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Sold in the U.S.A.

By Kimbriell Kelly

The window frame broke, loosening the lock. Ricardo Veisaga listened for footsteps. It had been more than a week since the Argentinean went outside unaccompanied. Two weeks earlier, he had responded to an ad in a Chicago newspaper. In Spanish, it had listed an employment agency hiring people to work in Chinese restaurants.

When he applied, Veisaga was promised more than \$1,000 a month, meals, "a comfortable bed" to sleep on and a chance to earn overtime. What he got was a 12-hour workday at a restaurant in Greenwood, Ind., earning an equivalent of 51 cents an hour. He was fed only rice and water. On three occasions, he was beaten and threatened with kitchen knives.

At the restaurant, he was always kept in the kitchen and prohibited from entering the dining room, which had a telephone. His work injuries were ignored and resulted in pus-filled wounds tattooed across his thick olive arms. At the end of his shift, he was put in a van and returned to the owners' four-bedroom home, where other employees also lived. He was ushered to an unfurnished room and locked inside by deadbolt. He'd fall asleep on the carpeted floor, fashioning his coat as a blanket and knapsack as a pillow.

Veisaga believed he wasn't the first to be misled. On the first day, he found a used Greyhound ticket in his room. Like his, it was a one-way from Chicago but for someone named Manuel. It was dated two days before Veisaga arrived. Initially, he wondered why Manuel left so soon. Now he had a good idea.

After the third beating, he'd had enough. One night, Veisaga lay his hands against the frame of his first-floor bedroom window and began to fiddle with it. The lock broke. Veisaga pulled his body through and planted his feet on the dead winter's grass. He was free.

In an instant, his mind wandered. It landed on Manuel. Veisaga wondered: How many others had been enslaved like this?

Veisaga turned toward the window and climbed back in. If his traffickers were going to pay for what they did to him, he needed to get evidence. "I didn't want to be like Manuel who came and disappeared," Veisaga said. "I wanted to do something to change this."

Advocates believe Veisaga's story is a textbook case of human trafficking, the modern-day form of slavery in which people are recruited into indentured servitude and then kept there through means of "force, fraud or coercion." But his

case isn't among the more than 14,500 to 17,500 people who the U.S. Department of State estimates are trafficked into the country each year. That's because officials only count victims brought to the U.S. and neglect those who were recruited within the country.

But similar cases of domestic trafficking have been uncovered across the country in recent years. In 2004, for example, the owner of six Chinese restaurants in upstate New York was arrested after authorities found that 75 of his workers, all of whom were undocumented immigrants, were grossly underpaid and threatened.

And, in January 2005, Gildardo Ferrera was trafficked from Chicago to work in a Chinese restaurant in Michigan where he was beaten and did not get paid for five days before he made his escape, according to Jose Oliva, director of the Chicago Interfaith Workers' Rights Center, which filed a labor complaint on Ferrera's behalf.

In January, Ferrera was joined by about 30 protesters outside of the Ho Ho Employment Agency, which recruited him. "The only thing that I ask for is that there be justice, and that what happened to me won't happen to other people," he said as the crowd around him chanted: "Hey, Hey. Ho, Ho. Human trafficking has got to go!"

Experts say trafficking within the U.S. borders has long been a problem, but what grabs the attention of politicians and the public is usually cases of international trafficking, often involving sex crimes. "It's easier to look at trafficking when there's other criminal activity going on [like prostitution]," said Elissa Steglich, managing attorney for the Midwest Immigrant and Human Rights Center, a Chicago-based nonprofit that provides legal assistance to immigrants.

Victims of domestic trafficking often come from a pool of society's most vulnerable, ranging from youth and the homeless to drug addicts and undocumented immigrants. "It has to do with the fact that there's a great demand for low-skilled or no-skilled labor, and the labor pool is generally people in the U.S. that are the most disenfranchised," said Steve Lize, co-author of a 2005 report on human trafficking by the National Institute of Justice. "They're more likely to be exploited in the more extreme ways, such as human trafficking."

