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University of North Texas students out to fight human trafficking



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University of North Texas students played with children from low-income families at a school in Bucharest, Romania, during their trip to Eastern Europe.

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University of North Texas students spent three weeks in Romania this summer, studying the problem of children and adults being sold into bondage.

Back home with opened eyes, sophomore Hayli Boren and senior Christian Hernandez want to start a conversation about human trafficking in North Texas.

“First, we need to work right in our backyard where it’s really happening,” Boren said.

Fourteen students traveled to central Europe as part of a program that pairs students with anti-trafficking agencies, including the Open Door Foundation, an emergency shelter for trafficking victims.

Hernandez plans to raise awareness of modern-day slavery by sharing what he learned in Romania with students in his Sunday school class. The next time his classmates sign up for community service, he hopes they’ll volunteer with anti-trafficking organizations.

Those groups could use the help. A hotline recorded more than 1,300 calls about human trafficking in the United States in the first three months of this year, according to Polaris, an anti-trafficking group.

About 100 of those were in Texas; only California had more.

Lindsey Speed, program director at Traffick 911, believes much of the trade happens along the Interstate 10 corridor, which crosses southern Texas through San Antonio and Houston.

Traffick 911 focuses on preventing the sale of children in Texas by educating the public and first responders. The Addison-based organization helped identify or rescue 21 victims of domestic minor sex trafficking in the first six months of 2015, and trained more than 1,300 first responders.

Speed said most trafficking victims are girls recruited as preteens or early teens, often through social media.

That’s one of the biggest differences between cases here and overseas, she said.

“Sometimes victims are looking for someone to love them or listen to them, and that’s why social media has been a perfect way for recruiters to reach out,” Speed said. “Pimps pose themselves as a boyfriend and the victim falls in love.”

In countries like Romania, on the other hand, many children are sold by parents desperate to escape poverty. A full-time minimum wage job in Romania is worth about \$240 a month.

Human trafficking experts estimate nearly 21 million people are trafficked worldwide, and that more than a quarter of them are children.