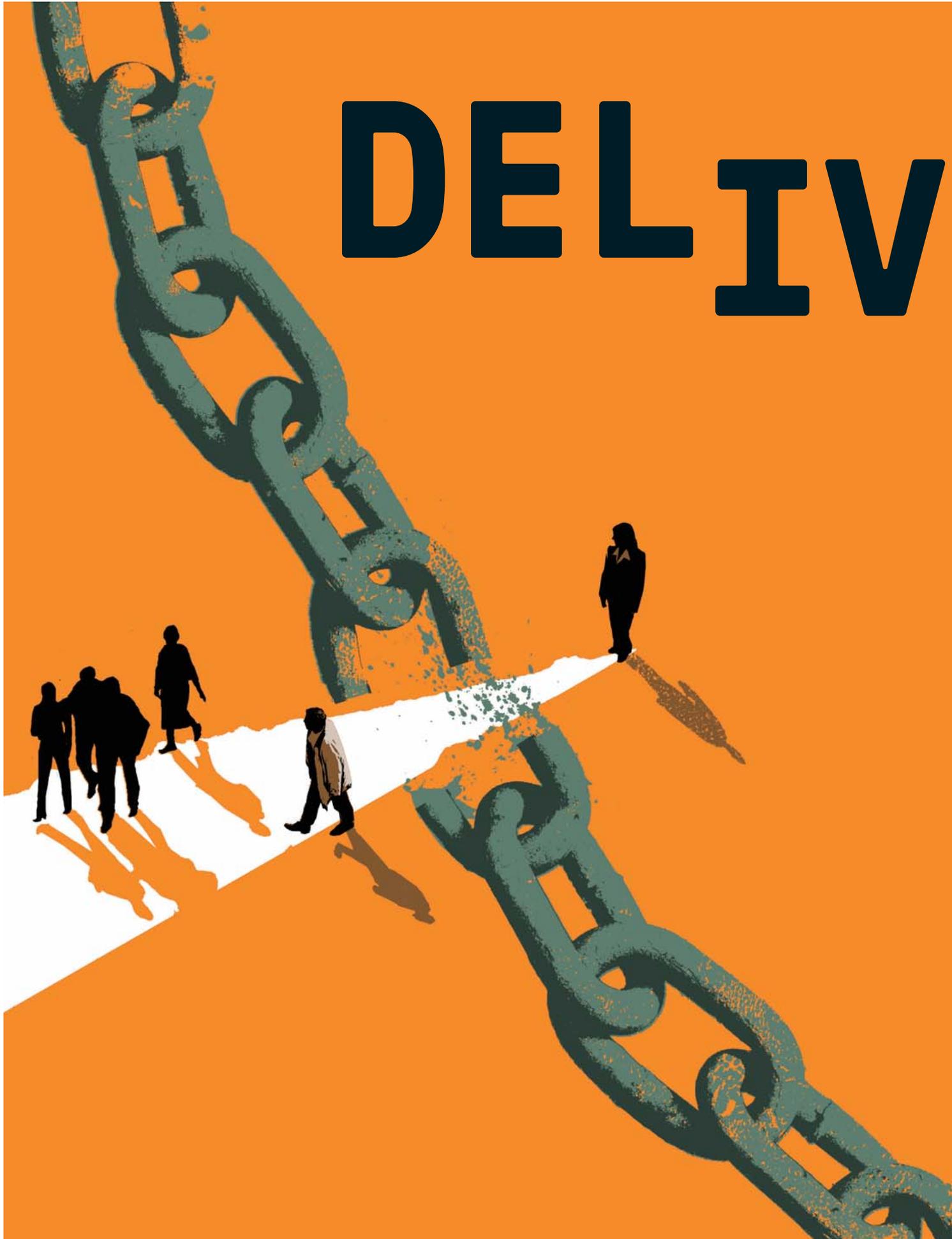


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BY  
ART JAHNKE  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
SHONAGH RAE

# ERANICE

Why did  
the FBI find  
so many  
victims of  
human  
trafficking  
in one  
heartland  
city?

Because  
that's where  
they looked  
for them.

