

NEWS

Vanguard University hosts human trafficking awareness conference



Martha Trujillo, 29, a human trafficking survivor, was part of a human trafficking conference at Vanguard University on Wednesday. (James Carbone)

BY MATT SZABO | STAFF WRITER

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Martha Trujillo has endured a lot of scary stuff in her 29 years on this planet.

Growing up in Orange County, raised by a single mom, Trujillo said she was jumped into a gang at the age of 10. She later went into foster care and became a victim of sex trafficking, she said, after she was expelled from her school district in eighth grade for bringing drugs on campus and partaking in those drugs.

By the age of 15 she was introduced to “a very dark life,” she said.

“I met this man and he had a business ... and I was oblivious because I was so high all the time,” Trujillo said. “I went on my first ‘date’ at a hotel in Irvine. When you don’t have anyone in your corner telling you what you’re doing is wrong, that you’re just a kid, it becomes so hard to see what you’re doing is wrong.”

These experiences surely shape who she is now, but they don’t define her. Trujillo eventually earned a master’s degree from UC Irvine and now serves as a youth support specialist with Orangewood Youth Center’s [Project CHOICE](#).

She was one of several speakers at a “Know More, Do Better” human trafficking awareness summit for 500 middle-school students at Vanguard University on Wednesday morning. The event was held on the final day of January, which was [National Human Trafficking Prevention Month](#), by the [Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force](#) in collaboration with 35 local resource organizations.



Human trafficking survivor Martha Trujillo tells her story during a conference at Vanguard University on Wednesday. (James Carbone)

Trujillo told the children from the Anaheim, Fullerton and Santa Ana Unified school districts to believe in themselves during her 20-minute speech.

“You need to believe in yourself first,” she said. “Someone can say that they believe in you, but if you don’t believe in yourself, it’s going to not even matter. You all are the creators of what you want your life to be. You guys have the power to say yes or to say no, and I think that holds a lot of weight.”

The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department [announced Tuesday](#) that more than 500 arrests were made recently as part of the weeklong, 10th annual Operation Reclaim and Rebuild. The arrests included 40 suspected “sexual traffickers or exploiters” and 271 suspected “sex buyers.”

According to the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force, there were 420 victims of human trafficking identified in the county in 2021 and 2022, including 153

minors. Most of them were not kidnapped or stalked off the street, contrary to popular belief, Waymakers program director of victim assistance programs Michelle Heater said.

Waymakers is the lead victim service provider for the task force, while the Anaheim Police Department is the lead law enforcement agency.

“The majority of human trafficking victims and children that are exploited are victimized because the perpetrator has created a friendship or romantic relationship with the person and has lured them in that way,” Heater said. “This young person feels that they’re in a romantic relationship, but really what’s happening is that the perpetrator is using them in order to make money.”



Odessa Perkins, left, Brianna Moseley and Jenna McKaye, all human trafficking survivors, talk to Orange County middle school students about their story during a conference at Vanguard University on Wednesday. (James Carbone)

That’s why it’s important for teenagers and preteens to understand red flags to look for and be careful about anyone they chat with or send pictures to online, the young

audience learned Wednesday. Things like healthy boundaries, positive relationships and being able to connect with safe, caring adults were also discussed.

“They can learn about human trafficking, how they can help keep themselves and their peers safe, as well as how these perpetrators move and act,” Heater said.

Wednesday’s conference was moderated by a pair of Vanguard adjunct professors. Kendra Tankersley-Davis also serves as vice president of development and community relations for Crittenton Services for Children and Families, while Bodie Wade was a finalist on Season 22 of “The Voice.” Young advocates from Higher Ground Youth & Family Services, as well as Costa Mesa-based Live2Free, gave presentations.

The conference also featured discussion from survivor advocates of human trafficking Odessa Perkins, Jenna McKaye and Brianna Moseley. The trio helped to bring [recently enacted SB 14](#) into law, making sex trafficking of a minor a serious felony under California law and a strike under the Three Strikes law.



