



**Statement of "Katya" Trafficking Victim from Ukraine
Before the
House Judiciary Committee
United States House of Representatives**

October 31, 2007

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the House Committee on the Judiciary for the opportunity to speak on behalf of trafficking victims. This is my story. I did not work as a maid, or on a farm. I was not made to be a prostitute. I came from another country. But I will try to speak for all survivors of trafficking, no matter what they were made to do or where they are from. Because our desire is a universal one - the desire for freedom.

Please call me Katya. I cannot use my real name today and I am also in disguise because I fear that my captors will recognize me and place my life and that of my family in danger.

In Fall 2003 I was a university student in Ukraine. I found out about a summer program that would allow me to work in the United States and study English. I was very excited. I applied for the program and obtained a student visa. I found out that I would be working as a waitress in Virginia Beach.

In May 2004 I traveled to the United States. I flew from Kiev to Washington D.C. When I landed, I was surprised to see Michael Aronov and Alex Maksimenko, people I knew from Ukraine, at the airport in Washington D.C.. They told me that I would no longer be going to Virginia but not to worry because they had worked things out and I would be going to Detroit. They gave me a bus ticket to Detroit.

When the bus arrived in Detroit I saw Michael, Alex, and another Ukrainian man that I knew, Veniamin Gonikman waiting for me. Once I got off the bus in Detroit, everything changed. They took me to a hotel and took all of my identity documents from me. They told me that they needed them in order to get a state identification card for me. They told me that I owed them \$12,000 for travel to the United States and \$10,000 for the identification document, and that I only had a short time to pay them off.

I quickly learned how I would have to pay it off. They told me I was going to have to work at a strip club called Cheetah's. They forced me to work six days a week for twelve hours a day. I could not refuse to go to work or I would be beaten. I had to hand over all of my money to Michael and Alex. I was often yelled at for not making enough money or had a gun put to my face. Every week I handed over around \$3000-\$4000 to Alex and Michael. I was their slave.

My captors kept me in an apartment with one of the other girls. I was never allowed out of the apartment by myself. I was driven to work by Michael or Alex (sometimes both) every day, except when they were on vacation. Then, they hired a car service for us. There was no phone in our apartment. Sometimes I was forced to call home to talk to my mom and tell her I was okay. Someone was always listening in on the calls so I could not tell her the truth, but I think she could tell by my voice that I was in trouble.

I never felt safe, between the other girl and I we only had one key to our apartment. Michael and Alex also had keys. Sometimes they would just come into our apartment

without knocking, even if we were in the shower or sleeping. They would also come into our apartment when we weren't there. I know that they did this, because I found my things moved around. I think they were looking around to make sure we hadn't been keeping any of the money. The girl I lived with and I were trying to keep some money to escape. Our captors would give us money at the store and we would have to give them any leftover money. To try to keep some money for our escape we would slide some money into candy boxes. Once we got back to our place we hid the money in a hole outside in front of the apartment.

My enslavement finally ended when I escaped with the girl that I lived with. I was terrified that Alex and Michael were going to catch us. When we escaped from our apartment we put the stuff we wanted to take with us in garbage bags in case Alex or Michael showed up, that way we could just act like we were taking out the trash.

We escaped with the help from someone who believed us. The other girl confided in a man who came to the strip club regularly and who she felt she could trust. When he found out what happened, he agreed to help us. We were scared but went with him to ICE because they were supposed to help escapees. It was intimidating, but we told our story. The agents not only believed us and helped us, but they went that night and rescued two other women that had also been enslaved. They arrested Alex and Michael before they could run away or hide the evidence. Once they were arrested, I felt safe for the first time.

Since I escaped I have been learning English on my own and working full time. I really want to go back to school and finish my degree in sport medicine, but the money for college is an issue.

I am lucky, I escaped and survived being a victim of human trafficking. Many others are victims right now, they need help. Traffickers should not be able to exploit the student visa process. I was aware of human trafficking, I knew about it. I checked the program out and talked to people who had used the same company and come back safely. Still I was victim.

Businesses in the United States should not be able to make money off of slaves simply because they have someone else bring them into work. Not only did Alex and Michael make a lot of money by exploiting me, so did the strip club.

Finally, when I left Ukraine in May of 2004 and I said good-bye to my mother, I expected to see her again in a few months. Life in the United States is hard without my mother being with me. I never wanted to be here this long, but it is not safe for me to return to Ukraine. I miss my mom, and I worry about her safety since Alex's dad, Veniamin, is still in Ukraine. If the trafficking law had allowed for my mother to come and live with me in the United States it would have helped me and protected her.

Please help future victims like me, do not let this happen to anyone else. Thank you.