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Legal community should take action to end modern-day slavery

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another." — Nelson Mandela

In 1841, a 32-year-old free black violinist from New York named Solomon Northup was kidnapped, bound and sold into slavery for \$650. In 1853, he escapes. He then writes a book chronicling his enslavement called "12 Years A Slave." In 2013, his book becomes a movie. In 2014, the movie wins the Academy Award for best picture of the year.

There is a scene in the movie that has stayed with me several months after first seeing the movie. It takes place shortly after Solomon suffers yet another horror at the hands of a vicious slave-owner. After it is over, Solomon stares out into the Louisiana landscape, baffled as to how he, a man born free, could have ended up a slave.

His expression is one of pain, suffering, exhaustion, defeat but most of all disbelief. How can this horror exist? And how can we have held on to this horror for so long?

For 246 years, slavery legally existed in the United States of America. On Dec. 6, 1865, three-fourths of U.S. states ratified the 13th Amendment and 4 million slaves in America were set free.

Yet when "12 Years A Slave" won an Oscar that Sunday, the film's director, Steve McQueen, made a special dedication:

"Everyone deserves not just to survive but to live. This is the most important legacy of Solomon Northup. I dedicate this award to all the people who have endured slavery, and the 21 million people who still suffer slavery today."

Slavery, or human trafficking, affects every country across the globe. It exists in our world, our city and our neighborhood. It exists as forced labor in restaurants,

factories, dry cleaners and nail salons.

It exists as forced commercial sex in the house down the street and the massage parlor across the way. And, as the mass arrests at the Super Bowl so heartbreakingly demonstrated, it exists as trafficked women and children forced into the sex trade on the eve of the most-watched television event of the year.

Despite the term, human trafficking does not require persons to be transported across borders. As defined in the Trafficking Victims' Protection Act, it requires a person be bound to perform unpaid labor or commercial sex acts through the use of force, fraud or coercion. Force, fraud or coercion is not necessary if the victim is a minor.

The statistics are eye-opening. According to the nonprofit institution, the Polaris Project, up to 27 million people may be enslaved today. Of that total, 800,000 of them are trafficked across international borders every year.

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Eighty percent of transnational victims are women and girls. Seventy percent of them are trafficked into the sex industry, 50 percent of them children. And 2 million children every year are exploited by the global commercial sex trade.

Slavery is illegal in the United States, of course, yet the State Department estimates that nearly 18,000 foreign nationals are trafficked annually into the United States, the vast majority into the sex industry. Nationwide, the domestic statistics focus primarily on children.

Hands Across the World estimates that between 100,000 and

PROFESSIONALISM ON POINT

MICHELLE A. SILVERTHORN



Michelle A. Silverthorn is the education associate at the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Prior to that, she worked as a litigation associate at Schiff, Hardin LLP in Chicago and at Latham & Watkins LLP in New York City.

300,000 American children are prostituted in the United States. These children are usually runaway or foster children, many are homeless. According to the Chicago Dream Center, their average age of entry is 11 to 14 years old. Their average life span is 7 to 10 years after they enter prostitution.

How much is this worth? In 2005, the International Labor Organization estimated that human trafficking makes \$32 billion annually. According to the CIA, a single trafficked woman can make a trafficker \$250,000. Solomon Northup was sold for \$650.

Human trafficking is modern day slavery. But it is not slavery that can end with a constitutional amendment, or a civil war. It is slavery that can only end if we each do our part to end it as both attorneys and individuals.

Laurel G. Bellows, past American Bar Association president, created an ABA task force in 2012 to combat human trafficking through public awareness, advocacy, training and education.

The task force develops best practices for corporations, drafts uniform anti-trafficking state laws and creates pro bono initiatives to train lawyers to help victims.

Attorneys interested in joining the effort should visit the ABA

website and learn how they can contribute their skills and resources to, as Bellows writes, guarantee freedom and liberty for all.

Outside of the task force, there are numerous ways we as attorneys can assist in combating modern slavery. We can offer pro bono assistance with visa applications, divorce petitions, restraining orders, housing and public benefits and civil and criminal complaints.

There are even non-pro bono opportunities in our daily jobs, whether as general counsel ensuring that contracted suppliers abide by anti-trafficking guidelines or as prosecutors ensuring that the trafficker, and not the victim, is prosecuted.

But it's not only as attorneys that we can help end trafficking. We can do so as individuals as well.

First, get educated about human trafficking. Learn how to recognize its victims, including the ones who live on your street. Stay alert at home and at work, and look out for red flags that indicate human trafficking. These warning signs include living with an employer, inability to speak without the employer present and signs of physical or emotional abuse.

Second, determine how you as a consumer assist human trafficking — visit the website slavery-footprint.org.

Finally, in this election year, agitate for legislative reform that can effectively address the problems of human trafficking. This includes H.R. 2805, federal legislation that would prosecute both those who traffic human beings, and those who purchase them.

That entire Nelson Mandela quote reads: "Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful country will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world."

Starting today, work to eliminate the stench of human trafficking and end 396 years, and counting, of American slavery.