**Cynthia Cordes**  
led the  
search.

THE MOMENT the agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement pulled into the parking lot, Filipinos on the hotel's housekeeping staff began to imagine the worst. They would be handcuffed. They would be questioned for hours. Their papers would be found to be out of order. Ultimately, they would be deported and would return home, where they would explain about the costs of visas and housing and transportation, about the paychecks that after all the deductions barely covered expenses. They would admit that they could never repay their uncles and cousins who had given much of their savings to send them to the United States.

That's how their journey would end, they feared, with the entire village seeing the folly of their journey, the futility of their dreams.

But when the federal agents actually approached the foreign workers, there was no mention of anyone being sent back home. The agents spoke slowly and in soft voices, taking care to follow the exacting directives of an unconventional assistant US attorney named Cynthia Cordes. It was the kind of obedience that did not come naturally from federal agents who were known, at times, for a "bag 'em and tag 'em" handling of undocumented immigrants, but Cordes, of the US attorney's office for the Western District of Missouri, had earned their respect.

"Cynthia was demanding, but she was also very thorough," says Chris Budke, a former supervisory FBI agent who oversaw many of the investigations directed by Cordes (COM'01). "She would call and give the agents a laundry list of things to do. Then she would call 10 minutes later, add to the list, and say, 'How are we doin' on that first list?' If you didn't know her, it could be frustrating, but the agents knew that with Cynthia, if you put the work into your case, even the hardest cases would be prosecuted, and they knew that you were going to win. You couldn't say that about every assistant US attorney."

The Filipinos were taken to another hotel, where, for the first time since they had left their villages, some of them began to believe that they were truly safe.

Instead of threats of deportation, they had heard a promise of deliverance. They were told that, as far as the government of the United States was concerned, they were not criminals but victims, human trafficking victims who had been duped and exploited by Giant Labor Solutions (GLS), an international criminal enterprise that recruited hopeful immigrants in impoverished villages around the world.

GLS, it was later revealed, had transported more than 1,000 people to the United States from the Philippines, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Jamaica, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Poland, and the Dominican Republic, often helping them through with fraudulent visas. GLS also preyed on foreign workers who were already in the country, and

whose visas were about to expire. Promising jobs and legitimate working papers, the Kansas City-based company held workers in virtual captivity, shuttling them to work sites in 14 states and subcontracting their labor, often to hotels that believed GLS was legit. The company charged its workers exorbitant fees for rent, transportation, help with visas, and anything else it could get away with, deducting fees from paychecks so ruthlessly that workers earned as little as \$2 an hour, and sometimes ended up owing money to GLS at the end of each week. Any complaints from a foreign worker were easily quashed with threats of deportation.

To the Filipinos housed safely in Kansas City, the investigators' assurance that they wouldn't be charged as criminals seemed too good to be true, and then it got better: the workers were told that as victims of human trafficking, they were entitled to legal status in the United States, restitution for the harms that they had suffered and, eventually, full US citizenship. It meant that their suffering was not in vain; that their dreams were no longer futile.

"They gave us hope," says Renado, a worker who doesn't want his last name to be used and is now working toward citizenship. "I knew exactly then that something good was happening, and on that day I started not to worry. And so I'm not hiding anymore. I am free now."

The case against Giant Labor Solutions, which shut down after the raid in May 2009, is one of more than 50 human trafficking cases that Cordes prosecuted in

**"They gave us hope," says one trafficking victim. "I knew then that something good was happening. I'm not hiding anymore. I'm free now."**



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**Cynthia Cordes (COM'01)  
says big money and low  
risk are two reasons that  
human trafficking is  
flourishing.**

ring of Chinese traffickers who imported women to work as prostitutes in massage parlors, and a sadistic sex-slaver who kept women in cages and tortured them through electric voltage and genital mutilation. She helped to rescue more than 170 people, domestic victims as well as foreign nationals. Seventy-five percent of them came here from other countries, spanning the globe from Asia to Africa.

In 2013, the US Department of Justice named Cordes as Crime Victim Rights Champion of the year, and the following year, her first in private practice at the law firm Husch Blackwell, *Missouri Lawyers Weekly* named her Lawyer of the Year.

