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## Woman's Tale Highlights Modern-Day Slavery – Experts Think as Many as 20,000 are Enslaved in the U.S. Each Year

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The butcher knife was her key to freedom. She gripped it in trembling hands, ready to plunge it into her chest to end the rapes, beatings, virtual imprisonment and terror.

Only in her midteens, she had yearned for hope — and a Houston job that would let her help her impoverished family in Central America.

What she got, she says, was slavery.

For almost a year, she claims, she was held against her will, forced to work for the Houston relatives of the *coyote* who had smuggled her into the country. Brutalized, starved, forced to sleep on the floor and threatened with a life of prostitution, the girl saw death as the only escape.

“I was crazy,” she recalled recently in halting, tearful Spanish. “I was about to do it.”

But as she raised the blade for the fatal thrust, the diminutive housekeeper felt a tug. Her captors' 4-year-old daughter, horrified by what she was witnessing, was clinging to her legs.

“I think she was my guardian angel,” said the woman, now 23. “She saved my life.”

She says that crisis, though followed by beatings and sexual attacks, spurred a daring, successful bolt for freedom.

Today, Houston YMCA immigrant advocates cite the case as a classic example of modern-day slavery, an ancient curse that afflicts an estimated 1 million people around the world each year. After weeks of emotional meetings with the woman and consultations with law enforcement authorities, the YMCA will submit the case to the FBI for formal investigation this week. If the probe verifies the woman's claims and results in arrests and convictions, the offenders could face as many as 20 years in prison.

## **Hard to spot**

Authorities say the woman, who still lives in Houston, has married and made a life for herself. But fear is never far away. The chains of servitude, she says, still rattle through her dreams. The Chronicle is withholding her name at the YMCA's request.

"The *coyote* has visited her parents," said Dottie Laster, director of the Houston YMCA's Trafficked Persons Assistance Program. "He is looking for her."

Slavery, authorities say, can exist undetected in the most respectable of neighborhoods.

Some estimates place the number of people annually sold into slavery in the United States as high as 20,000. But no one knows for sure.

"Numbers? It's hard to get numbers," said Lilian Care, spokeswoman for Women Against Global Trafficking, a Houston group that has worked since the late 1990s to draw attention to the problem.

"Slavery still exists," fumed U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, who in June chaired a Senate subcommittee investigating a situation most Americans thought ended 139 years ago with ratification of the 13th Amendment.

"It's not very complimentary on how far we've come in the treatment of our fellow men," said Jeff Watkins, Houston YMCA's director of international services. "What drives this is the same thing that drove slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries. It's money."

Cornyn said much human trafficking is carried out by international organized crime gangs looking to supplement income from their narcotics smuggling operations.

Earlier this summer, Cornyn joined Houston-based U.S. Attorney Michael Shelby and other officials in announcing formation of a law enforcement and social services task force to target slavery.

The Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance is the first such group in Texas and the fifth in the nation.

In the past three years, Justice Department prosecutors nationwide have charged 121 people with trafficking — triple the total from the preceding three years — and secured 83 convictions.

## **Keeping victims quiet**

Earlier this year in Texas, seven members of the Juan Carlos Soto smuggling ring were sentenced after pleading guilty to a variety of immigration offenses. The gang's victims were detained, raped and forced to work against their will.

Such victims often are drawn from the world's poorest regions, lured into the slavery trap by smugglers' promises of lucrative or glamorous work. Once ensnared, women often are consigned to lives of prostitution; men to sweatshops or back-breaking work in the fields.

If they are documented workers, official papers may be seized to keep them from fleeing; if not, they can be held with threats, violence, locks and chains.

"There are many ways to force people to work against their will," Laster said. "They will threaten their families back in the home country. Or they will threaten to turn them over to authorities. When people don't understand the United States judicial system, when they come from countries where people are 'disappeared' or killed, that works very well."

The YMCA, a member of the new task force, first dealt with slavery three years ago when 25 of the more than 200 Chinese and Vietnamese nationals rescued from a garment sweatshop in American Samoa were sent to Houston for social aid.

Factory owner Kil Soo Lee is set to be sentenced in the case next month in Hawaii federal court.

The case has been the Justice Department's largest to date.

Since then, Watkins said, the YMCA has provided services to seven or eight Houston slavery victims.

Among them were a Mexican national abducted at gunpoint and dragged across the border to be enslaved, and a pregnant woman who was promised her freedom in return for her baby.

"If a Houston police officer is walking a beat and comes across a prostitute, it's very easy to view her as nothing more than someone involved in prostitution," Shelby said.

"If no additional questions are asked, he may never learn that the prostitute is a victim of human trafficking. Sometimes people are blind. They don't see what they are looking at."

## **Finally, a way out**

Among the YMCA's task force duties is teaching police and others the tell-tale signs of enslavement. About 1,500 officers already have gone through the class.

The housekeeper's story of slavery illustrates Shelby's point.

For almost a year, she said, neighbors had no suspicion of the hellish scenes played out in her captors' modest one-bedroom apartment.

Though the housekeeper encountered them frequently as she took the couple's daughter out to play, she feared for the safety of her family in Central America and said nothing.

One of eight children of an impoverished farmer, the woman left home at about age 12 to attend an ailing woman in a nearby town. When the woman died, the girl, then about 14, met the trafficker, a man highly regarded in the community and an acquaintance of both her family and that of her late employer.

He offered her the seemingly amazing salary of \$100 a month to work for his brother and his wife in Houston.

But upon arriving in Houston after an 18-day trek across Mexico and much of Texas, she found reality fell short of the promises.

She says that within weeks her captors stopped paying her.

She was forced to sleep on the floor, survive on scraps scavenged from the refrigerator, and — denied access to the apartment's only bathroom — relieve herself in paper cups.

Then, she says, the rapes and beatings began.

“He would throw me on the bed and tell me I was nothing,” she said. “He threatened to make me a prostitute. He said he'd take me to his friends.”

The day of her near-suicide began with a rape, she said, followed by a beating. The child's unwitting intervention not only saved her life, it renewed her will to live — and to escape.

Her chance came later, as her captors took her to a nearby supermarket to help them with the family shopping.

“In public,” she said, “they were always nice.”

On this afternoon, the young housekeeper forgot the lemons. At the cash register, her mistress flew into a rage and sent her scurrying for the fruit, she says. Then she was upbraided for forgetting the lettuce, and sent dashing for the salad greens. On this second trip, she saw some men she recognized as neighbors.

“I pulled on one and said, ‘Please, please help me!’ “ the woman remembered. The men eased her out of the store without attracting her captors' attention, she said.

As the couple waited for their lettuce, the trembling, tearful teen scrambled into the back of a taxi.

With a resounding thunk, the door slammed shut on her old life and the car pulled away.

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