

Home > Eastside Messenger > Reynoldsburg students fight human trafficking

Eastside Messenger

## Reynoldsburg students fight human trafficking

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Staff Writer

Students from Reynoldsburg High School were recognized for launching the first high school abolitionist group in the Columbus area after the group hosted the second annual human trafficking conference earlier this month.



Members of the coalition listen to a presentation at the Break Every Chain human trafficking conference, that they planned, held at the high school's Summit Road campus.

Abolitionists are people who oppose and work toward an end to slavery. According to the Reynoldsburg Youth Human Trafficking Coalition, 30 to 40 million people worldwide are being exploited this year. That's more than the 9.9 million people who were in slavery during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, according to Rachel Phillips, a Reynoldsburg sophomore who serves as treasurer of the coalition.

"I believe in equality and freedom, so the fact that there are more people in slavery now than during the transatlantic slave trade is mind boggling and terrible," said Phillips. "Even just raising awareness of this issue, I feel like I'm doing something to help these people, and that's what it's really about."

Human trafficking "is the exploitation and enslavement of another human being," said State Representative Heather Bishoff at the conference. It describes a variety of situations in which people are exploited for their labor, including forced prostitution, and as child soldiers.

The ultimate cause of human trafficking is greed, says Ohio State University social work professor Jacquelyn Meshelemiah, who spoke at the conference about the economics of slavery. Human trafficking is a \$32 billion industry worldwide.

Many companies that make products we use every day buy from suppliers that use forced, child, or sweatshop labor, said Phillips. This is the part of the human trafficking issue that hits home when she talks with her fellow students. They often feel it doesn't affect them, but "their minds are blown" when they see how widespread it is.

One website, [www.slaveryfootprint.org](http://www.slaveryfootprint.org), attempts to illustrate this point. Visitors answer a few questions about the products they use and an algorithm tells them how many slaves were involved in producing those products.

There is a lot people can do to decrease the demand for exploited labor, said Meshelemiah, from rethinking bachelor parties to being a conscious consumer by boycotting businesses known to have slavery in their supply chains, supporting local businesses, buying used clothing and goods, consuming less in general, and buying fair trade. She said businesses and brands will listen if people write them and ask them to monitor their supply chains and guarantee they don't use slave labor.

This year's conference presenters included a panel of survivors from the Columbus area who spoke about their experiences.

Participants celebrated that, since the conference last year, Ohio has moved from the third highest rate of human trafficking in the country down to number four. No one is proud to be fourth, but participants hope the change means the efforts of many community groups and governments are having an impact.

Since the students began working on the issue last year, said Reynoldsburg City Councilman Cornelius McGrady, who advises the youth coalition, "three human trafficking arrests have been made in our city, yes, the city of Reynoldsburg." Attorneys from the city of Columbus and other law enforcement representatives presented at the conference to discuss what law enforcement is doing to combat human trafficking.

At a Martin Luther King Day awards ceremony, student coalition members received a Liberator award in the "student or student organization" category for their work in raising awareness of human trafficking. The coalition was the only high school group among the nominees – all others were college level. The Liberator awards are a statewide recognition organized by Save Our Adolescents from Prostitution and BE FREE Dayton.

At the conference, students wore shirts with a phone number: 1-888-3737-888. That's the human trafficking hotline, which people can call if they suspect they are a victim or if they see suspicious behavior they want to report. These anonymous reports can also be done at [www.traffickingresourcecenter.org](http://www.traffickingresourcecenter.org). For information Phillips recommends the website [www.freetheslaves.org](http://www.freetheslaves.org).

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