Cordes says the main reason investigators found so many human trafficking cases in Kansas City is that's where they looked for them. In fact, she says, there is no reason to think that the crime is more prevalent there than any other American city. She attributes the success of the search to the diligence of the agents she worked with. "They were willing to step outside of their comfort zone and investigate in a new way," she says.

Globally, human trafficking is a \$32 billion business, one that moves more than 20 million people a year for one of two purposes: forced labor or commercial sex. And while it doesn't garner the headlines awarded to busts

of bad guys selling drugs or weapons, it is, in Cordes' opinion, an even more insidious crime. "It's lower risk and higher reward," she says. "If you're trafficking in arms or narcotics, you have to resupply after you sell your product, but if you're trafficking in humans you can sell their 'services' over and over again."

It's also relatively easy to get away with. Get pulled over with drugs or guns in your car and you're going to jail, says Cordes, but get caught with three or four people in the back seat who are trained not to talk to police and your crimes are more likely to go undetected.

Cordes sees another reason that human trafficking is flourishing today: the opportunity offered by the corporate trend toward outsourcing labor. "A lot of forced labor is associated with legitimate businesses," she says. "The C-suite doesn't know it, or hopes to stay out of it, but six levels down work has been subcontracted out to groups who are taking advantage of foreign labor both overseas and labor

her nine years in the US attorney's office. In 2006, when she brought her first case to court, the district had never filed a human trafficking case. When Cordes left the US attorney's office for the private sector in 2013, she had prosecuted more human trafficking cases than any assistant US attorney in the country, and she had never lost in court. Cordes was the first federal prosecutor in the country to charge a human trafficking case under the RICO Act, the first to indict a foreign official, the initial prosecutor to charge a parent with trafficking her own child, and the first in the nation to prosecute the buyers of human trafficking victims.

"Cynthia insisted that agents take a victim-centered approach in everything that we did," says Budke. "Where she was demanding of herself and the government, she was patient and understanding with all of the victims."

Cordes' convictions include pimps who forced preteen girls to walk the streets, a high-ranking foreign official from Taiwan who abused her household staff, a highly organized



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**Former FBI agent Chris Budke says in 30 years of law enforcement, he has never seen an issue that so unified Kansas City.**

and everyone here always thought of things like human trafficking as East Coast and West Coast problems. No one wanted to believe that it could be a problem in the heart of America.”

Working with FBI agent Budke and numerous federal and state law enforcement agencies, she started with education and training, teaching state police and federal agents how to spot evidence of human trafficking. “This is not the type of crime that comes to law enforcement with a nice bow on top,” she says. “It hides in the shadows. It happens in fancy hotels and office buildings and in popular suburbs. It is modern-day slavery woven into the fabric of the community. Everyone had to learn ‘this is what forced labor trafficking looks like; this is what sex trafficking looks like.’”

When Cordes realized that human trafficking victims would need extensive services and support after their rescue, she set out to build it, recruiting help from hospitals, churches, and other nonprofit agencies. She also launched a case manager program so the victims could have one point of contact to coordinate all of their services.

“Cynthia helped develop a training program to educate local law enforcement and community organizations on how to locate victims, provide necessary assistance, and procure admissible evidence for any prosecution,” says Brad Schlozman, who ran the US attorney’s office when the initiative was launched. “She played a key role in building critical coalitions of state and federal law enforcement, as well as victims’ rights and other non-governmental organizations. She helped organize stings to draw out perpetrators from the shadows, and she secured convictions in some of the toughest cases any federal prosecutor will encounter.”

“I didn’t want to rescue them and dump them,” says Cordes. “These are people who came to this country to have a better life, or they are US citizens who had fallen through the cracks. I also wanted to help provide them with the opportunity that they should have had from the beginning.”

Today, the Kansas City human trafficking task force, which Cordes grew to include more than 20 state and federal law enforcement agencies, more than 60 nonprofit groups, and a partnership among 3 federal districts, remains a model for federal prosecutors in districts across the country.

Cordes also had to get agents up to speed on the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), a complex law that sets out severe penalties for those convicted of human trafficking and provides rehab-

recruited into the United States. Most executives would be highly disturbed if they knew what was going on.”

The commercial sex side of the business is booming, too, says Cordes, thanks to the convenience and security offered by the internet. “Sex traffickers don’t have to parade their victims on the street anymore,” she says. “They can sell them online. That gives them a wider customer base and greater protection.”

