

Trafficking in America By Grace Kahng

In spring of 2004, Katya (not her real name), like thousands of other foreign exchange university students, was looking forward to the summer job placement that she and a friend had received in Virginia Beach, Va. When she and her friend Lena arrived at Dulles Airport after a long flight from Ukraine, they were relieved to be met by fellow countrymen who spoke Russian.

The two men, Alex Maksimenko and Michael Aronov, were holding signs with the girls' names and greeted them by taking their bags and luggage. Charming and reassuring, Aronov informed the girls that they had been reassigned to a job in Detroit where they would waitress and perfect their English language skills.

The men drove Katya and Lena to the Greyhound bus station and gave them tickets to Detroit. Confused and exhausted, the girls had no reason to question the change of plans.

"When we got to the hotel in Detroit, everything changed," says Katya. "They closed the door and sat us down on the couch, took our passports and papers and said, 'You owe us big money for bringing you here.' They gave us strip clothes and told us that we were going to be working at a strip club called Cheetahs."

Shocked and scared, the two women were subjected to physical, mental and sexual abuse over the next year as they were forced to work 12-hour shifts stripping for local Detroit men's clubs. According to immigration customs agent Angus Lowe, the men controlled the women through intimidation with guns and threats to hurt family members back home.

Katya and her friend are two of the estimated 17,000 young women and girls annually who are forced to work in the sex industry in the U.S. by organized criminals. "Chicago, Houston, St. Paul, Minnesota, these crimes are happening in every community in America big and small," says Marcie Forman, director of investigations for ICE (Immigration Customs Enforcement). "We're talking about money here. Millions of dollars, and these people don't think about these women as human beings. They think of them as dollars and cents," Forman says.

In February 2005, after months of planning and finally confiding in a customer from the strip club, the two girls escaped and were brought to the FBI and ICE. Their escape resulted in the arrest of Alex Maksimenko and Michael Aronov, both of whom pleaded guilty and are serving time in federal prison for their crimes.

Even though her captors are in prison, Katya says she will never live without fear. Maksimenko's father — who was also convicted of forced labor and illegal trafficking — continues to live openly in Ukraine as a fugitive from authorities.

Tune in: NBC's Meredith Vieira goes inside the human trafficking and underground prostitution scene in the United States in "MSNBC Undercover: Sex Slaves in America," which premieres Monday, Dec. 3, at 11 p.m. ET/PT on MSNBC.

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