

Ronny Marty

In 2009, in the Dominican Republic, I heard from friends about a recruiter who was coming to the Dominican Republic (DR) to find workers for large U.S. hotels and other hospitality companies. I had worked in a hotel in the DR and thought if I could get a job like that in the U.S. I could really help my family. I went to the place where they were recruiting and during two interviews, I was told that there were many jobs in the U.S. with great pay and benefits.

They told me that the employment required a work visa lasting nine months and said that they could get me the visa and a job to work in a hotel in Kansas City. They said I would have to pay a recruiting fee of \$3800. They also made me put down a deposit to hold my place, and later told me I would also have to pay travel expenses. But they said if I didn't have the money for the extra charges that I could owe it to the recruiting company.

I scraped together the money for the recruiting fee from family and friends, thinking I would be able to pay them back because the job was supposed to pay quite a bit. A couple of weeks later, I went by plane to the U.S. and landed in Kansas City. At the airport in the Dominican Republic, when I was given my work visa, I noticed that it was only for three months, which was different from what was promised in the interviews. That worried me, but when I asked about it, the recruiters told me: "No problem, the visa will be extended when the three months ends."

When we got off the plane in Kansas City, some people from the recruiting company were waiting for me and the others who had come to work at the same U.S. company. But when we arrived at the first location where we would stay for the first night, we were told that there were no hotel jobs in Kansas City and we would have to travel to Huntsville, Alabama to get another job. When we protested, things got ugly. We were told, "Take-it or leave-it" – but none of us could afford to leave it because we had already put in so much money up front.

We were upset and worried because the recruiters told us we would have to pay \$50 each for the van that took us to Huntsville, Alabama. We didn't have the money, so they said they would add it to the bill we already had with them. We were told we would be working for a DVD company when we got to Huntsville. We were around 12 people with luggage per minivan in vans built for 8 people and drove straight through from Kansas City to Huntsville, so it was a cramped and horrible drive. When we got there, they put 4 or 5 people in one studio unit and we were told that we each had to pay \$300/month in rent. Later, I found out that the apartment cost them \$400 a month, so they were making a lot of money from all of us. Because none of us had any money, this also went on our list of debts owed to the company.

The company required us to work 12-hour days. We were packing boxes full of DVDs, lifting them, and hoisting them onto flats for shipping. We were doing this back-breaking work 12

hours a day for 7 days a week. We did not see a paycheck for a few weeks and then we realized that the money we made was all going toward expenses. After they deducted airfare, van costs, rent, transportation costs to and from the job, sundries, and other expenses, I was left to live off \$40 per paycheck. Try to live on that per month. We were starving and getting sick and we were trapped in their contract with no way to get out.

After three months, when it came time to renew our visas, our petition was denied. We told the trafficker that we would not continue to pay for expired visas. We tried to leave but we couldn't get away. We were all in debt to this guy and we feared for our families. But as the work continued with no pay and even worse conditions, I stepped up and said that we wouldn't pay for the van that transported us to and from the job until we got our deposits back. The recruiter threatened my family and harassed them with dozens of phone calls until I got upset. I was exhausted and felt I had nothing left to lose.

We had heard some rumblings of problems already because the landlord manager for the apartments had said that she did not like the living conditions they were leaving us in. She told us that our rent had not been paid for the last month. I told her that we have been paying every month because the recruiter deducts the rent from our pay check, and I showed her our paystubs. That is when I realized the recruiter was paying only \$400 a month per apartment. Then, she called him to ask for the pay and he said that he would not pay. At that time, we felt so worried.

But the landlord manager spoke to the owner and they provided us with food. After the landlord spoke with the recruiter, she realized something was not right and asked me if I would like to speak to the Huntsville newspaper and I said yes. When the recruiter found out that I spoke to the news, things got worse. He called me and told me that we better stop talking to the news, so I complained that this wasn't what we were promised and that we weren't making any money and we were starving. Also, a couple of us complained about conditions and said we wanted to leave. He threatened to turn us in to the police and told me that we would all be deported. He also said that he knew where we lived and where our families lived back in the DR and made threats to harm them. I knew we could not do anything when he said that. The head of the recruiting company was Russian and so were the other guys at the top of the company. The middle management was Filipino.

When that happened, I called my family in the DR and told them to move out of the house for their safety. Then, we decided to escape and went to Biloxi, Mississippi where we met Mary at a Catholic Charities. She spoke Spanish. When she heard our story, she asked how many people were like me. I said I didn't know but I thought that there were hundreds. She said she thought we might be trafficking victims. I had never heard of that and didn't know what she was talking about. She called the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents came out to talk to us. Our lives changed the moment ICE moved in. They

investigated and turned their findings over to the Department of Justice. It was the largest labor trafficking case ever prosecuted in the U.S. – 11 traffickers and over 500 victims (*U.S. v Giant Labor Co*). Ten of the traffickers were prosecuted and are now in jail. The 11th (the kingpin trafficker who threatened us by phone) escaped back to Russia.

By the time ICE stepped in, I was having nightmares and serious post-traumatic stress syndrome. I was afraid for myself and my family and didn't trust anyone. An ICE agent, Julie Gray, changed our lives by re-building our confidence and trust in law enforcement officials. The agent assisted in connecting us with the services we needed, such as housing, food, and work permits because our visas were about to expire. The investigators provided all necessary documentation after the case was closed for us to apply for T-Visas, which are issued to victims of human trafficking in the U.S.

I credit agent Julie Gray's passion and persistence to the training she received. Training in how to work with victims and providing victim-centered care is essential to helping victims of trafficking.

Now, whenever I go to any large company or hotel or restaurant in the U.S., I'm always asking questions about how the employees are treated, where they are from, and if they are in debt bondage.

- Transcribed from presentation to the U.S. Department of Defense Combating Trafficking in Persons Task Force Meeting, July 2016