

Ex-U.S. Sen. Chiesa on human trafficking: 'There are more slaves now in the world than there were in the Civil War'



Former U.S. Senator and state Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa (right) in a January photo. (Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger)



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on June 27, 2014 at 10:57 AM, updated June 27, 2014 at 1:09 PM

PRINCETON — In 2007, an African woman who was “very dynamic” and “very bright” convinced the parents of many teenage girls, ranging from 13 to 19 years old, that she’d help their children escape the poverty-stricken country of Togo and bring them to the United States for a chance at quality education, former U.S. Senator and former N.J. Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa recounted Thursday night.

The woman did take the girls to the U.S., but instead of enrolling them in schools she took their traveling documents away, threatened them with violence and sexual abuse, and enslaved them in a U.S. hair salon, forcing them to work 14-hour days, six days per week, Chiesa said, speaking before an audience of about 40 at Princeton Unitarian Universalist Congregation Church.

Though they were miserable and deceived, the children told their parents nothing about their plight.

“You might say, ‘Why didn’t any of them say anything?’ They were absolutely terrified,” Chiesa said.

Chiesa, a longtime crusader against human trafficking, spoke about the challenges of human enslavement, how to prevent it and how individuals, most of them young girls, find themselves coerced. His talk, sponsored by the Princeton

Area Interfaith Anti-Torture Group with several other area groups, came on International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, established by the United Nations 17 years ago.

The African girls were later separated from the woman and sent to a Catholic Charities group in Michigan. "Due to their strength," Chiesa said, they were able to confront the woman in court. The ringleader of the operation was sentenced to 27 years behind bars, he said.

Forced labor in the private economy generates \$150 billion in illegal profit annually, according to the International Labor Organization. Human trafficking is considered one of the fastest growing criminal industries worldwide, and in the U.S. alone, 100,000 girls under 18 years old are trafficked into commercial sex annually, many of them living in plain sight in misery, Chiesa said.

"It's slavery. That's what it is. It robs people of their innocence because they're forced to do things they otherwise would not do under normal circumstances," he said. "There are more slaves in the world now than there were in the Civil War. We're supposed to be past that and evolved as a society."

Tracy Thompson, assistant attorney general and director of the New Jersey Attorney General's Office Human Trafficking Program, introduced Chiesa to those in attendance before his lecture, which was followed by a question-and-answer session moderated by the Rev. Bob Moore, director of the Coalition for Peace Action and co-pastor of Christ Congregation in Princeton.

Chiesa served in the Senate following the death of former Sen. Frank Lautenberg last year. Previous to his Senate appointment, he served as New Jersey's 59th Attorney General.

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Those who are commonly seduced come from areas of poverty and lack meaningful education and employment opportunities, he said. But deception and luring is not limited to inner-city or poor socioeconomic areas, Chiesa said.

"You can be a young girl at the mall temporarily not close to your family, temporarily not feeling like you're fitting in at school or somewhere else," he said.

Thompson referred to offenders as "wolves in sheeps' clothing" who cunningly seduce their prey for money, power and other reasons.

When authorities come across trafficking victims, they have to be sensitive to the situations they've faced and help them regain their ability to trust other people again so they can become successful members of society, Chiesa said.

"If at 13 years old there's no one you can trust and you're forced to do things you don't want to do, that's a very heavy burden," he said.

It is most likely to occur at large stadiums or arenas with a steady stream of events, Chiesa said, calling the Super Bowl a "magnet for human trafficking." The public should always keep its eyes peeled for suspicious activity that could be related to human trafficking, he said.

"People in the community know the pace and pulse of their community better than the government," Chiesa said. "Every case you do reminds people that we're watching."

Thompson encouraged those who believe they have identified a trafficking victim to call the state's hotline at 855-END-NJHT (855-363-6548).

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