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Human Trafficking symposium a real eye opener

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I recently attended a symposium in Cutler Bay Town Hall dealing with human trafficking.

I really had no desire to go because my only understanding up to now of human trafficking was bringing people here to clean their homes or pick crops or whatever, none of which directly involves me or anyone in my family. What I came to learn at this symposium actually blew my mind.

It seems that one of the major targets of human traffickers is to select young girls, mostly between the ages of 13 and 15, and have them enter a world of prostitution. It would seem to me that this is a difficult thing to do, but not so.

We got to hear some actual stories of young girls who were simply approached in a shopping mall by a kind gentleman who offered to buy them a new pair of shoes if they attended a party with him. Apparently new shoes are quite an incentive and who doesn't want to go to a party?

The solicitors are not always dirty old men but in many case a young man, not much older than the girls who have found a way to make use of their bodies by selling them to others willing to pay for sex. To make it even more desirable to these young girls, they are willing to actually share their profits allowing these young ladies unheard of riches.

Most of the victims were from broken homes and would easily welcome someone who would appear to be a father figure. There seems to be a huge number of girls wanting this new life and even more willing to offer it to them. I heard stories of a girl in a hotel on Miami Beach being approached by a contemporary who offered to be her friend then invited her to a party in another room.

No need to guess what happened there. A few

drops, a few drinks, and the girl had now entered a new life, which amazingly she was rewarded for with either cash or gifts.

There were speakers there from the FBI, Miami-Dade Police, and several other enforcement agencies telling us stories as they experienced them that I found quite hard to believe.

The advice that they gave to parents was to be aware of any of their children suddenly showing up with extra cash and gifts that they could not normally afford. Try to find out who their real friends are.

In my day, a friend was someone who you actually knew, went to the movies with, played in the park with, etc. Now due to the modern wonders of science kids can brag about having hundreds of friends following them on Facebook or other social media, some actually specializing in trafficking.

It seems like yesterday when I got my first computer and someone introduced me to this marvelous thing called Prodigy which allowed me to communicate with other people directly on the Internet without any additional cost. What could be better than that?

I had no idea that it would reach the levels that it has now with the many, many social media sites that these kids are able to gravitate towards. Of course we were all given warnings of how to keep children safe but perhaps there are some negatives to that as well.

I was in a restaurant some weeks ago when the owner, a wonderful guy that I know, walked by a table where there was an adorable child sitting with her mother and he couldn't resist waving to her and telling her how cute she was, etc. Anyone that knows me knows that I love children and am very apt to do the same thing.

Just the other day there was this adorable little girl sitting in a supermarket basket smiling and talking. When I tried to play grandpa with her as I do with my own grandchildren she immediately curled up in the fetal position covering her eyes and her

face. No doubt this is what her parents taught her to do to avoid stranger danger. I couldn't help but wonder what the future holds for these people.

I always thought that being friendly and smiling at other people is a good thing to do. Not so! I had taken my granddaughter to a movie not long ago lost sight of her for a moment and she came over to me and told me that a man wanted to buy her some candy. I asked her to point out the man He was long gone by then. Scary huh?

There were quite a few speakers at this symposium, one of whom had written the book which I look forward to reading, called *Stolen*, by Katarina Rosenblatt, PhD. In it she describes her life of being a trafficking survivor.

In her talk she demonstrated how easy it is to become involved with these sinister people and what she went through to eventually break free and graduate from college. Being a parent and grandparent myself I always worry about my kids driving, texting, etc. but frankly never really worried about them becoming the victims of trafficking.

Are we going to be raising a generation of anti-social people and children who are afraid to speak to strangers under any circumstances and will they mistrust just about anyone who offers them any form of kindness as a reward? Going back 30 or 40 years, I never dreamed of anything like this becoming a problem to society.

I truly wish I had the answer. Of course we all know that one of the major problems is the extremely high rate of separation of families in which the basic need or want to be part of a loving family group is no longer being fulfilled. I think this is the same reason that we see all of these gangs with their related shootings, etc. Young people need to feel that they belong and what they belong to can amount to just about anything these days. Beware!