And they are kept in poor working conditions for a range of reasons, said Florrie Burke, senior director of international programs at Safe Horizon, a New York victim service agency, who has served as an expert witness on how psychological coercion played a part in many trafficking cases. Victims, Burke said, are often taken to job sites that are far from their friends and family. They are also hindered by their lack of English skills. And they could be afraid that their families would be harmed if they leave, or that they won't receive the money they

desperately need.

In two recent cases originating in Chicago, the cycle of slavery had the same starting point: an employment agency. Typically, these agencies place advertisements in Spanish-language newspapers, offering everything new immigrants are looking for---housing, food, transportation and more than \$1,000 a month.

The Chicago Reporter examined the Friday classified sections of Hoy during a six-month period starting on June 3, 2005. Friday is the Spanish-language newspaper's largest circulation day. Two employment agencies placed 66 ads, with almost the exact same heading: "Trabajos en rest. Chino"---or "Work in Chinese restaurant." Veisaga was hired through Agencia de Empleo Latino, which placed 44 of the ads. Officials say similar ads are printed in Spanish-language newspapers throughout the country, but it's difficult to determine which are legitimate.

Officials at Agencia de Empleo Latino couldn't be reached for comment.

When job applicants show up at such agencies, they are often told that the job is out of state, and that they must leave immediately on a Greyhound bus or in a nearby van, experts say. Once on board, their identifying documents are confiscated, and the individual is forced to work long hours until they pay off the agency's referral fees, typically a few hundred dollars. Whatever is left is whittled to almost nothing after the costs for housing and food are deducted.

Steglich said these practices could be widespread. "Like domestic violence, there's tremendous underreporting," she said. "People are scared, and they don't want to cause problems for their families."

Graciela Giselle was home alone cleaning when she toppled down the stairs. By the time Veisaga got to the hospital, his wife had undergone surgery and was in recovery. Giselle had made it. But the little girl growing in her belly for eight months did not. Her name was "Solange," Veisaga said through glossy eyes.

The couple tried therapists and psychologists but, swallowed by depression, divorced three years later. Veisaga wanted to distance himself from his grief. He transferred their home and an investment property to his wife and 9-year-old son and took out just \$1,500 from their bank accounts for his new beginning: He had decided to move to Barcelona, Spain, to start over. "I needed to cure my wounds," he said.

But first he'd attend a cousin's wedding in Boston. While there, another relative invited him to stay out his tourist visa at her condo in Chicago. But, while there, Veisaga lent more than \$1,000 to a relative who didn't pay it back. He needed

money to get back home.

Then **Veisaga**, a former seminarian who holds a master's degree in political science, found the ad in the paper. When he called the number, he was told to come to the agency's office. He arrived later that day at the business at 5668 N. Clark St. The agent said there was no work in Chicago, but opportunities in Missouri and Indiana.

"When I asked him when I had to come back, he said, 'Right now. We're leaving in half an hour,'" **Veisaga** said. He was given a fake social security card and a one-way Greyhound bus ticket to Indianapolis, Ind. When he arrived at the station, an employee of Szechwan Garden picked him up. By 11 p.m., they arrived at the restaurant in suburban Greenwood. **Veisaga** spent the next two hours washing dishes.

Around 1 a.m., **Veisaga** was ushered to a van and driven a mile down State Road 135 to the owners' home, a red brick house at 931 Sable Ridge Drive.

Several others lived in the house. **Veisaga** slept in a room with enough space to lay two mattresses side by side with a table between them. **Veisaga** woke up five hours later to a knock on the door. Everyone in the house was to board the van and head to work at different locations. **Veisaga** was dropped off first at Szechwan Garden.

He typically worked for 12 hours a day, with a 30-minute meal break, for 10 straight days. One day, **Veisaga** cut himself with a knife. "They told me to throw on a glove and keep working," he said. "They treated me as if I was a piece of trash."

