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Woman's Goal is to Rescue Tampa's 'Invisible Children'

Redefining Refuge will host a gala to raise funds for sexually trafficked children.

By [Deborah Bostock-Kelley](#) [Email the author](#) 7:00 am

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In a state catering to tourists, and specifically families with children, there is a sinister underbelly.

It's an unspoken activity that's heard about in third-world countries, not the home of the Dark Continent and Mickey Mouse.

The Tampa Bay area has been identified as a region struggling with the issue of human trafficking. Statistics show that Florida is commonly known among law enforcement officials to have one of the highest rates of human trafficking in the country, according to [Shared Hope International](#), a group that works to eradicate sexual slavery.

Locally, two recent initiatives have been put forth in an effort to end human trafficking in Tampa Bay.

The first: Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn formally recognized January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Awareness month last week in a [written proclamation](#).

The second: On Saturday, Jan. 14 at 6 p.m., the nonprofit organization [Redefining Refuge](#) will host a black and white, black-tie optional masquerade ball at Chart House, 7617 West Courtney Campbell Causeway, to raise funds to open a sanctuary for Tampa's rescued sexually trafficked children.

The ball's theme has a specific meaning.

"We are unveiling the mask of child slavery," said Natasha Nascimento, founder of Redefining Refuge. "Marilyn Bray (of the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, located in north Tampa) did a session with a group of girls who decorated masks for our event."

Bray, outreach and empowerment coordinator at the Crisis Center, said the masks helped empower teens to help others.

"In addition, it created a conversation about the masks we wear to keep ourselves safe, like the funny person, mean and angry or always happy," she said. "These masks had a purpose when we were being hurt, but now, they keep those that love and want to help us at a distance."

The masks will be for sale at the gala fundraiser. The fundraising event will also feature

"When I first started doing research, Redefining Refuge was going to be organization f verbal abuse," said Nascimento.

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But Nascimento began to see a pattern in her research of girls that were sexually abused ended up in prostitution.

"It's human trafficking. Girls that are 16 years old end up becoming child prostitutes," she said. "A child *cannot* be a prostitute. She is a sexually exploited child."

Nascimento speaks from the heart. A survivor of childhood sexual abuse herself, she wants Redefining Refuge, founded in 2010, to be the voice of Tampa's "invisible children."

Initially, the non-profit was met with skepticism.

"People would say, 'This is in third-world countries. This is not an American problem, certainly not a Florida problem, and definitely not a Tampa problem,'" said Nascimento. "Our goal was to make them see, yes, this is happening in our community, in our schools, in neighborhoods, in middle-class families. It's not just a certain demographic of people. It doesn't discriminate."

Nascimento's mission for 2012 is to open a specialized home and do a pilot program, offering professional counseling and a safe haven for these children.

Nascimento's nonprofit works with such organizations as the [Florida Coalition against Human Trafficking](#), the local FBI Task Force, [Miracles Outreach Community Development Center](#) and [The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay](#).

The Crisis Center is a member of the Restore and Rescue Coalition, a working group established by the Florida Coalition Against Human Trafficking.

"The work group was established to address domestic minor sex trafficking and to help address commercial sexual exploitation of children," said Bray.

Nascimento's goal is to work with these established organizations and the local community to provide stability to these children, and to offer the children a place to stay until they turn 18. Government assistance could help with student housing and going to college, Nascimento said.

"We want to provide them with what parents are supposed to be providing," said Nascimento. "That would be our best case scenario – a real home in every sense of the word, and allow a child to be a child. When we get them, we want to salvage as much of their childhood as we possibly can."

The Crisis Center of Tampa Bay offers a 40 hour advocacy training program for anyone interested in volunteering with Redefining Refuge. A thorough background investigation is also required.

Tickets to the Gala are \$20 online and if available, \$25 at the door. To donate, volunteer or to just learn more about Redefining Refuge, visit www.redefiningrefuge.org or search Redefining Refuge on [Facebook](#).

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