

SLAVERY OUT OF THE SHADOWS:

SPOTLIGHT ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

By Ty Meighan



As a 10-year-old girl, she met a man who promised to take care of her. But for the next seven years, she was forced to sell herself on the streets and subjected to threats, torture, and manipulation.

She had been lured into the dangerous and illegal world of sexual exploitation through human trafficking. “I almost died every day for seven years,” said Withelma “T” Ortiz Walker Pettigrew, who is known simply as “T.”

However, 13 years later at a recent video shoot in an East Austin studio, she was the star, the expert using her lived experiences to prevent others from suffering the same fate.

“If we share our stories, maybe this doesn’t have to happen to other people,” said T, who is now 23.

T is the narrator for *Slavery Out of the Shadows: Spotlight on Human Trafficking*, a new video by the Texas Young Lawyers Association initiated by TYLA President C.E. Rhodes. The video, expected to be released in January, is intended to educate the public on the increasing incidents of domestic human trafficking.

Six years after T escaped her former life thanks to a court-appointed advocate, the anger toward her pimp, or any pimp,

remains. But she has worked through the pain and anger, and now uses her experience to push for reforms to help children who have been victimized sexually.

“I have never met somebody who has been through what she’s been through and be that willing to come out with it in order to help other people,” said Allison Smith, project director and an employee of Synthetic Pictures, which is producing the video for TYLA.

Under the bright studio lights during the shoot in Austin, T looked into the camera and spoke with the authority driven by her experience. “Most importantly, we can help cut off the supply of victims, make it harder on the traffickers by giving our

young people a voice, building up their self-esteem, confidence, and teaching them about healthy choices,” she said.

Her advocacy work has attracted national attention. In 2011, *Glamour Magazine* named her “Woman of the Year,” along with nine other women. She also is a frequent speaker around the nation, including testifying before Congress and serving on the National Foster Care Youth and Alumni Policy Council, and the Board of Directors for the Washington, D.C.-based Human Rights Project for Girls.

Rhodes said he first learned about T when his wife pointed out her story in *Glamour*. “I read that article, and I was very moved by her story,” Rhodes said. “I thought this was a face that could connect with young people.”

T said she was excited to contribute to the TYLA video when Rhodes contacted her. “Why wouldn’t I contribute to an amazing project?” she asked.

Rhodes said his interest in human trafficking and desire to do something about it was sparked when he watched the movie, “Taken.” In the 2008 film, an ex-soldier traveling through Europe is forced to rescue his daughter after she was abducted by slave traders. Rhodes said he began thinking about his younger sister and the possibility that such an ordeal could happen to her.

Many children are at risk of becoming human trafficking victims, not just those from unstable or foster homes, Rhodes said, noting that adults are also brought into the United States and forced to work long hours with little or no pay. “The first step is to raise public awareness,” he said.

More public education is needed to raise awareness about the rise of human trafficking, which is the second largest and fastest-growing illegal activity in the world, authorities say. According to the U.S. State Department, 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders every year, and at least 100,000 children are sexually exploited every year in the United States.

In Texas, 80 percent of the human-trafficking cases involve sexual exploitation of children. For several reasons, the problem is especially prevalent in Texas, including the state’s proximity to the border and the number of highways to other states. Houston and El Paso are among the nation’s “most intense trafficking jurisdictions in the country” according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

In addition to Austin, the film crew shot video and conducted interviews in Houston, including at a cantina that fed-

eral authorities raided and shut down for sexual exploitation of dozens of girls.

“This isn’t just happening across the ocean,” Smith said. “This is happening right in the middle of Houston, Texas.”

Texas lawmakers have taken notice of the problem, passing legislation in 2011 that toughens penalties for human trafficking crimes and enacts protection measures for minors who are human-trafficking victims.

In the TYLA video, Geoff Barr, Texas assistant attorney general for human trafficking, speaks about the importance of protecting survivors and ensuring that they don’t return to their previous life. “There’s no consistent trend or system that protects these unique victims,” he said. “That’s what we’re trying to create. What we want to do is rehabilitate and counsel the victims so they don’t return to the trafficker.”

Barr said proper counseling and rehab is vital for survivors. “A prosecution is important, but if we can keep the victim from becoming a victim again, that’s more of a victory,” he said.

Also featured in the video are programs designed to address human trafficking, such as the public awareness initiative in the Miami-Dade school district. The Florida effort focuses on training teachers and administrators on

warning signs that a child could be a human-trafficking victim.

“We’ve had a teacher who was arrested for trafficking one of our middle school students because of this training and program,” says Miami-Dade School Board Vice Chairman Lawrence Feldman, who proposed the new campaign. “There were people with suspicions, but this program gave his colleagues the ability to know what to do, who to report information to, and that resulted in his arrest.”

Production of the TYLA video began in October and is expected to be finished in January, which is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month. “We want to be presenting it to different groups at that time,” said Rhodes, adding that the video will be available on the TYLA website and distributed throughout Texas and the nation.

Smith, the video’s director, said the TYLA project piqued her interest since she has a background in news and documentary work. “This was especially compelling to me because it was dealing with the real players in this growing problem,” she said. “The video should educate, but I also think we were looking to show the very real faces of human trafficking. We wanted to personalize the issue and make it real and intimate.”

Runaway minors and homeless youth are among the child populations with the greatest risk of falling victim to human traffickers, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which estimates that traffickers are likely to approach children within 48 hours after they run away from home.



TYLA President C.E. Rhodes (right) speaks with video director Allison Smith before the shoot in Austin on Oct. 4.



"T" and the crew prepare to film her narrated portion of *Slavery Out of the Shadows* at a studio in Austin.

The video will help dispel some myths of human trafficking, such as that it mostly involves illegal immigrants, Smith said. "That's not only what trafficking is," she said. "It's time that we get educated on it."

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Slavery Out of the Shadows also features interviews with survivors and human trafficking experts, including lawyers who are prosecuting such cases and child advocates. One survivor, Debbie of San Antonio, tells a harrowing story of her mom injecting her with heroin at the age of six so she would feel no pain when men fondled her. In exchange, her mom would get drugs from the men.

"My mother was selling me for her drugs," Debbie said.

Debbie said she got pregnant at age 11 and gave birth to a second child when she was 13. "I was 31 years a heroin addict and I'm now 10 months clean," Debbie said. "That's a big deal for me. Before I just felt like nothing. I just thought everything that happened to me was just what happened to me. When my

husband stabbed me and almost took my life, I knew that's not what life was supposed to be."

T met Debbie for the first time on the set of the video shoot in East Austin. They embraced each other like sisters who hadn't

seen each other for years, tears flowing from Debbie's eyes as T praised her courage for speaking out.

Survivors such as T and Debbie say pimps are manipulative, inflicting a psychological and physical chokehold on innocent children who are looking for someone to care for and about them. Pimps control everything – where they go, who they talk to – and their main tools are fear or torture, which prevents the children from seeking help.

"Victims do not allow this to happen to themselves," T said. "This is not something that these victims just go along with."

Her message to other survivors is simple. "You can still be the best you can be," T said. She is putting those words into action in her own

life, including creating a website on fundrazr.com, "T Goes to College 2013," where she is raising money so she can get a college degree.

Meanwhile, Smith said the TYLA project had a profound impact on some of her film crew who told her, "It was nice to be working on something that really matters."

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