

# Praise for Theresa L. Flores & *The Slave Across the Street*

"Flores puts a different kind of face on human trafficking in America. She is white, middle-class and blond and looks the epitome of a suburban American woman. She grew up in a wealthy suburb of Detroit in Michigan and did well at school. Yet Flores tells a nightmarish story ..."

— *The London Guardian*, NOV. 22, 2009

"[Theresa Flores] turned her 'hell' into help for other victims"

— *Catholic News Service*, NOV. 16, 2009

"For 20 years, Theresa Flores kept a secret about the tortured life of her teen years"

— *The Today Show*, NBC, FEBRUARY 2009

"I've just finished your book and I want to say thank you—thank you for the courage you brought to the writing, for the truth you spoke so unflinchingly, and for the hope that is your special gift to others. We hear too little from those who have borne slavery. Yet it is this lived experience, and the lessons that come from it, that is our best guide to ending slavery."

— KEVIN BALES, FREE THE SLAVES, PRESIDENT, AND AUTHOR OF *Disposable People*

"This is a note of many thanks for coming to Dallas recently and participating in the Women's Symposium; I am still stopped on campus by people who were in attendance and who were deeply moved by your story in particular and by the panel in general."

— RICK HALPERIN, SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION PROGRAM, DIRECTOR

"After reading Theresa Flores' courageous book, I have come to understand how the pain of silence can cut a person off from a healthy life. Her honesty and courage has been an inspiration to me and my clientele. This book should be read by every therapist in America."

— JOHN J. GARY, MS, PCCS, NCC, PH.D., CLINICAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST

"A St. Thomas Aquinas High School junior, the school's representative for the Catholic Consortium, said Flores' story had a big impact on her, especially the secrecy of it. 'Her story made me shake in my seat.'"

— *The Catholic Exponent*, JANUARY 22, 2009

# The Slave Across the Street

The True Story of How an American Teen  
Survived the World of Human Trafficking

THERESA L. FLORES  
with PEGGY SUE WELLS



ampelón  
PUBLISHING

Boise, Idaho  
[www.ampelonpublishing.com](http://www.ampelonpublishing.com)

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ISBN: 978-0-9823286-8-2

Printed in the United States of America

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Ampelon Publishing

PO Box 140675

Boise, ID 83714

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009941479

To order other Ampelon Publishing products, visit us on the web at:

[www.ampelonpublishing.com](http://www.ampelonpublishing.com)

Cover photography & design: Jared Swafford — [SwingFromTheRafters.com](http://SwingFromTheRafters.com)

Printed in the United States of America on post-consumer recycled paper

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# A Note to the Reader

## Trafficking in Persons:

*“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of person, by means of the threat or use of forces or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, or the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”*

## Exploitation:

*“shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation”*

*“The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth above, shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in the above stated have been used”*

*“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered trafficking in persons even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in the above stated”*

– taken from United Nations Convention against  
Transnational Organized Crime, 2000

**L**ecturing across the United States over the past couple of years, I've told my story a hundred times. While it has been excruciatingly painful, my journey bore fruit in the awareness that my story brings to others.

Whether speaking to five Midwestern Kiwanis men, a small room of retired Catholic nuns in Ohio, an auditorium full of eager and enthusiastic college students in California, Missouri, and Tennessee, or simply speaking privately and candidly to a television journalist who knew nothing of this topic, each time I began with the same question.

“How many of you know about human trafficking?”

A few hands go up.

“Enough to write a paper on it or explain it to someone?”

The hands drop. All but one or two. Time and time again.

While it is disappointing and somewhat alarming that hundreds, even thousands of people know very little about this topic, it is uplifting and encouraging to educate others on human trafficking, how it looks, how it feels, and where it happens.

I recently began a short conversation with another mom at a summer baseball game for our children. She casually asked, “What do you do?”

“I lecture on human trafficking.”

“You mean like in India?”

