. As a teenager, I started to understand what those ads were referring to -- the ones that are found in every city in the world -- that there are “three new girls” in so and so place. Who puts a minor in such a situation?

In college in Ithaca, a room in my house was rented to a chef that made me understand, through gestures and with a map, for he did not share a language with me, that he had just arrived from rural China. He now had to work in a kitchen until he paid off some 70 thousand dollars to the people who had brought him. What does it mean, not to be able to switch jobs until such a debt is paid off?

Around that time I also made it to the farms around

the Finger Lakes, with plans to organize language exchange classes and soccer leagues. I had to arrive to one of them by foot, because they had blocked the driveway with a large rock. There I found that decisions were not for the workers’ to make, but for a certain “leader” who owes me an answer to this day as to whether the workers will play soccer that Sunday. Why did that person have so much control?

Could it be that all these memories are instances of human trafficking? Some may have been, some may have not. What is certain is that they were all missed opportunities to ask an urgent question: Am I in front of a person who is not in control of their own life?

Before we can bring aid to the people who need it, we need to know how to identify them. That is how the majority of investigations against traffickers begin: with the intervention of a neighbor, a client, a colleague, or a relative.