

Crackdown on Houston sex ring freed 120 women

Details emerge from sex ring crackdown, Team rescued 120 women from grim conditions when it dismantled the operation in Houston

By **Lise Olsen** Published 5:30 am CDT, Sunday, June 29, 2008

The farewell party was in full swing at midnight when police came for Maximino "El Chimino" Mondragon, his accomplices and his victims — scantily dressed women and girls he forced to sell beers and sexual favors under the flashing lights of a revolving crystalline disco ball inside his strip mall bar off Hempstead Highway.

Mondragon was celebrating his retirement at El Potrero de Chimino bar, also known as the Wagon Wheel. He had a one-way ticket back to his native El Salvador and blueprints in the bar for a brand-new hotel back home.

Then uninvited guests arrived. Pickups packed the parking lots at five related bars and restaurants in northwest Houston, as more than 100 officers from federal, state and local agencies rushed in the night of Nov. 13, 2005.

Interviews with the arresting agents and documents recently obtained by the Houston Chronicle provide the first detailed account on how one of the nation's largest sex trafficking rings was dismantled in Houston — considered both a center of operations and transit point for international sex and labor traffickers.

Task force members — including Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the FBI, the Harris County Sheriff's Office and the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission — had expected to find 50 or 60 women. Eventually, they rescued about 120 victims.

In interviews, victims told agents they had been forced to work six or seven nights a week and to allow men to buy them overpriced drinks in exchange for their company or for sexual favors.

The main targets were the lead cantina owner, Mondragon; head smuggler, Walter Corea; as well as their relatives and wives. Corea was sentenced in May to 15 years; Mondragon's sentencing, the last, is set for Sept. 22. Faced with reams of evidence, seven have pleaded guilty.

To the members of the then-nearly new Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance, the mass arrests and rescues represented a significant enforcement victory.

The size of the Mondragon ring, as well as others dismantled elsewhere, convinced law enforcement authorities that the problem of forced labor in the U.S. is likely much larger than anyone anticipated and continues to proliferate in Houston.

For years, the ring preyed on women and girls from Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala, illegally bringing them to Houston with false promises of legitimate work and then forcing them to work in cantinas to pay off smuggling fees from \$8,000 to \$15,000 — as well as all living expenses, according to court records and interviews with investigators. The FBI named the case for them: "Bar Belles."

Mondragon had run businesses in Houston for at least a decade, according to records and interviews with police and a labor activist who helped rescue cantina workers.

In his bars, agents from the TABC found detailed ledgers and notebooks showing how victims had been billed for everything they ate and drank, for their rent, for their clothes, for their transport to the U.S. and for shipping money back home.



Jose Benitez, a Houston labor organizer, talks with two women who were victims of sex trafficking outside El Corralon del Chele Paco, a Houston bar targeted in the past for such trafficking.

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'Thought he was the devil'

To control them, Mondragon kept "intelligence" on each one — the names of their mothers, brothers and children and locations of their homes and schools. Records show victims said he threatened to kill relatives or burn down family homes if they did not cooperate.

"They were scared to death of him. ... They thought he was the devil," said Sgt. Michael Barnett of the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission's enforcement division in Houston.

In that strictly monitored world, male traffickers and their female "handlers" controlled victims' clothing, their bodies, their money and nearly their every move, according to interviews and court records. "I had to do everything that they said — they had a camera outside my apartment that recorded everything," one victim told the Chronicle.

Another former bar belle, working when the raid began at Mondragon's party, fled through a back door, only to be illuminated by a helicopter spotlight and grabbed by a federal agent. She felt terrified yet relieved to have escaped. "I said, 'Thank you God!'"

Over the years, Mondragon ran at least three seemingly normal looking bars and restaurants in northwest Houston. Mondragon and two of his brothers, both convicted as co-conspirators, lived legally in the U.S. Mondragon and his brother Oscar were both legal permanent residents. Their half brother, Victor Omar Lopez, was a naturalized U.S. citizen.

But Mondragon worked closely with lead smuggler Corea, a convicted felon and illegal immigrant who conspired to bring women to Houston from Central America and then used them as slaves. Both Corea and Mondragon were self-made Salvadoran ricos, rich guys, who owned hotels and restaurants back home in San Miguel, the nation's third-largest city, federal investigators said.

Corea used his Salvadoran businesses as recruiting sites for victims, agents and victims said. He also oversaw an unusually large network of smugglers and safe houses in Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico, according to an interview with Tom Anello, an ICE unit chief and smuggling expert whose work was key to the case.

Patrons often saw Mondragon dance with the girls he kept as virtual prisoners in his clubs, according to Jose Benitez, a Houston labor organizer who tried to help the women after he met them and realized that they were being abused.

Beatings, forced abortions and prostitution took place behind closed doors or in adjacent buildings, houses and apartments, court records show. Aborted fetuses were buried or thrown down a drainage hole into the city sewer system, women told police.

Still trying to recover

Houston's task force is considered a national leader, in large part because of the partnerships forged between victim advocates and investigators. "What's unique ... is the bridge we have built," said Edward F. Gallagher, the senior assistant U.S. attorney in Houston who serves as task force coordinator.

Today, most of the women rescued in the Mondragon case apparently still live in Houston, though only a few dozen appear to have obtained special visas that were created for victims under new federal anti-trafficking laws.

Three interviewed for this story said they feel safer but still struggle to recover. None remains eligible for federal assistance initially available to trafficking victims. Some depend on support from boyfriends or husbands; others eke out a living cleaning houses or doing other odd jobs.

"We don't know even where to go," one said.



Maximino Mondragon was also ordered to pay \$1.7 million in restitution to his victims.