

Victim shares ordeal at HSU

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Shandra Woworuntu speaks in a heavy Indonesian accent, making some of her words hard to understand. No one, however, had trouble understanding what happened to her on her first day in the United States.

“He put a gun on me,” Woworuntu said, pointing a finger at her head and sending a chill through the audience.

It was then that Woworuntu realized she had been tricked into the underworld of sex trafficking by answering a newspaper ad for an enticing job in America.

Woworuntu was guest speaker Tuesday for Hardin-Simmons University’s chapel service. She shared the stage with Chris Heuertz, founder of the Gravity Center, which seeks to connect social activism with Christian contemplative spirituality.

Heuertz asked Woworuntu questions and then repeated her comments if they were hard to

See speakers, 5A

understand.

Woworuntu lives in New York City and works with anti-human trafficking advocacy groups. She also is a legislative lobbyist in Washington D.C. Woworuntu and Heuertz frequently appear together to raise awareness about sex trafficking.

Woworuntu’s personal story started in 2001, when she responded to a newspaper ad for a six-month job in the hotel industry in Chicago. She was exceptionally bright, graduating from college in her native country just before turning 18. She was employed as a financial analyst for the Korea Exchange Bank in Indonesia.

But during an economic downturn in 1998, she lost that job. She took other jobs but in 2001 decided to look to the United States for a higher paying job so that she could save money to send her daughter to college.

It sounded perfect. She would work in a hotel in Chicago for six months, save money and then decide what to do next.

“I was excited with the expectations,” she said.

But those high hopes were dashed when the plane landed in New York City, not Chicago. Woworuntu, who was 25, and several young Indonesia girls on the flight were met by a man who said he was to pick them up.

He confiscated their passports and identification cards and drove them to a hotel. The dream then turned into a nightmare. Once they arrived at the hotel, the driver took them in and pointed to another man who had a large roll of cash.

“You have to stay with this man,” they were told.

Eventually, Woworuntu was sold to a woman who operated a brothel and told she had to pay \$30,000 to be free. Each time she met with a “customer,” \$100 would be deducted from the debt.

She was drugged and controlled for months until escaping through a second-story bathroom window of a Brooklyn hotel. Through it all, she kept her faith and hope.

“I believed that one day the light would shine on me,” she said.

It did, but it took a while. After escaping, she was homeless and had trouble getting anyone to believe her story, even law enforcement. Eventually, she was rescued by Safe Horizon, a victim assistance agency in New York, and connected to an FBI agent who believed her story.

She helped bust the trafficking ring and testified in court. The men responsible either were deported or imprisoned.

Heuertz said it is hard to get accurate data on a black market endeavor but that sex trafficking is estimated to be a \$35 billion industry, with up to 2 million people being trafficked each year.

Woworuntu and Heuertz offered some suggestions for helping to end the trade:

Educate yourself about the realities of sex trafficking.

Help raise awareness.

Support organizations that are equipped to tackle the problem.

Report suspicious activity by contacting the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (888-373-7888).

Woworuntu told students that she witnessed and experienced violence and abuse at the hands of her captors for months, but that through it she managed to cling to hope.

She grew up in a Muslim home and attended Catholic schools. She said prayer helped her through the roughest times of her captivity and that she never lost her faith.

“God is loving, God is caring,” she said. “Just lean on him.”

speakers from 4A

Edition: AR-O

Section: Local

Page: 4A

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