



Contact: Jennifer Crusco
Public Relations Manager
(201) 768-7822, Ext. 267
jcrusco@holyangels.org

February 2024

Survivor Discusses Ways to Recognize, Halt Human Trafficking

Demarest, NJ: "I wouldn't be alive today if that

woman hadn't been my angel," Theresa Flores told an upper school assembly at the Academy of the Holy Angels on February 7. Flores, a human trafficking survivor, was referring to an elderly Black woman who saw Flores after she escaped from a nearby motel. Flores had been left for dead.

The woman, whom Flores calls her angel, asked a simple question after seeing the distressed teen.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked.

Flores was amazed. No one had asked her that question since the day an older boy in her new high school decided to drug, assault, blackmail, and intimidate her into a life of human trafficking. The nightmare continued from the time Flores was 15 until she was 17.

"She did me another favor that saved my life," Flores said of her angel. After Flores insisted she was fine, the woman in the diner refused to believe that. She called the police.

Flores was terrified of threats against her family from the group of men who had been trafficking her, and did not escape her secret life that night. She did not tell the responding police officer anything about what was happening. Her parents, who did not learn Flores' terrible secret for decades, were angry with her for sneaking out of the house. They believed she had been having fun at a party. It was not until Flores was 17 and her family moved far from their upper middle class Detroit suburb that she was able to escape her tormentors.

"I want people to see what I do now," Flores told the Angels in Demarest. She pointed out that human trafficking can occur anywhere, and can happen to anyone. Human trafficking, she noted, is the second most prevalent crime in the United States.

"It happened (to me) in plain sight. It can happen anywhere," Flores said.

Human trafficking happens to people of all ages. Victims are coerced into labor or sexual exploitation.

The guest speaker responded to many questions, explaining that her faith in God sustained her throughout her ordeal and afterward.

"I leaned on my faith really hard," she said when asked about processing her experience.

For the past 19 years, Flores has used her personal experience to help others learn to protect themselves and others. She explained that she wanted one trusted person she could have told that she was being trafficked. She asked those present to think who their “one person” might be.

Flores pointed out that signs of trafficking include a person (most frequently a female) who holds onto multiple hotel keys, has lots of cash, keeps a phone that is only for calls from a boyfriend, and someone who receives expensive gifts from an older boyfriend. A victim may also experience a drop in grades or begin to dress differently.

Social media is the number one way traffickers find victims, she said. While libraries, malls, movie theaters are also places where traffickers strike, she was trafficked from her own home.

Today, her activism includes the Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution Project (soaproject.org), which involves affixing a message of hope and the Human Trafficking Hotline (1-800-373-7888) to bars of soap that are placed in venues where people are likely to be trafficked.

She also worked with a senator on the Theresa Flores Law, which removed the statute of limitations for Michigan’s human trafficking survivors who wish to file charges. Flores provided testimony, and was present when the bill was signed into law. She continues to advocate for improved legislation.

To date, she has authored five books, including “The Slave Across the Street.” Flores donated a signed copy of this work to the AHA Learning Commons. Currently, she is planning to launch a feature film.

Flores has been sharing her story for the past 19 years, and said she does it for a trafficking victim named Grace, who died at age 17. Flores said the world failed Grace by not asking if she was all right.

“If you see something, or know something, say something,” Flores said.

She promoted Fair Trade products to ensure that trafficked labor is not being used, and urged those present to educate others and/or start a club to halt human trafficking.

This moving, awareness-raising program was co-sponsored by the AHA Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the AHA Office of Mission & Ministry. An evening session was held for parents.

At the morning program, AHA Director of Mission and Ministry Joan Connelly noted that human trafficking is one of the Atlantic-Midwest Province of the School Sisters of Notre Dame’s five focus areas. All joined in the SSND prayer to end human trafficking, which includes the words: “Our hearts are saddened and our spirits angry that their dignity and rights are being transgressed through threats, deception, and force. We cry out against the degrading practice of trafficking and pray for it to end.”

Founded by the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1879, the Academy of the Holy Angels is the oldest private girls’ school in Bergen County.

315 HILLSIDE AVENUE, DEMAREST, NJ 07627

201.768.7822 | HOLYANGELS.ORG