

# Experts discuss Human Trafficking Awareness and Protection

*By: Rima Suleiman, Diplomacy Fellow*

On Thursday, February 18, 2016, the UCF Global Perspectives Office hosted a panel featuring expert and first-hand perspectives on human trafficking. The panelists, Shamere Mckenzie, Pastor Paul Palmer and Ted Reynolds, addressed an audience of over 70 students, faculty and community members in the Garden Key Meeting Room in the UCF Student Union.

McKenzie is the CEO of Sun Gate Foundation, a non-profit organization which provides scholarships to survivors of human trafficking. The glamorization of sex trafficking and sex for hire in American culture, she said, is one root cause perpetuating the practice, using examples such as bachelor parties, restaurants like Hooters and popular rap songs about being a “Pimp.” Sharing her own story, McKenzie chronicled being a student athlete in college whose scholarship was pulled after an injury. In need of financial assistance to pay for school, she said she was lured in by her “Prince Charming,” who offered her a place to live in his building and to pay her to “dance.” She told how her situation quickly devolved into 18 months of “severe torture,” which included rape, sodomy and physical abuse until she developed compliant behavior to avoid the consequences. After escaping in the gated, suburban neighborhood where she and others were kept, McKenzie has dedicated her life to liberating others from trafficking, and helping survivors make new lives for themselves. “This is a dark issue,” she stated, “but there is hope.”



*McKenzie shared her personal journey as a human trafficking survivor.*

Palmer, director and founder of Atlanta Dream Center, rehabilitates trafficking survivors through the Center’s “Out of Darkness” ministry. Palmer described trafficking as, “not the oldest profession, but the oldest form of slavery.” He works to rescue the enslaved, and said, “someone loved me when I was unlovable once.” His main concern was with the law, which he said needs to change rapidly. McKenzie described how many trafficking victims are forced to break laws, and how she was convicted of a felony due to the control her trafficker held over her. As part of Palmer’s love-based approach to rehabilitation, volunteers at Out of Darkness do not run searches for arrest warrants on trafficking survivors who come to them for help. Palmer admitted that “it does not take a lot of courage, wisdom or money” to do what he does. “Showing people love and compassion,” he said, “is what trafficking victims are deprived of and need.”

Reynolds, Senior Research Fellow in Terrorism Studies at UCF, followed with warnings to the audience about traffickers in the digital sphere. He explained that, using popular social media sites, traffickers can see the locations where a target frequents, personal information and potential vulnerabilities that can be used. He continued that, with the right program, a trafficker can exploit

social media postings and instantaneously locate a potential target using GPS coordinates via Google maps. Examples he gave were of pictures of obviously intoxicated young ladies leaving a popular club, and also of a young girl at a concert whose mother posted her name and that she wanted to be a star. “A trafficker at that concert, monitoring and seeing this,” he warned, “could go up to that girl, call her by her name, and tell her that she had star potential, and essentially lure this 8-year-old away forever.” Reynolds, who studies terrorists’ use of social media, stated, “I would *rather* deal with terrorists than traffickers.” He offered simple but powerful advice to the audience: “Privatize your social media accounts, turn off location services on your phone and please, be careful.”

In addition to the Global Perspectives Office, sponsors of the presentation included the UCF Human Trafficking Awareness Program, Student Government Association and Civil lawyers Against World Sex Slavery. This event was also a feature of Sex Positive Week at UCF, which aims to reduce stigma and increase sexual health understanding, leading to safe practices through open community dialogue.