

Trafficking victim reunited with son

NEWARK, N.J. - Through the work of the Archdiocese of Newark's Catholic Charities' refugee resettlement and human trafficking programs, a former trafficking victim was reunited with her 9-year-old son July 26 at Newark Liberty International Airport after more than four years of forced separation.

Inspired by this reunion, officials at Catholic Charities are hoping they will be able to report more happy endings soon.

Two years ago Lucy Magambi had told her harrowing story to The Catholic Advocate, Newark's archdiocesan newspaper, speaking under an alias. She came to America in 2003 from Kenya to work for a family in Bergen County as a housekeeper and nanny. She left her young son Brian behind with the hopes of making a new life for them in the United States.

"They were going to pay me \$200 a month. I thought I was going to be rich," she recalled.

However, Magambi was pressed to work tirelessly for little pay, forced into seclusion and physically assaulted. Two years ago, Catholic Charities arranged for her rescue. Magambi was trapped in the web of human trafficking, a shadowy crime defined as obtaining commercial labor from a person using force, fear or coercion. Those coerced into working against their will typically are immigrants from Latin America, Africa and South Asia who fear being deported. Victims suffer through a lonely, dark, brutal world intimidated by cruel traffickers and virtually cut off from society.

The Archdiocese of Newark's Catholic Charities unit works to uncover these cases, providing victims with food, shelter, access to health care, job placement and legal services. The organization also helps human trafficking victims obtain a T visa, It allows which allows them to stay in the United States while officials pursue the case against their trafficker. The visa was created by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

After earning her T visa, Magambi anxiously awaited her son's arrival. Now married with an 8-month-old daughter, her family is reunited and looking forward to a new life in New Jersey.

Debbie Marulanda, the director of Newark Catholic Charities' refugee resettlement program, along with other Catholic Charities workers, was present for the emotional reunion of Magambi and her son. "It is rare that the horror story of human

trafficking has a happy ending,” Marulanda said. “No words can truly express how touching that moment (at the airport) was.”

There are seven cases at Catholic Charities of trafficking victims waiting to be reunited with their children. All are women are from Central America – Honduras, Mexico and Guatemala – waiting for T visas.

“Immigration Services is working hard for these victims and with pressure from the Department of Health and Human Services, getting a T visa is taking less time. Now it takes about a year,” Marulanda said.

The Catholic Charities’ refugee resettlement program caseload includes 10 new cases since January and 48 cases from 2006. Meanwhile, the group’s human trafficking program has 11 new from January and 25 cases from to 2006. Most of the trafficking victims are women from a prostitution raid that took place in Union City in May 2006.

“Most of these women came to this country through the border and were forced into prostitution,” Marulanda explained. “Some of them were forced to have abortions and they were constantly humiliated. The worst part is that they had no one to turn to in America – no one to listen to them, no shoulder to cry on. They felt like they were abandoned.”

Today, these women have found jobs and Catholic Charities is helping them restart their lives. The traffickers pled guilty and will soon be sentenced for their crimes. “I admire these women. They went through such a difficult situation and they are working hard to repair their lives from nothing to something,” Marulanda said.

Magambi is settling in with her son and is grateful for what Catholic Charities has done for her. “It was so nice to see him again,” she said.

“I was so excited and speechless. I have a new family now. To my surprise, Brian is adjusting quite well; he’s in summer camp,” she added. “He loves his sister Allison very much.”