Embracing the opportunity, the teachable moment, I gave this college educated woman, working in the school system, more than she bargained for in the middle of a baseball game. But I was glad for the chance to open her eyes to the importance of protecting her lovely teen daughter.

About six months after I put this story on paper and started lecturing on a regular basis, I quickly realized that I hadn’t fully described the small details, the circumstances around what happened and the recovery process. When I was originally compelled to write down what happened, it had been painful to dredge up old memories. I felt I was doing good to get it out on paper. My main objective at the time was to simply tell my story, to tell what happened to me so that parents could see how easily this could happen to an average kid from the suburbs.

But each time I spoke, telling a small snippet lasting five minutes to an hour, of the traumatic two years that my story encompasses, the same questions arose over and over again. They needed to be answered.

My desire is that when you close this book, it is not with a sense of horror or sadness for me, but with a clear understanding of how simply and easily this occurs. Right here in the United States. How trafficking seeped into our country. Into our communities. May this project imbue you with a passion to help the child that comes to their mind as they read the book. My desire is that you will share this with other parents. May this book provide hope that a survivor can heal and turn something

horrific into a catalyst for good.

As I began working on revisions for this manuscript, I asked my oldest brother to help me make this a more rounded story. After sharing the book with him, we talked about the previous taboo topic, the subject we had avoided for over two decades – those years in Detroit. At last we had permission to ask one another questions, and discover what each of us had endured unbeknownst to the other. Talking it through provided a different perspective and fresh insight that we hadn't been crazy or imagined it all. It was validation.

My brother's contribution brings greater understanding to our family dynamics, my behavior during that time, as well as what my brother, unfortunately, encountered so the traffickers could ensure I remained in my position of indebtedness.

I also wanted to include the perspective of the person I first successfully shared my story with in college. The first successful relationship I had that helped me heal and trust again. This healing was especially important from the further wounds of unknowing strangers, unbelievers that this could truly be ‘slavery,’ comments and opinions that I must have had an option, therefore it could not be slavery. I suppose I was seeking validation again. Embedded deep within our soul, rejection and shame are emotions that people with post traumatic syndrome disorder (PTSD) live with daily. I needed another person’s perspective on how this trauma changed me, the psychological and physical aftermaths of what it did to me. Both internally and externally.

I realize that this is a difficult subject for many to embrace, and that no amount of witnesses or perspectives I provide will convince some people that I had no other viable options in the circumstances. It is my greatest hope that people will understand the most important message in my story is the sexual exploitation of a child.

The victim is a child.

A child who *feels* there are no options.

This is *my* story of a girl from the suburbs who was manipulated, coerced, and threatened into terrible things against her will, while others profited. Since speaking publicly, others have confessed similar, sad

#### A Note to the Reader

stories. It is not important for the nonbeliever to acknowledge the truth of what happened to me. What is important is that people become aware that this is happening in the United States, in cities, and in small towns. To kids of every color, every socio-economic background, with two parents, or no parents. It is vital that people understand how simply this can happen to *any* child.

# Introduction

**L**ying in the bathtub, I knew it was time. Time to pour out the past onto paper. As I pondered this thought, I wondered what would happen, not *if*, but *when*, I finally opened Pandora's Box and wrote my story for others to read.

This bath was different from the other baths. It was a turning point. Even though I would expose my naked self, my soul, I would finally be whole. Finally be cleansed. Washed free of these years of sin and guilt. Of the secrets and the what-ifs.

Like a soft womb, the fragrant, warm water embraced and soothed me. After long years locked within the dark corners of my mind, the memories slowly seeped out. I had kept them contained, afraid that if I allowed myself to remember, my fragile state of mind might crack.

I prided myself on being a strong woman. I had endured more than most people could ever fathom. After all, I had survived my own nightmare, hadn't I? But that was physical. This was mental. One can never guarantee how strong the psyche really is. Or what the results will be.