Then the abuse began. It was first verbal and then escalated to physical. "I would try to resist their pushes. But then one of the guys grabbed a soup ladle one day and struck me on my back." **Veisaga** said. He tried not to react, hoping they'd back off. "But then it came to the point where I had to strike back. Once, to protect myself, I grabbed a piece of metal while they were armed with knives," he said.

A few days later, it happened again. He was being pushed and grabbed a knife to defend himself. "After the second brawl, I felt like my life was in danger. I was so paranoid that I would go into the walk-in refrigerators and place an object to prevent somebody from closing it on me," **Veisaga** said.

He'd had enough. He was broke and desperately needed the money to get back home to Argentina. But, with promises of pay but no evidence of it, **Veisaga** decided to escape before he had a change of heart and formed a plan to gather evidence.

He first needed to find out where he was. He couldn't communicate to others

since he didn't speak English. All he knew was that he took a 20-minute van ride from the Greyhound station. He wasn't even sure if he was in Indiana. At the restaurant, **Veisaga** was responsible for receiving packages. He tore a label from one of the packages and stuffed it in his pocket.

One morning, when the van left the house, **Veisaga** studied the black breadbox-sized metal mailbox at the end of the drive. Three metal numbers were affixed to a weathered wooden post and read: Nine. Three. One. He wrote it down later and put it in his pocket. He kept everything there in case his bag was ever searched.

The hardest part was reading the painted street sign atop the rusted green pole as the van zoomed by. He eventually figured it out: Sable Ridge Drive.

He also began penning the number of hours he had worked: 12 horas, 12 horas, 12 horas---10 dias, 104 horas. Ten days. One hundred and four hours. No pay.

Finally, he felt he had enough information. When his bedroom door was opened to go to work one morning, **Veisaga** was ready to tell them that he was leaving. "I had already analyzed the situation and was prepared for anything," he said. "I didn't know what they were capable of doing to me, but I was set on leaving, so I did."

The owner called his wife to the restaurant. They talked for a while and then gave **Veisaga** \$53.30. They ushered him into the van and drove him to the Greyhound station, where he bought a bus ticket. The couple waited there a half hour until the bus drove off.

Bruised and with infected scars, **Veisaga** arrived back in Chicago. He made a bed beneath the Red Line tracks and went to sleep.

'Who locked? I [didn't] lock!' said Ching Liang.

The 48-year-old from Taipei, Taiwan, has operated the Szechwan Garden for 16 years with her husband, Chuen Mod Liang, 60, whose thinning hair has begun to gray.

Liang walked to the room where she said **Veisaga** slept. She grabbed the brass handle of the wooden door and freely swung it open, revealing an artless room with two mattresses lying on the floor.

But the room across the hall was locked by a deadbolt from the outside. Liang explained that it was for "safety reasons" because the cook didn't want his possessions stolen. She hastily made her way across a living room cluttered with

seating, boxes and cases of soda, and pulled a key out to unlock her bedroom door. "We don't say, 'No, you can't go anywhere,'" Liang said, showing that even her room has a lock.

Liang has five school-aged children, but they live next door under the care of an unrelated neighbor. That is because she and her husband usually get home late from the restaurant, she explained.

When **Veisaga** worked for her, he was reclusive, she said. He didn't talk with others in the house and sometimes wouldn't eat. He got a break on Saturdays before 4 p.m., but she said he never took it.

Liang said **Veisaga** wasn't a victim. In her view, she was helping him out by offering a place to stay and feeding him. He was paid \$53.30 for his 104 hours, but Liang said it was justified. "I deducted for housing and employment," she said.

But advocates say such deductions are one of the tricks that traffickers employ to take advantage of their victims. "It's common sense and human dignity to know you can't force someone---to essentially enslave them for weeks, months, years, all for putting shelter over their head and maybe allowing them to eat scraps leftover in the restaurant," said Kay Buck, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking. "That is not a dignified way of life. And everyone knows that."

