

HOSTAGE HOUSE | PART FIVE

'I share my liberty with my son'

By LAURA BAUER
The Kansas City Star

She fiddles with her cell phone. In midconversation, she holds it out, showing off who's on the screen.

"Here's my son," she says, pronouncing those three words in perfect English.

A wide-eyed toddler smiles, an oversized hat on his head. Mom leans over to see the photo herself, not able to pass up one more look.

Two and a half years after she was smuggled into America and then held hostage at a drop house where she was raped, forced to work for no pay and constantly abused, this young woman from Central America is transforming herself. So is her aunt.

They're human trafficking survi-

SEE ORDEAL | A12

vors, not victims. There's a difference.

Every day now is about hope and healing and grabbing hold of that American dream they chased through the Mexican desert.

Finally, they can see it.

"We thank God for this," the aunt says.

■■■

The day of the raid, the two women didn't know what would happen to them.

Would they be deported? Treated as criminals?

Would anyone believe what they went through?

So many of the 60 immigrants who were crammed into that single family home in Southern California refused to talk. They didn't trust law enforcement. Some just wanted to go home.

Because of that, three-fourths of the immigrants were sent back to their countries. It isn't clear if they were deported or went back on their own.

The aunt says 16 cooperated, including her and her niece. They were certified as victims and received benefits available for those who suffer severe abuse by human traffickers.

They were given food, housing, clothing and work permits. Once they get a special visa for trafficking victims, they can stay in America for three years before they can apply for permanent residency.

The two women got their work permits six months ago and are now legally employed.

The day after the raid, they arrived at a shelter where workers seem just as invested in their future as the women. They got weekly therapy, job training and the chance to commiserate with other survivors.

It's what the U.S. system designed to protect human trafficking victims is supposed to do: Identify the victims. Help them. Heal them.

They now live the life they first heard about in Central America.

They save 30 percent of everything they make. The niece finally sends money home, where her father's illness has gotten worse.

"My parents are very happy," she says. "They say, 'God bless you for doing what you are doing for us.'"

The two women and the little boy live together in a transitional apartment as they plot new courses.

The aunt now works at a college. After years of serving as a modern-day slave for human traffickers, she has her favorite programs: cooking shows.

The niece is taking classes to learn English. She spends most of her time with her 1½-year-old son, whose trafficker father never wanted him to live. Mom and son play on the floor together and watch "Sesame Street." The father's whereabouts are unknown.

■■■

When they do talk about what happened, which isn't often, they never focus on the pain. They say:

Look where we were and look where we are now.

Yet sometimes fear and the awful images sneak in.

The aunt has dreams about the men who trafficked them. She'll wake up in the morning, shaken, and tell her niece about nightmares that seem too real.

"I dreamed they took the baby away from us," she tells her.

More than a month ago, the aunt took him to get his immunization shots. She pushed him in a stroller on a nice fall afternoon.

When a stranger snatched her purse and ran off, she panicked.

Were they coming after the boy? she wondered. No, but the incident brought it all back.

No doubt the women are still afraid. Six or seven of their traffickers are still out there.

Sometimes they'll just walk around the shelter, careful not to venture too far away.

Close to safety, but still free.

"I share my liberty with my son," the niece says.

They tell their story, hoping that other victims of human trafficking know that there is a better life once they're rescued. The United States intended for people like them — people who came here illegally but ended up horribly abused on American soil — to be able to rebuild their lives here.

In a country that believes in human rights.

"If more information is given out," the niece says through a translator, her aunt nodding in agreement as she talks, "people will realize the help they can get, and fewer people would stay quiet."

"People would come forward."