#### **IT CAN’T HAPPEN HERE**

Cordes’ crusade against human trafficking began nearly a decade ago. After graduating from the College of Communication, she went to law school at Notre Dame, and then in 2004 was accepted into the prestigious Attorney General’s Honors Program. After signing on as an assistant United States attorney in her home state of Missouri, she was prosecuting child enticement and child pornography cases when, in 2006, a new US attorney selected her to lead a human trafficking initiative.

“Part of me hoped that the initiative would be successful,” Cordes says, “but another part of me hoped that we wouldn’t find this problem in Kansas City. I was born and raised in Missouri,

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**“In 85 percent of our cases we were making new law,” says Cynthia Cordes. “We really went out on the edge.”**  
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## Neighborly Tips Topple a Sex Trafficking Ring

ilitation for victims. Although the law had been signed by President Clinton in 2000 (and had been amended several times), it had never been used in the Western District of Missouri before Cordes launched the task force, or in most other districts throughout the country.

While her cases routinely involved charges such as money laundering, wire fraud, and harboring, Cordes would also file charges under the TVPA. Human trafficking statutes are the most potent charges, because they draw the heftiest penalties and because charges under the statute allowed for benefits and resources for victims, many of whom expect punishment, not rehabilitative care. But they take a lot of extra work to investigate and prosecute.

“The victims of human trafficking often don’t think of themselves as victims,” says Cordes. “There is a lot of self-blame; they think they have done something wrong. They have failed and disappointed their families, who in many cases have spent their life savings to get them to the United States. They need to be approached with kindness. They need to understand that they didn’t cause this to happen, and that what happened to them is a crime.”

Under the TVPA, human trafficking victims are often eligible for the same federal benefits offered to refugees. The law also provides mandatory restitution for victims, something Cordes pursued in every one of her human trafficking cases. By the time she left the US attorney’s office, she had won over \$4 million in restitution orders on behalf of victims.

Linda Smith, a former congresswoman and current president of Shared Hope International, an organization devoted to the eradication of human trafficking, says Cordes “brings the two essentials to fighting sex trafficking: heart and brain.”

“Cordes listened to advocates and survivors,” says Smith. “She learned everything she could about sex trafficking. Then she strategized the buyer sting operations, working proactively with law enforcement to secure the right evidence to prosecute and, in the process, empowering them to do their investigation knowing their cases would be taken and aggressively prosecuted. This approach ensured the success of her task force, and serves as a model for locations around the country.”

**IT STARTED** with a tip. Neighbors of the China Rose massage parlor in the upscale Kansas City, Mo., suburb of Overland Park noticed that customers, always men, would avoid parking directly in front of the building. It also seemed strange that the masseuses, Chinese women who had recently arrived in the United States, rarely left the building, even after the business closed at 11 p.m.

Then Overland Park police received a letter claiming that the owners of the China Rose were exploiting the women. A telephone tip alleged that the owners were smuggling women between the ages of 20 and 28 from Fuzhou, China. When surveillance and pole cams showed they were rotating the women through more than a dozen massage parlors in the United States every 20 days, the FBI took action. They searched the trash outside other massage parlors owned by the same suspects and found 1,164 condom wrappers, along with evidence of airline flights to five other US cities and receipts for tens of thousands of dollars wired to China. Finally, an undercover agent who stopped by for a massage was solicited on three successive visits.

In May 2007, federal agents and police raided the China Rose, along with 11 other businesses and 4 homes. The bust freed 15 women, who were given food, shelter, and counseling. Three Chinese nationals were arrested. Federal agents later found that many of the women were deeply in debt to the men, who had arranged for their transportation to the United States, promising them high-paying white-collar jobs when they arrived.

The agents also learned that the women were virtual prisoners; doorknobs on the inside of exits had been removed, and many women had been forced to spend 24 hours a day in the building, sleeping on the same massage tables that were used for sex. The government’s case, led by Cynthia Cordes, yielded four guilty pleas by the ringleaders. AJ

“It’s fair to say that Cynthia has had an incredibly positive and long-lasting impact on countless lives of some of the most vulnerable members of our society,” says Schlozman. “She helped free these individuals from the tyranny—if not outright slavery.”

