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# Ames High group forms to fight human trafficking

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Sofia Lence, junior at Ames High School, used to think human trafficking was only a problem in foreign countries and was surely not something happening in small town Iowa.

“I didn’t really know it happened a lot in the U.S.,” Lence said. “I didn’t really realize it was such a big issue here until I watched a video.”

That video was the documentary “Any Kid, Anywhere: Sex Trafficking Survivor Stories,” which shares the stories of three Iowa women who survived sex trafficking. This was the documentary Lence, along with a dozen other Ames High School students, watched during the first meeting of the newest student group at Ames High School dedicated to raising awareness about this crime and helping to put an end to it.

“What really shocked me was these girls were from Iowa, because I never thought it would happen in this state,” Lence said. “Just that it can happen, and it can happen to anyone kind of shocked me.”

While there are currently no statistics on the number of victims currently being trafficked in Iowa, it is estimated that more than 100,000 American youths are victims of this crime.

Lence, who serves as leader of this newly created student group, said she was first approached by high school counselor John Burke about creating this group.

“I was taking a test in AP psych, and he came in and he wanted to talk to me,” Lence said.

Burke said he solicited Lence’s help to begin the group because he sees human trafficking as an issue high school students can help raise awareness about and ultimately help put an end to.

“It’s the fastest growing crime in the world, and the third largest behind war and drugs,” Burke said. “Another big factor for us here is we have two interstates that intersect very close to Ames, and we know that a lot of trafficking is happening, so it’s coming right through here.”

Lence and Burke agreed that often a misconception about sex trafficking is that it's not happening in Iowa.

"There's probably more going on than we realize, and maybe we need to be on the forefront of that," Burke said. "For me, a big factor for helping a group like this get started is that while the vast majority of our kids aren't going to be in danger of being trafficked themselves, they would be the first eyes and ears to hear of peers, of kids in their generation that might be, so for them to be educated and more aware is really one of the best things we can do to help curb it and help keep it out of our communities."

Currently, all tenth-grade students at Ames High are required to take a health class that teaches a unit on human trafficking, but this student group hopes to increase awareness even more through special events, guest speakers, t-shirts and posters.

"We are still starting, but we have a couple of ideas that we could do," Lence said.

Moving forward, Burke said the group hopes to network with the Iowa State University and Ankeny High School student groups that also raise awareness about human trafficking.

During the first meeting of this group, which meets every Monday during the school day, everyone in the group shared what they knew about human trafficking. Burke said one international student shared how human trafficking is a huge issue in his country and how he was almost trafficked.

"Being a counselor at the high school, we always want to be on the forefront of any developments that could affect our students," Burke said.

- See more at: <http://amestrib.com/news/ames-high-group-forms-fight-human-trafficking#sthash.m40xEiKW.dpuf>