

Angels aid trafficking victims

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Mary Jo Gugino-Colligan estimates that 136 children in America were forced into some type of sex trafficking Saturday morning during the very same hours she spent advocating for victims.

As the founder of Angels of Mercy, a nonprofit dedicated to ending human trafficking, estimates such as that, coupled with her own experience with traumatic violence, fuel her anti-trafficking efforts.

Saturday's Stop the Trafficking — End the Cycle 5K, hosted by Angels of Mercy, went off without a hitch at Meridian Centre Park in Brighton. From 7 to 11 a.m., hundreds of men and women walked and ran in support of bringing awareness to human trafficking and domestic violence. The goal of the 5K was to raise funds that will be used to build a home for healing, which will shelter victims of these tragedies.

Gugino-Colligan considered the event a "success," and a step in the right direction against the battle known as modern-day slavery. "Many people have no idea this is going on...maybe they don't want to believe something of this nature is happening," shared Gugino-Colligan. "But, we have to educate people. People need to know that every hour, 34 children are forced into sex trafficking in the United States."

Sadly, this isn't the only shocking statistic when it comes to human trafficking and violence against women. In the United States during 2014, more than 3,500 tips were reported regarding trafficking activity, according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center operated by Polaris. In addition, the International Labour Organization estimates almost 21 million human



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Angels of Mercy's 3rd Annual Stop the Trafficking - End the Cycle 5K kicks off at Meridian Centre Park.

trafficking victims exist around the world, with children accounting for 5.5 million.

In addition to lack of education on the topic, misconceptions of who may be lured by traffickers abound. According to Gugino-Colligan, while there is no exact formula or profile regarding who may be more vulnerable to be lured into a trafficking situation, environmental and economic status may be influencing factors.

"Traffickers are everywhere — from the playground, the mall, restaurants, schools and even your local supermarket. Anyone can be approached regardless of their status. Children and young adults do not realize who they are talking to. Many are lonely, in pain, or looking for love," she said.

For homeless children and runaways, the statistics of who falls prey to trafficking is staggering. According to Pam Weaver, director of community education for The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children/NY, "In 2014, the NCMEC estimated that one in six endangered runaways reported to them were likely victims of sex trafficking."

Dosomething.org estimates the average age of



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Angels of Mercy founder, Mary Jo Gugino-Colligan (center), stands with attendees.

a teen who enters the sex trade is between 12 and 14 years old. Most often, these are runaway girls who have been sexually abused.

Given the propensity for traffickers to prey on those living on the streets, Gugino-Colligan also pointed out the correlation between trafficking and foster kids who age out of the system.

"Those who age out are usually picked up or lured by traffickers within 48 hours. Many times, they get them addicted to drugs. This way when they need their next fix and can't pay for it, they can be prostituted for it," she said. "This is how traf-

fickers make their money. You see, selling drugs only lets you make money one time, then the drug is sold and gone. With human beings, they can be sold up to thirty times a day, bringing in continual income. It rips apart the victim's heart and soul and eventually they become walking zombies."

Although this year's Stop the Trafficking — End the Cycle 5K is complete, Gugino-Colligan wants people to be cognizant of other awareness opportunities right here in Rochester.

"Anyone can come alongside us and help us get the word out. We have events where we provide

information to women's groups, Rotary Clubs, schools and churches," Gugino-Colligan explained. "We are really interested in getting into the school system so we can make people aware of what is happening out there. Also, we can always use help with our Dress a Girl program."

For those unfamiliar with this national campaign, it is conducted by a nonprofit called Hope 4 Women International. The idea behind it is for volunteers to sew beautiful dresses, which will be donated to poor and homeless girls worldwide. According to Gugino-Colligan, these children often wear torn and tattered clothing, making them immediate targets for traffickers who view them as "trash."

Angels of Mercy took on the campaign about five years ago and today, Gugino-Colligan is Dress a Girl's Ambassador for New York State. "We have about 700 women who sew dresses each month and to date, we have provided over 185,000 dresses to 75 different countries. We also hand these dresses out right here in Rochester to the city's schoolchildren and homeless youths," she said.

Angels of Mercy, a volunteer-run organization, is in need of donors for its upcoming home for healing. Gugino-Colligan's vision is to build a Christian-based treatment center to help trafficking and violence victims.

"We want to run it free of charge so no one is turned away because of insurance issues. Our goal is to get to the root of their problems and teach them that their lives can be turned around. We want these women to know they are special and precious and that they can begin their life anew."

Go to www.angelsofmercyny.org to learn more.

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