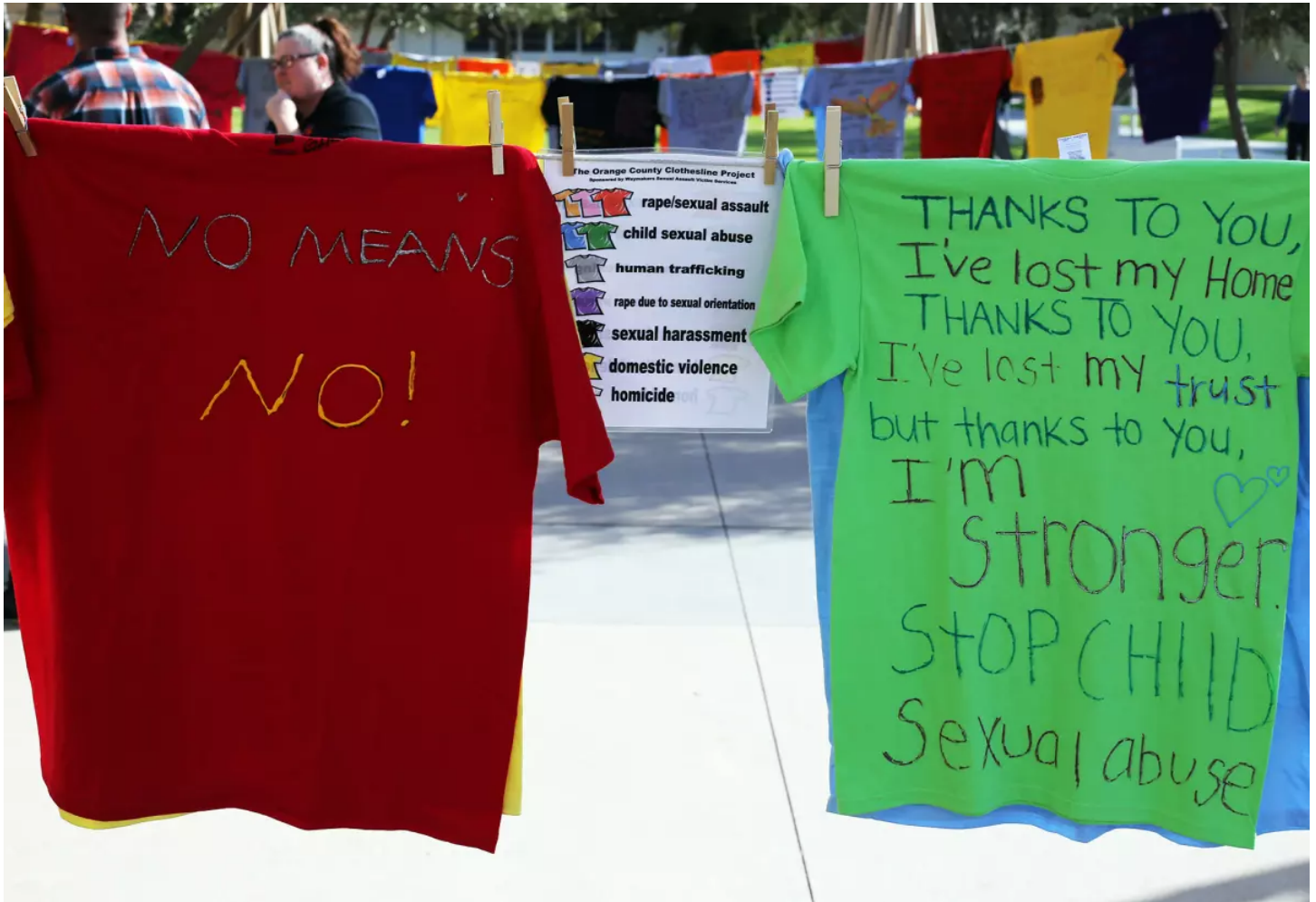
Orange County middle school students listen to human trafficking survivors tell their story at Vanguard University on Wednesday. (James Carbone)

Vanguard President Michael Beals was present at the conference to welcome the middle-school students. He told them that he was a first-generation college student.

“We designed this campus so that students who come here, and guests who come here like yourself, feel at home,” Beals said. “Learning can take place in an environment that is safe, an environment where you can ask questions. Where human trafficking is concerned, it’s easier to just look away ... but today is about opening our eyes, opening our hearts and not looking away from people who are being exploited.”

Sophia Garcia, 12, is a sixth-grader at Lathrop Intermediate School in Santa Ana. Sophia said she didn’t know much about human trafficking coming into the conference and that she felt the event was beneficial.

“It made me think more about the internet and stuff, not to trust that many people that you meet,” she said.



The Clothesline Project, where each shirt is made by a survivor of sexual violence or someone who has lost a loved one to violence, was on display at Vanguard University on Wednesday. (James Carbone)



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