

College students track sex trafficking in San Francisco

SAN FRANCISCO – Students and campus ministry officials at Jesuit-run University of San Francisco are mapping sites where sex trafficking goes on in an effort to help humanitarian organizations combat what they term a blight of modern-day slavery in the city.

The students suspect that at least 90 sex emporiums operate in San Francisco with women held against their will. Because of the difficulty in gathering witness testimony and in tracking the life stories of the victims back to their home countries, the students fear traffickers often escape prosecution.

But they believe the evidence they are collecting will raise public awareness and point aid organizations to places where victims are being kept against their will.

The students described the effort at a recent session of the Theology on Tap discussion series for young adult Catholics, sponsored by the Archdiocese of San Francisco. The meeting was held at a popular bar in the city's financial district.

"A lot of the places we're looking at are a few blocks from here," student Mellice Hackett said.

The effort is part of the "Not For Sale" campaign against human trafficking created by David Batstone, a University of San Francisco ethics professor and an adviser to the undergraduate Erasmus Community on campus. The name is taken from a book Batstone wrote on trafficking and the abolitionists fighting the problem in many countries.

Batstone decided to investigate trafficking after learning that one of his favorite Indian restaurants in the Bay Area had been trafficking women from India for kitchen work and other tasks.

The "Not for Sale" campaign is becoming a global network of abolitionists, involving faith organizations and high schools as well as colleges. More than 35 people

attended the discussion group; half of them were under the age of 30 and they represented nine parishes and two colleges.

Christina Hebets, a junior, said she and Hackett began investigating sex trafficking in San Francisco in 2006. Newspaper and Internet ads for massage parlors raised the students' suspicions that some establishments were marketing groups of women. They theorized the women were being used against their will.

The students then staked out some of the massage parlors, many of which were located on upper floors and had boarded-up windows. They noticed that few women left the buildings. They also learned the establishments did not have massage or business licenses.

After becoming frustrated with follow-up work to determine if charges could be brought against the suspected traffickers, they concluded that not enough is being done to enforce criminal laws against trafficking.

"We found out that whoever's supposed to focus on human trafficking, it really falls through a loophole," Hebets said.

But Lt. Mary Petrie, who is in charge of the vice crimes unit at the San Francisco Police Department, heatedly denied that her officers fail to follow up on any allegation of human trafficking. "There's never been a third-party report that's ever been pushed aside," she said.

The department is part of the North Bay Trafficking Task Force, which also includes law-enforcement and social service agencies in San Mateo, Marin and Sonoma counties. The task force investigates complaints and responds with legal action or aid to the victims.

She said citizens who want to help law enforcement should know the legal definition of trafficking is "services or labor that are obtained through force, fraud or coercion."

She added that in the same establishment a sex worker may freely earn \$7,000 a month while another may be under coercion.

“That is the difficult thing to determine,” Petrie said. “If the students have probable cause or reasonable suspicion that trafficking victims are anywhere, by all means we take all allegations seriously.”

In an interview with Catholic San Francisco, the archdiocesan newspaper, Batstone stood by the students’ work.

“The task force has really been disappointing in that they have yielded very few trafficking cases,” he said, adding that it “flies in the face” of evidence gathered by students.

Luis Enrique Bazan, who is associate director of the university ministry department at the University of San Francisco and who guided the students’ investigation, also expressed frustration that law enforcement did not respond to the findings.

“They’re just not prepared to take evidence from students,” he said, adding that the students are shifting their emphasis from police work to social research.

He said human rights organizations and outraged citizens, like the students, must take on much of the responsibility for exposing the problem through education and outreach to the victims.

Trafficking flourishes, he told the discussion group, because it is a low-risk, high-profit business and its victims are poor, voiceless and disposable.