

College Students to end modern slavery

For the better part of an hour, 42,000 college students stood in the frigid Atlanta night, patiently waiting for a statue illustrating the fight against human trafficking to be illuminated.

They filled the Georgia International Plaza next to the Georgia Dome stadium and stood in the crisp 40 degree air this week staring up at the 100-foot high hand reaching toward the sky. Just a few minutes after midnight, they lit candles and the lights below the statue came on. The students cheered then started to softly sing. A chant of "FREE-DOM! FREE-DOM!" grew momentum.

The event was one of the final gatherings during the Passion 2012 conference, an annual meeting of 18 to 25 year olds. The students were encouraged to donate money to causes that battle trafficking.

The statue, covered in items made by slaves like clothes, represents many things said the man responsible for coordinating the outreach efforts with the organizations that will receive portions of the more than \$2.6 million raised during the four-day conference.

"Is it a hand of worship? Yes. Is it a hand of justice? Yes. Is it a [helping] hand from this generation? Yes. It is all those things," said Bryson Vogeltanz, the chief steward of Do Something Now, a fundraising arm of the Passion City Church. "We believe in these students so much and we felt like this issue was something they could rally around. Not just for these four days. We believe they will not only leverage these four days, but ... their lives."

Vogeltanz said the kids were asked in the months leading up to the sold-out event to learn more about human trafficking so many came to Atlanta with some awareness of the immense nature of the problem.

But sometimes people still think of trafficking as something that happens in other countries, "Melissa," a former sex slave, told CNN.

Melissa was raised in the Atlanta area, but had a bad life at home and says she moved out when she was 18. She and another friend found an apartment that became unaffordable when they both lost their jobs. They were approached by a man who offered quick cash if they would go out with men. \$300, no sex, he promised. It was a lie.

He plied the teenagers with drugs and kept them trapped in a town home. They had no car, no way of getting away. They were high all the time so Melissa's family disowned their druggie daughter. Melissa was beaten. After a year in hell, Melissa asked a random man she met to take her to a hospital. She thought she was going to die.

The hospital released her and told her to go home. At 3 a.m., Melissa called her mom for the first time in many months. Thinking her mom wouldn't come, she also called the man who ruled her life. Her

mom showed up first. Eventually she ended up the first woman in Wellspring Living, a program for former sex slaves.

Today, Melissa is a stay-at-home married mom with a 2-year-old child. She stays active with Wellspring, which she says saved her life physically and emotionally.

She came to Passion to tell young people her story and thank them for supporting Wellspring, the group that helped her rebuild her life. She was overwhelmed by the tens of thousands shows of support.

"As I was driving up to the conference this morning, I was watching the kids and I just smiled," she said. "Because they are learning and they are becoming aware of things that happen in the real world - in Atlanta, in California, in Alabama, not just in the movies or in other countries."

Melissa said when she was a slave none of her neighbors ever called the police, never got involved in any way. They probably were too afraid to get involved, she said. And she hopes that that will change, that the kids who were so selfless with their money will also speak up when they see something wrong. That they will get involved in other ways too.

Vogeltanz echoed her thoughts.

"Our goal is not to get a bunch of transactions. It's not about the money," he said. "It's about these students lives being changed and [them] engaging ... This is a shift in your core. Because once you know the facts, you can either go for it or you can ignore it. And for us, indifference is not an option."

Later, after the singing died down and the college kids turned to leave, most cupped their hands around their candles instead of blowing them out. They slowly walked back to their hotels, not wanting the light to die out.

CNN's Steve Almasy