Unsurprisingly, Cordes also won the enmity of a few hard-core criminals, one of whom decided to improve his courtroom chances by hatching a plan to have Cordes killed. From a cell at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, he made arrangements to have her taken out in a home break-in gone bad. “He had my schedule down,” says Cordes. “He knew when I was going to be home with my baby. It got scary because we didn’t know who was working with him on the outside.” The US marshals led the protection and the Kansas City police department patrolled her neighborhood until the FBI ended the murder-for-hire plot and the defendant was placed in solitary confinement. He is now serving a 20-year sentence.

In 2013, when Cordes decided to leave the US attorney’s office for private practice, she chose Husch Blackwell, largely because its lawyers had agreed to represent human trafficking victims pro bono in the cases she prosecuted. The firm, with offices in 15 US cities and in London, welcomed her with a partnership, and she brought along her commitment to continue serving those victims, virtually all of whom need legal help and advice on issues ranging from immigration, protection orders, child custody, and divorce to defense from prostitution charges.

Cordes had two ideas about how to continue her antitraff-

## Housebound

IN 2011, Cynthia Cordes, then an assistant US attorney, led the prosecution of Hsien-Hsien Liu, a high-ranking official from Taiwan who forced two Filipino servants to work long hours for low pay, and forbade them from leaving her Kansas City, Mo., home. Liu pleaded guilty to labor violations and paid \$80,000 to the victims, one of whom had already fled to a remote island in the Philippines.

The following is excerpted from a Victim Impact Statement read in court by one of the domestic workers, who was 47 years old at the time.

**I LEFT** the Philippines on March 5, 2011. I worked as a domestic helper. I was promised a salary of \$1,240 a month to work 8 hours a day, 5 days a week for a total of 40 hours a week. I signed a contract stating this, a legal contract honored by US law.

I started working for my employer, Ms. Liu, on March 6, 2011. She taught me everything I needed to do around the house. There was a strict schedule to be followed—specific things I need to do and places I needed to be. In the beginning, she said my work here was not going to be difficult. It was going to be easy, she said. But I was thinking, the house was so big, and she wanted me to

clean every little part of the house.

She was nice in the beginning, but by the third day, her true colors started to come out. She would scream at me, ordering me around. She ordered me to stay out of her way. She kept changing her mind about what she wanted me to do—my schedule, my chores, etc.

**SHE DICTATED** when I was supposed to eat, what time I was allowed to shower, when I could wash my own clothes. Sometimes I couldn't eat, even when I was hungry, because there were cameras all around me, watching my every move. My work hours were approximately 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. She paid me only \$450 a month, instead of \$1,240. I started to ask her why I was getting this amount and she would respond, "That is a good amount in the Philippines." After a few more times asking about my salary, she would respond by threatening to have me deported. I endured this treatment because I know my kids and my family back home need the money....

I felt tortured. I couldn't tell my kids how much I was suffering. Whenever my kids asked how I was doing, I just pretended everything was OK.

She used to tell me not to say anything to anyone about my salary. She also said no one was going to help me here in the US, but I was determined to

ask for help, so I called the Human Trafficking Hotline.

**I COULDN'T** sleep at night. The mere sound of her car pulling up made my knees shake. I could not eat. She did not allow me to go to the doctor when I told her I had a pain in my tooth. My face started to swell and my vision was greatly affected. This was dangerous because the infection could have spread to my brain and heart and could have killed me. I was very scared. I would vomit and be in a lot of pain. She still did not let me see a dentist. She said it was too expensive to see a doctor, and I had no insurance.

She took my passport from me. Whenever I asked her for my passport, she would say I don't need my passport around the house and she will be the one to keep it at all times. I felt like a slave while I was living there. She controlled everything...I felt I had a nervous breakdown. Even now when I go out and someone looks like her, I feel really scared.

My only goal in coming to the United States was to work, save money, and help my family. Because of what happened, I was unable to do this...I know that I will get the help I need to survive. I am also glad that by standing up for myself, we will be able to put a stop to this and prevent other workers from being victimized.



