

Survivor to share personal account of human trafficking, sexual slavery

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By Sanne Specht

Natasha Herzig, keynote speaker at a sexual assault awareness seminar planned Wednesday in Ashland, will speak about surviving the brutal world of human trafficking — a world that rolls right through the Rogue Valley, police say.

“Natasha has been so courageous in telling her story,” said Ashland police Detective Carrie Hull. “She is getting ready to testify against her kidnaper, her pimp. And she has just testified on Capitol Hill on sex trafficking.”

Portland is listed as a national hub for child sex trafficking. Herzig’s story of terror and triumph began in a Northern California town. The Rogue Valley is on the Interstate 5 corridor between the two, Hull said.

“I don’t want to panic everyone,” Hull said. “And I know these are difficult conversations to have. But it is simply too naive to believe sex trafficking is not happening here.”

It was spring 2001 when the then-19-year-old Herzig was approached in a well-populated mall by a woman who asked the pretty blond college student whether she wanted a job in the makeup industry.

Herzig became uneasy during a follow-up meeting at a local restaurant. She excused herself on the pretext she needed to get her sweater from her car.

Her plan was to leave and never come back. But it was too late. A man with a gun was waiting in the parking lot. She was forced into a black Mercedes.

The man was James Vernon Joseph, aka “Spyder.” He placed Herzig in “mental chains,” breaking her down physically and mentally during her months of sexual slavery, Herzig said recently on “The Joy Behar Show,” where she appeared with John Walsh, host of the “America’s Most Wanted” television show.

“Each day is a day of survival,” Herzig said.

To avoid the police attention of a missing person’s case, Joseph had Herzig call her parents. Listening in on the calls, he coached her on precisely what to say, she said.

“The entire time she was gone, her family thought she was fine,” Hull said. “People think this only happens to kids who are out on the streets.”

Herzig said Joseph threatened to kill Herzig’s family members, beat her on a regular basis, and forced her into prostitution. The pimp took Herzig and other young women to sporting events and conventions across the nation, selling them to men willing to pay thousands of dollars, Hull said.

The trauma continued for 10 months until Herzig and another captive managed to escape in New York. Herzig said her breaking point came after

seeing another victim beaten so badly her eye was nearly protruding from its socket.

“I called somebody, and said, ‘Please call my parents,’” she said.

The police arrived. Herzig and her friend were saved. But Joseph was gone.

Sexual assault experts know the process of recovery is never an easy one. Herzig’s life was forever changed the day she was stolen. She told television producers it took years to reclaim her self-esteem.

“When you feel like you’re worth nothing, you’re going to treat your body and yourself like you are worth nothing, and while you’re healing you’re making a lot of mistakes because you’re trying to find out who you are,” she said in an interview with “America’s Most Wanted” producers.

During that process, Herzig made a series of X-rated films. The media has hammered Herzig, Hull said, not understanding that acting out sexually can be a common experience among those who have been sexually abused.

“There are reasons why that happened. She’s been so courageous, knowing this is in her past. She could have turned to drug use or alcohol and people would have been much more understanding,” Hull said.

Herzig said in her interview with “Wanted” producers that girls who have survived sex trafficking often end up in clubs or on the streets because it is a reflection of their self-worth.

“Your behaviors and actions that you display are now how you see yourself and that goes back to what you’re being told when you’re trafficked,” she said.

Herzig now is 29 years old, married and has children. She works with advocacy groups, is a guest speaker at law enforcement conferences and is doing what she can to bring awareness to sex trafficking.

No specific laws regarding sex trafficking had been written until 2004, when the Child Protect Act was passed. In March, Herzig testified in Washington, D.C., in support of U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden’s anti-sex-trafficking legislation, Hull said.

Herzig is also preparing to testify against Joseph. The alleged pimp was arrested by U.S. marshals as he walked out of his upscale Woodland Hills, Calif., home just days before her story was told on Walsh’s show. Joseph is slated to face charges for promoting prostitution and second-degree assault in New York.

“I can’t say enough about how courageous she has been. There are other victims of this guy who are afraid to (speak),” Hull said.

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