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Downtown march puts focus on human trafficking



FRED SQUILLANTE | Dispatch April Jones walks her children, Leanel, 5, left, and Dylan, 4, right, (all from Columbus) along East Broad St. to Columbus City Hall to participate in the March for Freedom-Columbus to raise awareness about human trafficking. The march was organized by staff and members of Judah Christian Community Church in Whitehall.

By [Mary Beth Lane](#) The Columbus Dispatch • Monday May 4, 2015 2:47 AM

Judge Paul Herbert was greeted over and over yesterday, a familiar face to the women he has helped to escape from lives being sold as sex slaves.

“Thank you, buddy,” Sandy McLurg said to the Franklin County Municipal Court judge.

The judge and the sex-trafficking survivor were among several hundred demonstrators who marched from City Hall to the Statehouse yesterday to publicize the issue of human trafficking and demand an end to it.

Trafficking is modern-day slavery, forcing most victims into the sex trade and other forced labor. It occurs worldwide, including in central Ohio, not just in far-flung places such as Thailand, the organizers of March for Freedom-Columbus said.

[Herbert has become a leader in fighting trafficking](#) since 2009, when he founded CATCH Court — Changing Actions to Change Habits. The program treats prostitutes as human-trafficking victims who need counseling and other help to escape the sex trade.

[Judah Christian Community Church in Whitehall also has become a leader](#) in the fight.

The 500-member church organized yesterday's interfaith march, which included Catholics, Jews and members of other congregations. The Rev. Gerald Rice, the church's senior pastor, said he plans to make the march an annual event.

Among the throng were as many as 50 survivors of trafficking.

Among them was McLurg, 54, who now lives in Hilliard and works as a seamstress for the Flag Lady store in the Clintonville neighborhood. She graduated in September from the CATCH Court program after completing the required two years of treatment, counseling and other assistance.

Before embarking on her new life, McLurg said, she had spent many years abusing drugs, mainly crack cocaine, off and on since she was in her 30s.

"I was addicted really badly, and I was being trafficked by the dealers to pay for the drugs," she said.

Jeanette Bradley, 61, shares a similar history. Her drinking and drug use in the past led her to a boyfriend who was a drug dealer and addict and forced her to have sex with other dealers so he could get his fix.

Since she conquered her addictions and joined Judah Christian Community Church in 2003, Bradley has become an advocate for helping others who have been trafficked.

"We love them, we care for them and we need to give them hope," she said. "My life's passion is to instill hope in them."

Officials estimate that 1,100 children are forced into the sex trade each year in Ohio. The most common age for children to become victims is 13. Most prostitutes enter the trade before their 18th birthday.

The issue is receiving more attention, as shown by the Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force created by Gov. John Kasich in 2012, working with the Human Trafficking Commission that Attorney General Mike DeWine convened in 2011.

Still, more needs to be done, Rice said.

Proceeds from T-shirts sold to marchers yesterday will be deposited into a fund set up to provide safe transitional housing for sex-trafficking survivors, the pastor said.

The shirt's message reads "What are you going to do?"

From the Statehouse steps, Rice challenged everyone to do something to unchain the victims of modern slavery. They are locked away in a subculture of abuse, he said, in basements and attics, and in motels and strip clubs, with no way out.

“Children don’t plan to be sex or labor slaves,” Rice said. “This is on no one’s wish list. No one has a desire to have this happen to them.”

Help them, he asked.” Get up, stand up, speak up for those who can’t be heard.”

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