It had been just a few days since his return to Chicago when **Veisaga** met Amy Beuschlein, an FBI agent, in March 2001. Beuschlein remembers he didn't appear to be the typical victim. **Veisaga** handed Beuschlein a collection of documents, including a map of Indianapolis, with a dime-sized circle around Sable Ridge Drive, and a copy of the social security card for "Branton Morataya" given to him by the employment agency. He also showed her a copy of his notes showing the hours he worked, the bus tickets for himself and Manuel, and a copy of a contract that entitled the employment agency to \$280 from his paycheck.

Beuschlein quickly found three other victims, all transported by the same employment agency to Chinese restaurants in Michigan.

But building a solid case was anything but simple. For one thing, each of the victims had voluntarily left the employment agency with its owner, Shao Hong Tang, Beuschlein said. "Nobody had a gun to their head. They were allowed to walk to and from their car---or even to and from the restaurant, sometimes on their own, sometimes with one of the restaurant owners' family," Beuschlein said. "The issue was that they had apparently plenty of opportunity to just leave."

To hear **Veisaga** tell it, however, things were a bit more complex. "Their tone of voice and actions toward me were threatening. They would constantly harass me, give me menacing looks, pound on the kitchen table---which let me know, 'Hey, we're here. You'll do what we want you to do. Or we'll hurt you.'"

Still, Beuschlein chose to prove "forced labor" instead. She then had to show that victims were threatened with "serious harm or physical restraint" if they didn't work.

Six months into the investigation, there were two setbacks. Beuschlein was transferred to a different division and would no longer handle the case. It was passed on to two or three other agents, she said.

Then the World Trade Center collapsed. The Justice Department's top priority was now anti-terrorism. Trafficking, a civil rights issue, became number five on the list of 10 priorities.

Then, two years into the investigation, agents began to question the credibility of some of **Veisaga's** statements. He had said that he was struck on multiple occasions by other employees, hit with a ladle and threatened with a kitchen knife, though he initially told Beuschlein someone was only trying to strike him. In 2003, the U.S. Attorney's Office ultimately decided not to pursue the case.

But Steglich remains convinced that **Veisaga** was a victim of human trafficking. "He was recruited under false pretense, held through actual force, threats and physical isolation as a part of work," she said. "He was held in a coercive environment that prevented him from leaving---the intimidation at work and control from day to night."

For a successful prosecution, trafficking cases would require a solid investigation and good witnesses, said Burke, of Safe Horizon. "Trafficking is a really hard crime to prove," she said. "In the Northeast, we've had really good cooperation from the [U.S.] Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, and that's not true everywhere from what I hear."

Today, both the restaurant and employment agency remain open. Oliva, of the Chicago Interfaith Workers' Rights Center, helped file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Labor and recouped \$572, which included back wages and bus ticket expenses.

In April, **Veisaga** went on a hunger strike to decry unfair labor practices. And he's infiltrated at least five other buffets on his own in an attempt to expose abuse. "I saw that no center, government agency, nor the FBI was doing anything about it. Everybody wants evidence, wants you to present them with something," he said.

"They say they're going to investigate and they don't."

This year, Steglich applied for a visa extended for trafficking victims on **Veisaga's** behalf. Meanwhile, **Veisaga** is considered deportable.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky says victims like **Veisaga** need more support. "These are people about as beaten down and fearful as you can get. To assist advocates to reach out to them to protect them is going to take some resources to do it," said Schakowsky, who co-sponsored the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2005 to increase financial assistance to trafficking victims. "It's a question of putting money behind this, making it a priority."

Steglich said there must be some changes, requiring employment agencies to get guarantees of fair wages from restaurants and educate employees about their recourse if those terms aren't met.

Today, **Veisaga** can't work legally, but he says he finds ways to make ends meet. "My family in Argentina doesn't know what happened to me," he said. "I never told them because I didn't want them to worry."

Contributing: Angelica Herrera.