

DOWNFALL OF A SEX SLAVE RING

A Clearwater task force helps break an international organization.

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She came from Guatemala, a woman in her early 20s smuggled into the United States for what she thought was a housekeeping job.

The journey from her small town to the Texas border took 26 days. From there she was whisked to a safe house near Houston, then brought to Tampa and moved once more to a house in Jacksonville.

There, an enforcer for the human trafficking operation told the woman her debt had jumped from \$5,000 to \$30,000.

The enforcer demonstrated how to use a condom by rolling it over a beer bottle. He said she'd have to pay back the debt as a prostitute, according to authorities.

She turned 25 tricks the next day and nearly every day for eight or nine months.

This tortured existence - the daily life of a human trafficking victim - ended May 22, 2007, when authorities intervened. The woman's captor, Juan Jimenez Henao, was arrested in Clearwater. But the investigation went much further. It connected with an international human trafficking network.

Carlos Andres Monsalve, 29, the ringleader, was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in federal prison. Henao served a short prison term and is scheduled to be deported.

In total, seven people were indicted and six victims identified.

A Clearwater task force did much of the work that led to the arrests. The task force, formed in 2006 when the Clearwater Police Department won a three-year, \$450,000 grant from the Justice Department, is now a model around the country.

Human trafficking plagues Florida, California and Texas, among other states. Unlike smugglers, traffickers don't just transport human cargo; they exploit the travelers for purposes ranging from manual labor to prostitution.

Clearwater Deputy Chief Dewey Williams, three Clearwater police investigators and a special agent from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement sat down with a St. Petersburg Times reporter to talk about the case.

Monsalve, the kingpin, owned houses across the state, including in Tampa and Pasco. Police said he lived a middle-class life. No gold chains. No fancy cars. A legal immigrant from Colombia, he helped run a clothing store in Tampa.

But his main business was more sinister. Monsalve made the circuit of Hispanic communities, passing out business cards offering women for prostitution. For years, his ring was composed of willing prostitutes. At some point in 2005, authorities believe, he began to use forced labor.

His operation set up in Pinellas, Pasco, and Hillsborough counties, as well as in Orlando, Jacksonville and Tallahassee.

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The women would charge \$30 per sex act. The organization skimmed half that amount off the top and applied the other half toward the women's debts. Victims fell back on tip money to pay for food, condoms and other expenses, authorities said.

Detectives said there were six to eight women in the ring, each bringing in as much as \$6,000 per week. One woman became pregnant, according to a report from the FDLE. The organization made her have sex with clients until she was "too pregnant" and then kicked her out onto the street.

The story of Clearwater's involvement starts as early as 2004, when police got a tip about a Hispanic brothel at an apartment complex near U.S. 19 and Drew Street.

In these types of cases, police said, the tip often comes from people who think it is a drug house. A steady stream of customers comes in, staying for only minutes, all of them men.

Police managed to get an undercover officer into the brothel and bring about a raid, arresting one woman on prostitution charges.

Police learned she was a willing prostitute, but the brothel was part of a bigger operation that included forced prostitution. That led police to apply for the Justice Department grant.

Thanks to the grant, two people are assigned to work full time on human trafficking cases at Clearwater police headquarters: Detective James McBride of the Clearwater Police Department and Special Agent Cal Cundiff of the FDLE.

They came upon Monsalve's trafficking ring in a roundabout way.

One night in 2006, two young women were spotted running down the road in Tallahassee. Police determined they had been brought into the country and forced to work as prostitutes. They were running from the trailer where they had been held.

Police arrested the man who had delivered the girls to the trailer and began burrowing into the network behind this brothel. Monsalve's name emerged, but no one knew the organization's structure.

FDLE Special Agent Eric Yopp eventually learned Monsalve was based in Tampa Bay and told the task force in Clearwater.

As it happens, the local task force had come across business cards Monsalve was distributing at U.S. 19 and Drew Street. The cards said "Tacos and Gorditas" and included a cell phone number on the back. People in the know understood the code words for prostitution.

Authorities set up an undercover operation and arranged to have one of the women delivered to them on May 22, 2007.

Henao, the driver, was arrested and found to be working for Monsalve.

After months of interviews with the Guatemalan victim, whose name has not been released by police, authorities came to understand the inner workings of the organization.

The woman explained that the police and military had been bribed all the way through Central America. The traffickers warned her that if she did not go along with their plan, they would notify immigration officials or harm her family, including her 6-year-old daughter in Guatemala. They even told her that the police in the United States would show no mercy if they found her.

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"When we came in and were taking the trafficker into custody she thought ... we were going to kill her," McBride said. "She thought the police, we were going to kill her."

The woman explained that the prostitutes rotated each week through brothels in Tampa Bay, Orlando, Tallahassee and Jacksonville areas.

Police in Clearwater pooled their information with state and federal authorities, eventually leading to Monsalve's arrest in September 2007 in Houston. After pleading guilty, he was sentenced in the fall.

"Our very first meeting on the task force, we stated that we are not interested in stopping that transporter that brought that trafficking victim," said Clearwater Sgt. Steven Sears, "our goal was to take down the organization."

The Clearwater task force has been at work on other cases since then, some still ongoing. In all, this task force has dealt with five human trafficking victims. It is in the third and final year of its grant, but plan to reapply.

"In this area, nothing has been done like this (investigation)," Sears added later. "With these types of cases it's not something that is reported. It is not something that gets a lot of press. It is very subtle and low-key. For us to develop it from nothing into this, it was very satisfying."

And it's not just the police work. Sears said an organization called World Relief and other partners helped the woman. Among other things, they took her to doctor visits, set her up with educational services, provided her with transportation to church and helped her contact her family in her home country.

The woman was allowed to take up residence in the Tampa Bay area in exchange for her cooperation. She has since moved out of the area and is living somewhere in the southern United States. Police said she is hoping to be reunited with her young daughter.

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FAST FACTS

Can you help?

Police are eager for any tips on human trafficking. Detective James McBride points out that one clue - Monsalve's business card - set detectives on the road to tying everything together. They hope for more leads. Anyone with information may contact the anonymous tip line at (727) 562-4917. More information is at the task force's Web site at www.catfht.org.