CHRISTOPHER CAMPISI

## LAW Students Hone Antitrafficking Skills

ficking work. One, she would provide pro bono services for victims, making that a regular part of her practice. When she bounced the idea around the firm, 40 lawyers volunteered to help. Cordes and the firm launched a Human Trafficking Legal Clinic to provide free legal services to all human trafficking victims nationwide, an unprecedented dedication of resources by a private law firm. Husch Blackwell also set up the nonprofit Human Trafficking Rescue Assistance Fund to provide victims with any additional needs they may have, such as housing, clothing, cell phones, interpreter fees, and medical costs.

On the billable side of things, Cordes developed a compliance program to advise corporations on how to meet soon-to-be enacted requirements that companies with government contracts put in place anti-trafficking compliance plans. It's the first such program in the country. "Corporations will have to step up," says Cordes. "The problem of human trafficking is larger than the government resources available to address it. The private sector needs to do their part."

Cordes' compliance program may do for law firms what her convictions did for federal prosecutors: there are now 88 human trafficking task forces in the United States, and most are modeled on hers. Because of Cordes, Kansas City may be the American community with the fewest illusions about the prevalence of human trafficking, as well as the greatest willingness to do something about it. Budke, who retired from the FBI and recently joined Cordes at Husch Blackwell, remembers the public's response.

"The first few cases we prosecuted were so shocking to our community that the people wanted to know more," says Budke. "They wanted to be part of the solution. We were inundated with requests from civic organizations that wanted training on what to look for and what they could do for the victims. In all my 30 years in law enforcement, I have never found an issue that so unified the community."

**AT BU'S SCHOOL OF LAW**, an extraordinary program is helping victims of human trafficking make their way to citizenship. The Human Trafficking Clinic matches second- and third-year students with people seeking advice on immigration, civil, and criminal matters. Only the second of its kind when it was established in 2012, the clinic has so far provided free legal help to 13 victims of labor and sex trafficking.

Julie Dahlstrom, director of the clinic and a LAW adjunct professor, says the program was created to take advantage of a 2001 Massachusetts law that supplanted the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, which grants victims a special trafficking visa. The visa allows them to work, receive social services, and start on a path to citizenship. The less cumbersome state law explicitly outlines criminal penalties for traffickers and gives victims new legal protections. Dahlstrom is also managing attorney at the Human Trafficking Legal Assistance Center at the community service organization Ascentria Care Alliance (formerly Lutheran Social Services of New England), which works in partnership with the BU clinic. She says the clinic received indispensable support from former Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley (LAW'79), who was chair of the Massachusetts Interagency Human Trafficking Task Force.

In addition to the casework, the clinic studies potential ethical dilemmas, cross-cultural sensitivity issues, and problems that are likely to arise with law enforcement across international boundaries. There are also policy-related projects: working in collaboration with the law firm WilmerHale and the state attorney general's office, the students created the first manual for human trafficking attorneys in Massachusetts.

Nichole Beiner (LAW'15) says the Human Trafficking Clinic, which accepts about a half-dozen students and recently expanded from a half-year to a full-year program, is one of the reasons she chose BU. Beiner has worked with two clients, teaming up in both cases with Alyssa Tochka (CAS'12, LAW'15) to build an argument that met the legal threshold of proof that a person has been trafficked. In one case, she says, the client found the process of recounting her experiences too painful to bear and abandoned her pursuit of a trafficking visa in favor of political asylum, which can be easier to win but offers fewer benefits. The second client, a man who was trafficked from the Philippines to work in the hotel industry, persevered and is now on track for a trafficking visa.

"It was amazing," says Beiner. "It was probably the hardest work I've done at BU, and it was great to see that there was some vindication." AJ



CYDNEY SCOTT

LAW's Julie Dahlstrom

But what gives Cordes the greatest satisfaction, she says, is what she was able to do for the people she rescued from the grasp of human traffickers.

"I think it's phenomenal that our law, under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, allows victims to receive status in the United States," she says. "They get that whether they came here legally or illegally. I've always thought about it as our country's way of apologizing for what happened on our soil. It's our way of saying no matter what you did, you don't deserve this, and we are going to give you an opportunity to have the American dream. There is nothing more fulfilling than being able to tell people that you are going to be able to stay here. The nightmare is over. You are going to have a chance." ■