Was I strong enough now? Had I healed enough to go down this path? To remember what I had endured? To press myself to remember the parts I had blocked to protect myself? Could I face the silent horrors which no one knew about?

Baths have always been a symbolic experience. Almost surreal. Most women enjoy baths. They soak in the warm, sudsy, scented waters. Soak away the craziness of the day, the responsibilities and chaos. Baths give permission to unwind. Relaxing, peaceful, tranquil, medicinal.

Baths represent much more than relaxing or cleansing our bodies. Our first breath is taken as we emerge from the uterine bag of water in which we developed and lived for our first months of existence. Next we are washed clean and presented to our parents, to the world. Parents document their child's first bath as momentous. Many receive the waters of baptism to symbolically cleanse us of sin, proclaiming our commitment to be followers of Christ. At death, many receive final rites, a blessing of holy water by a priest.

Baths – water, not only cleanse us but also mark important events in

our lives. They cleanse our souls and make us new again. They heal us and nourish our soul. Our body requires water in order to survive.

Taking a bath has always been important to me. Baths allowed me to think deeply and have a good cry, which no one could hear while the hot water gushed from the faucet. Baths permitted me an opportunity for soul searching and at times, provided me with answers to my questions.

I took baths for another important reason. They were taken with an earnest wish of washing away sins and regrets. My regrets and the sins of others. But this never seemed to happen. Baths were taken as a cleansing ritual, to start a new beginning, a rebirth. With fresh, clean water. Yet the dirty feeling still remained, even after exiting the waters.

For all these years, I have carried the burden of what happened before and after that memorable bath when I was 15-years-old.

## I.

# They Don't Know My Name

To the men who used me night after night, I was not a human being. As they performed the most intimate act a man and a woman engage in, I was only a dollar value. A commodity. To know this in my formative teenage years, during that period when a woman defines her worth and identity, proved devastating. How does a child begin to process this? To feel, to hear, that so many, many men didn't care about me at all, in fact they celebrated my humiliation, degradation, and pain, was a critical wound to my soul. It was a bitter view of inhumanity to an idealistic teenager.

This awareness leads a victim of human trafficking to lose all love, even for themselves. When others don't value or love you, it becomes difficult to love yourself. There is no healthy example. Shame, embarrassment, and guilt fill the vacuum where love should thrive.

Often the heart and the brain give conflicting messages. My heart was wounded from so many men treating me without care or value. Certain locations, smells, words, or songs can trigger memories. One day a friend and I watched a movie on trafficking called *Call and Response*. As I sat in my theatre seat, trying to be strong and not remember, the passionate words of a song penetrated my carefully constructed shell.

*“They don’t know my name...”*

The memory rushed forward like a wave crashing upon a rocky beach. On that night the room smelled of sex, smoke, and musky incense when an older, attractive, olive skinned man entered. He looked upon me, splayed naked on the bed, my hair rumpled, my young body wet and exhausted from being mounted by so many men already. Rarely did anyone look me in the eyes but this man did and I saw admiration and sadness reflected there.

“What is your name?” he asked in a rough accent.

Knowing I would be punished, I didn't dare say a word.

The kind-eyed man seemed out of place among these other brutes.

He turned to Nick. "What is her name?"

Nick looked at him with disgust. "What does it matter? She has no name."

His words struck my heart. I turned my head to the side as tears rolled down my cheek.

"Never mind," I heard the man say. "I have changed my mind. The deal is off."

I turned to watch the dignified man walk regally out of the room.

I felt Nick's anger and his repulsion of the man who refused his prize. "Get up and get dressed," he spat. "You're no good to me anymore tonight. Get out of here. I will tell Daniel to take you home now. And this better not ever happen again! You are costing me money!"

While I was grateful that I didn't have to endure any more that night, all I could think of was that this kind man hadn't helped me escape.

I was worth nothing.

I didn't matter.

I had no name.