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Art-themed thrift shop opens to support victims of sex and labor trafficking

Galway women's long-term goal is to open a shelter

By Paul Nelson

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Photo: Lori Van Buren

Exterior of Eyes Wide Open-Her Treasure Box on Van Vranken Ave. on Friday, April 15, 2016 in Schenectady, N.Y. The group called Eyes Wide Open has opened the arts and crafts thrift store along Van Vranken ... more

Schenectady

[Deborah Fowler](#) has big dreams of one day opening a home for female survivors of labor and sex trafficking and a business where the women can earn money working in a [safe](#) environment.

But for now the grandmother from Galway spends three days a week in a nondescript building on Van Vranken Avenue in Schenectady that houses an arts and crafts thrift shop called [Her Treasure Box](#). The store is part of her effort to raise awareness about human trafficking and raise funds to support the cause. It opened in March.

Fowler is executive director of a nonprofit group called Eyes Wide Open NENY (Northeastern New York) Inc. She sees the arts as a powerful healing tool for women who have been exploited.

"Sometimes a woman is not going to be able to sit and talk about what happened to her for a long time, but if you're in the midst of creating something, it will come out in your artwork or while you're doing it in a group, and it will start to evolve and lead to healing," said Fowler, 58.

She said when she realized the scope of the problem her "eyes got wide open, and that is what I want: to open the eyes of others, and I also want the girls to have their eyes open that there is hope."

In 2010, Fowler, a homemaker, was living in Kuwait with her husband while he worked at power plants for General Electric.

While bonding with women during quilting, Fowler recalled a woman came by soliciting donations.

They later went out for coffee and the woman told Fowler about an underground shelter that helps runaway maids forced to work in terrible conditions after being lured from Nepal with promises of making more money than they could in their homeland.

The mother of three who has nine grandchildren visited the shelter and interacted with the exploited girls and women.

Fowler conceded learning about the plight of the maids and the labor trafficking made her angry.

"Part of me was feeling like this is ridiculous, I'm a fairly educated person, I listen to the news, I read newspapers, how come I don't know about this?" she remembers.

In 2012, she returned home to Galway in Saratoga County, and started telling family and friends and anyone else who would listen about labor trafficking. Fowler said the average age of the girls being exploited and enslaved is 14 years old.

She wrote a book, "Fragrance in the Desert," about human trafficking and her time in Kuwait, which allowed her to spread the word through speaking engagements and book signings.

She recalled one particularly disturbing story of a Nepalese woman in her 50s who, while working for a family with three young boys, was repeatedly raped by them one weekend while their parents were away on vacation.

"Their viewpoint was that she was just a thing, an object, she wasn't a person, she wasn't somebody who loved and took care of them," added Fowler.

To add insult to injury, she said the boys' parents didn't believe the women and beat her for lying.

In the United States, sex trafficking where pimps buy and sell women for prostitution is a big problem.

"It's here in our neighborhoods, it's everywhere and it's so hidden," said Fowler, adding the internet has made it easier.

"It's like ordering up a pizza, you call this number and tell this guy you want somebody that night, and they'll drop them off," added Fowler.

At first, Fowler and her friends were hawking donated items at flea markets and garage sales to generate funds to build a shelter for female survivors of sex and labor trafficking.

The Schenectady store, which the owner has allowed the organization to use rent-free for the first six months, is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. About a dozen volunteers do everything from pricing sale items to teaching art therapy. Starting in May, the store will also be open Wednesdays.

Fowler said they have repeat customers and sometimes people walking or driving by stop in to ask questions.

"I want them to know we care about women, we care about who they are, and that there's love and life here," said Fowler.

The proceeds will go toward the construction of the long-term care facility, which Fowler hopes to model after Thistle Farms in Nashville, "a community of women who have survived prostitution, trafficking and addiction," according to its website.

Fowler hopes to convert one of the huge Victorian homes in Schenectady into the first facility and maybe open other similar residences in other parts of the Capital Region. She said Eyes Wide Open NENY has offered to provide art therapy for women at Safe Inc. and the YWCA in Schenectady.

Sister [Michele Morek](#) with UNANIMA International, a United Nations-based non-governmental organization (<http://www.unanima-international.org>), said labor trafficking involving Chinese workers being bused from downstate to places upstate including Albany is a major problem and the work of organized crime.

Authorities are looking into whether the 2014 murder of a Guilderland family of four has any connections to labor trafficking and Chinese organized crime.

The issue of undocumented workers has arisen in the case of the Guilderland homicides of Chinese immigrant [Jin Chen](#), 39, his wife, Hai [Yan Li](#), 38, and their two young sons, Anthony, 10, and 7-year-old Eddy at their home at 1846 Western Ave.

The [Times Union](#) has reported that Chen allegedly handled large amounts of off-the-books cash which flowed through undocumented Chinese restaurant workers.

The Albany County District Attorney's Office has said much of the sex trafficking locally involves prostitution in hotels on Wolf Road by the exchange of Interstate 90 and the Northway where women being transported from New York City to Boston may stop in Albany.

Morek said often labor and sex trafficking overlap.

"If you look at the United States and Europe, the predominate form of trafficking is sex trafficking but if you look at Asia and Africa, the predominate kind of trafficking is labor trafficking," said Morek. She said mass migration and the large-scale displacement of people and organized crime networks getting involved in human trafficking could exacerbate the problem.

Morek said New York "has some of the best trafficking laws anywhere, certainly in the United States." She said, however, that the record of prosecuting suspected traffickers is not good.

"I think education is the answer and the media has a role to play in that," added Morek.

Fowler said it's going to take a massive effort to combat human trafficking.

"It's big, it makes money, it's mean, it's nasty, it's corrupt, it's violent, but guess what we can be bigger," she said. "We can be bigger if we work together and every single person has something they can do to bring the awareness."

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More Information

How to help

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