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## Valrico neighbors balk at safe house for trafficking victims

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The neighbors' fears are unfounded, said Elizabeth Melendez-Fisher, president of Selah Freedom, and the organization has every intention of opening as planned. YOUTUBE/SELAH FREEDOM

VALRICO — The big brown house near the end of the street makes the neighbors nervous.

It's freshly painted, and the lawn is nicely manicured. Hardly anyone is seen coming in or out. A peek through the blinds reveals stylish furnishings, granite countertops and a fireplace. It's one of the better-kept homes in the sleepy Valrico neighborhood.

A rotating cast of women will live there, though, and that gives longtime residents like Nancy Good pause.

The two-story, four-bedroom home soon will become a safe house for women who had been forced into the sex industry by human traffickers. The Sarasota-based nonprofit group Selah Freedom bought the home for a token \$100 and hopes it will allow the charity to expand its reach into Hillsborough County. The house, built in 1985, last was sold in 2008, for \$290,000.

The group's intentions are good, but they shock the neighbors, the homeowners association said. No one in the association had any idea what was in store for the house, which has a pool that the previous owners' grandchildren used while the house sat empty for the past two years.

The association is in agreement that the recovery house should never open.

There are too many questions about neighborhood safety, as well as property values and county permitting, said Good, who spends her days doing volunteer work for the free Brandon Outreach Clinic and other charities in the area.

“It’s not that we don’t like what they’re doing or aren’t sympathetic; it just doesn’t belong here,” Good said. “They didn’t give anyone in the neighborhood any information about what they were going to be doing, and people are worried it could attract other third parties into the neighborhood. There are families that worry about their children’s safety.”



The neighbors’ fears are unfounded, said Elizabeth Melendez-Fisher, president of Selah Freedom, and the organization has every intention of opening as planned.

Selah Freedom will maintain a level of secrecy about what goes on in the house to protect the women and make them feel secure, but that shouldn’t be seen as a slight to the neighborhood, Melendez-Fisher said. Human traffickers use force, fraud, coercion and drugs and alcohol to keep victims against their will and sell them for sex or labor.

Selah Freedom employees are working with the homeowners association to plan a meeting where they can give people details about the operation, but the first priority is the victims’ peace of mind, she said. The homeowners association held a meeting recently to discuss the house but only allowed five neighbors to attend.

Representatives from Selah Freedom did not know about the meeting.

Selah is a Hebrew word that translates roughly to “stop and listen.” It means to rest, pause and reflect, Melendez-Fisher said, and that’s all the women will be doing in the house.

“We just wanted a place that was quiet and peaceful for these girls,” Melendez-Fisher said. “I think when they hear the details of their stories, it will melt their hearts.”

Selah Freedom was founded in 2010 after Melendez-Fisher learned that Florida, the third most populous state behind California and Texas, also has the third highest number of calls to the hotline of the National Human Trafficking Resource Center. So far this year, 77 calls have come from Florida.

The house was turned over to the organization in January 2014 after the owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, sent an email to Melendez-Fisher “out of the blue.” He had never worked with Selah Freedom before but had volunteered with victims of human trafficking in the area and had heard about the work the young nonprofit group was doing.

The owner and his family were moving to Colorado, so at first he considered giving the house to a local homeless shelter. He changed his mind when he learned the shelter would sell it and use the profit on operations.

“They wanted people to be rehabilitated there,” Melendez-Fisher said. “They wanted this house to bring healing.”

Before the group was given the house, a major league baseball player anonymously donated new furnishings to be used in a safe house, Melendez-Fisher said.

“Everything was just meant to be,” she said.



The neighbors, though, say the homeowner should have let them in on the plan.

Several neighbors did not wish to be identified in this story. They worry not only about their safety but also the safety of the women who will move into the bustling residential neighborhood just minutes from large schools.

They worry pimps will come looking for their former workers and that the home could become a hot spot for criminal activity. Several say they would like to help the organization but that it has been “very secretive” and “unwelcoming.”

