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Slavery hidden in plain sight



Jessie Balmert, Gannett Ohio 12:09 a.m. EDT September 27, 2015



(Photo: Ed Borland/The Marion Star)

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NEW BLOOMINGTON — Arthur Carp and his wife, Peggy, would watch from their Oakridge Estates trailer as a handful of Hispanic teenage boys walked home, carrying small bags of pop and snacks purchased from a nearby gas station.

“They each had their little bag. That was probably their food and drink for the day,” Arthur Carp mused.

Every so often, the Carps would say, “hello,” or try to speak with the boys. But the Guatemalan teenagers either knew very little English or didn’t feel comfortable speaking with the Carps, a congenial couple whose cozy trailer is littered with photographs of their children and grandchildren — and one autographed picture of First Lady Michelle Obama.

“They probably had them scared, because I tried to talk to them and they just walked away,” said Arthur Carp, a retired Whirlpool employee and ex-newspaper carrier. “They were afraid of me, but I don’t intimidate nobody.”

It wasn’t until a massive law enforcement raid woke the Carps in the middle of a cold night just before Christmas that they learned anything was amiss with their young Hispanic neighbors. They never guessed that the boys, who were as young as 14 years old, were being forced to perform hours of rigorous labor, vaccinating chickens and debeaking them, at nearby Trillium Farms.

Six people, including ringleader Aroldo Rigoberto Castillo-Serrano, were charged in connection with a labor trafficking scheme that involved nearly a dozen teenagers and young adults being shipped from Guatemala to Marion County to work off their debts on egg farms. The boys’ parents, who handed over the deeds to their homes to the offenders, thought their children were being educated in America, not forced into what was essentially slave labor. Several suspects involved have pleaded guilty in federal court while others await hearings.

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Chosen location

But what made Oakridge Estates a place where an elaborate labor trafficking scheme could flourish undetected?

The large trailer park off Marion-Agosta Road in western Marion County is home to nicely furnished trailers with wood-carved nameplates like the Carps’. But next to those homes are abandoned trailers with broken shutters, tall grass and wobbly, plastic steps. The park has 89 trailers, but not all of them are occupied; another 23 lots sit vacant, according to the mobile home inspection agency’s records.

At least one trailer where the teenage boys lived had no heat, no hot water, no working toilet and vermin, according to federal court records. Arthur Carp couldn’t breathe near one of the raided trailers, which was filled with mold. “It’s that bad. It’s uninhabitable.”

Rent is collected once a month by a manager who does not live on site, Arthur Carp explained. The owners, Travis and Sharon Jones, live in Colorado. A man who answered the manager’s phone declined to comment or give contact information for the owners, saying that he wasn’t at Oakridge Estates when the incident occurred.

Still, Phil Wright, who owns the Marathon gas station nearby, said the trailer park is improving under the Jones' management, who purchased the property in July 2014. Fewer pot holes exist and crime has decreased, Wright said.

At the trailer park, people keep to themselves, which is made easier with language barriers and neighbors frequently moving in and out. A young couple and boy taking a walk had not heard about the FBI raid in December — she moved in recently.

On the same street, Confederate flags waved in the wind while an empty glass Corona bottle lay in the street. Several white residents spoke about the neighbors they called "Mexicans:" Nice people. Don't speak much English. Minded their own business.

But not all the neighbors who speak Spanish are from Mexico. Some are from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, one Spanish-speaking resident explained. More than one in four people in the area are Hispanic or Latino, compared with just 2.4 percent of Marion County overall, according to U.S. Census data.

But even if neighbors communicated more or were wary of the way the boys were treated, labor trafficking can be incredibly difficult to spot. Even victims who interact with the public, like hotel workers or nail salon employees, can be overlooked, said Michelle Hannan, who works with human trafficking victims at the Salvation Army.

Still, neighbors should report if workers appear fearful or don't speak for themselves, Hannan said. "It's something law enforcement can investigate."

A police presence

Police cruisers were not unusual sights at Oakridge Estates. Sheriff's deputies visited the trailer park as many as 11 times in a month for disputes or ambulance runs, according to Marion County Sheriff's Office records. Calls involved complaints of child endangering, drug abuse, domestic violence and criminal damaging.

"This particular location, we have a lot of calls there," Marion County Sheriff Tim Bailey said. "There's a lot of problems there."

But nothing compared to the night about 100 police officers, federal and local, flooded the trailer park to question rescue the teenagers and question suspects. Officers pulled people out of their homes, taking some away on buses to a Wooster hotel, where they were questioned. The Salvation Army helped 43 people that night, giving them food and clothing, and some of the victims are still receiving help in central Ohio, Hannan said.

"I don't know how many of these people were guilty, but I feel sorry," Carp said. "None of them had a coat. They had no coats, they were standing against the side of the trailer and it was like, what, 10 below the chill factor that morning? It was cold."

It was early Dec. 17, and the Carps' neighbor, Scott Douglas, had just returned from the hospital where he was visiting his ill wife. That's when Douglas heard dozens of cars pulling into the trailer park and a thump on his door.

"I went to look out the window and somebody was beating on my door. It was the FBI. They had a search warrant for my house, too, because I'd give people out here rides to the stores and stuff," Douglas said.

'You couldn't tell he was 14'

Douglas would drive the Guatemalan teenagers to Wal-Mart and a small Mexican and Latin American grocer in Marion. Sometimes, he would take them to Hong Kong Buffet — Chinese food was always a favorite among the boys. There wasn't much communication during these unsupervised rides to Marion.

"None of them could hardly speak a lick of English," Douglas said.

Douglas said he never guessed that the boys weren't old enough to work at the egg farms. He never questioned why they weren't in school. He never suspected human trafficking until a FBI agent explained why they were searching his home.

"These trailers were full of Guatemalans, and they all went to work. That's all I know," Douglas said. "There was one 14 year old. You couldn't tell he was 14."

Reporter Spenser Hickey contributed to this article.

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This series

This is the second story in a series looking at an elaborate labor trafficking scheme perpetrated in Marion County. The first piece examined the night of a massive law enforcement raid. Today's story examines the mobile home park where they lived.

Gannett Ohio will continue to investigate different aspects of this crime in our backyard. For tips, contact Spenser Hickey at 740-244-9940 or Jessie Balmert at 740-973-4536.