

April Speaker, Deborah Pond

“Human Trafficking in Our Backyard”

Deborah, “Debbie,” who has worked fulltime combating human trafficking since retiring from the RCMP in 2013 following 35 years of service, jolted us into realizing that “It happens *here*, in our backyard. Traffickers and their prey live in *your* community, shop at the same malls, attend the same schools. Human trafficking – modern day slavery- is happening as never before. Worldwide, between 27 and 40 million people are enslaved; 71 percent are girls and women; 5.5 million are under 18.”

Debbie works with the York Region anti-human trafficking sector helping young women – whom she calls “clients” – and is a director of U-R Home, a non-governmental organization which does the same. “There are many forms of trafficking – sex, forced labour, Cybernet child sexual abuse, forced marriage, domestic servitude.”

“Human trafficking is as big a criminal activity as illegal drug trafficking; an over \$100 billion enterprise that makes its money by exploiting the vulnerable. It’s underreported. A trafficker can make \$280,000 a year from one girl; most have stables so can make perhaps millions of dollars. Eighty-three percent of traffickers are males of whom 65 percent are between 18 and 34. There’s been an increase in female traffickers.” The average age of young girls lured is 13. The principal targets are those who are or feel isolated: Indigenous, visible minorities, newcomers, impoverished, homeless, in group homes, unemployed, addicted to drugs and/or alcohol, learning disabilities, mental health problems, LGBTQQ2S. But Debbie pointed out, “It can happen to anyone. One of my clients had professional parents.” Social media has enabled predators to scout online. While the person chatting sees no danger in talking about their personal life, for traffickers it’s a treasure trove of recruitment information. “Bad day with parents or a boyfriend; feeling they don’t fit in; where they live through school uniform, insignia; their interests. They use this to ‘friend.’ Users of social media should be careful.”

Debbie said that Toronto is Canada’s biggest trafficking hub and Halifax is also big. Traffickers travel cross country on major highways with their “girls,” stay at roadside hotels and motels, advertise and perform their “services,” then move on. Traffickers reel in prey by acting like a big sister or brother, father figure, or loving boyfriend; gifts of expensive clothing and meals; a place to live; beauty salon visits. “I find a crack and get in. I sell a dream,” a trafficker said in a video Debbie showed. Then they take control of every aspect of a girl’s life -when she can shower, eat, go to bed, get up, friends she can no longer see, can’t talk to family – and constantly belittle, wearing away self-esteem, controlling their state of mind. They take away their identity— health card, driver’s licence, passport; beat the girls, brand them as if they were cattle; threaten that they will hurt their families.

To stop trafficking/exploitation stop “demand, which comes from all ages and walks of life,” Debbie urged.

It wasn’t until 2005 that Canada included human trafficking in its Criminal Code. The Toronto Police has a specialized unit but there have been few convictions; the victims are afraid to testify. “I had a client who wore a wig and glasses to change her appearance; her trafficker was sentenced to 8 ½ years in prison.” There is a national hotline, posters and a number of help agencies. Debbie speaks to students, emphasizing the importance of “healthy relationships.”

Susan Goldenberg