“We just don’t know what to do, what to make of it,” Good said.

Many only found out about the plans for the house because neighbor Marilyn Madson distributed fliers to about 60 nearby residents.

Madson wrote in the flier, “While we can all agree that there is a need for a safe haven for these women, it should not be in a neighborhood of residential homes. The risks to our neighborhood and families with children are very high.”

Madson declined to be interviewed for this article.

The women who will live in the home, ages 18 to 26, will pose no threat, Melendez-Fisher said, and will be thoroughly vetted.

Selah Freedom operates another rehabilitation center that is “blended into a typical neighborhood,” she said. The new rehabilitation house was lauded by state Rep. Ross Spano, a Brandon Republican, who works closely with the organization.



Only four women will live in the home at any time, which exempts the group from having to obtain group-home permits and is expected to foster a family environment. They will stay for two to four weeks at a time before transitioning to a 12-month recovery program at a different center. They will use the time to rest and work with in-home counselors to assess their needs.

The extra bedrooms will help alleviate a long wait list at Selah Freedom's 5-acre home outside Hillsborough County, which houses six women and is working with 16.

The new house has been named "Bet Olam," which in Hebrew means "house of rest," Melendez-Fisher said.

Many of the women Selah Freedom helps have been sexually abused from the time they were 2 to 4 years old and begin working in the sex industry by 12 to 14 years of age, said Connie Rose, Selah Freedom's director of survivor programming and prevention.

Children who decide to run away often are approached by a trafficker within 48 hours, say victims who have been interviewed by the state and Selah Freedom. Hungry, scared and abused, male and female victims see their trafficker as someone who can take care of them and often consider the person a boyfriend or girlfriend. Some of the women working with Selah Freedom were sold 15 to 40 times a day, they said.

The youngest girl Selah Freedom is working with is 11, Rose said.

"Tampa is known as a sex-trip getaway. There are more strip clubs in Tampa than in Las Vegas, and these girls grow up to be the women you see on Nebraska Avenue because nobody got their backstory," Rose said.

Rose once was among them, though no one could have guessed from outward appearances, she said. She was abused by her father, sold out of her home for sex and sometimes forced to serve johns in the parking lot of her Tampa high school. Her friends, though, just saw a popular girl who got good grades and loved to dance. She wasn't the only victim living a "total double life," she said.

"The perception is that it's your choice and it's only bad girls and boys that do this and they'll never really recover, but that's just not true," Rose said. "I know from experience that you can change your life. There is no one that wakes up in the morning and says, 'I want to prostitute myself today.' No little kid says, 'When I grow up, I want to be a prostitute.'"



Selah Freedom also helps train law enforcement officers to identify and work with human trafficking victims. It also is helping to develop a court diversion program called Turn Your Life Around. Much like a drug court or teen court, TYLA is a diversionary program for prostitutes that provides counseling and job training and residential services instead of jail time. The program is operating in Sarasota and serves about 100 women a year, on average.

Human trafficking victims' cause is a top priority for Florida's top law officer, Attorney General Pam Bondi, of Tampa.

"This year we've really focused on legislation, public awareness, improving the effectiveness of prosecuting offenders and protecting victims," Bondi said at a recent meeting in Tampa of the

new Statewide Council on Human Trafficking. “Trafficking is often under-reported because victims are just reported for sex crimes. ... My No. 1 goal with this council is to find more safe places for our victims to go. We have to keep our victims safe.”

Women who have received counseling through Selah Freedom have gone on to graduate from college, earn a GED certificate, find stable jobs and raise families, Rose said. But the change only comes when they feel they have a refuge.

Some neighbors have made an effort to welcome them, Melendez-Fisher said. A teenage girl and her father brought cookies to the house and wanted to know how they could help. Others will come around, she said.

By the time the women arrive, Melendez-Fisher said, no one in the neighborhood will even notice they are home.

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