

Help spread the word: 'Slavery is still happening today'

On St. Josephine Bakhita's feast day, St. Thomas University honors heroes in fight against human trafficking

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Photographer: JIM DAVIS | FC

"We celebrate all those who do not just curse the darkness but light a candle," says Roza Pati of the Human Trafficking Academy at St. Thomas University, during the annual Gillen-Massey award luncheon held at the

university Feb. 8, 2023.

MIAMI GARDENS | If St. Josephine Bakhita were at [St. Thomas University](#) on Feb. 8, 2023, she might well have smiled with satisfaction. And not just because it was her feast day, but because of two events against the slavery she endured as a child.

The International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking, hosted locally at STU, shone a spotlight on activists who fight to free the estimated 49.6 million people who were living in modern slavery in 2021, according to the International Labour Organization – and to stop their predators.



Photographer: JIM DAVIS / FC

"This is an important day and an important issue," says John Makdisi, interim dean of law at St. Thomas University, during the annual Gillen-Massey award luncheon held at the university Feb. 8, 2023.

"This is an important day and an important issue," said John Makdisi, interim dean of law at the university, who spoke during the award ceremony. "It hits to the core of what St. Thomas University is all about. Not just about service but the welfare of people."

The headliner was the second annual Gillen-Massey Award Luncheon, recognizing top achievers in the field. The event drew 100 clergy, lawyers, law enforcement officers, religious leaders, STU students, social service providers, and a few survivors themselves.

Receiving the award – a block of crystal with a frosted image of the globe – were a journalist and a former child victim. They were Kwami Abodoe-Herrera, a former presidential advisor on policy regarding human trafficking; and Noy Thrupkaew, a reporting fellow with the nonprofit Type Investigations news service.

They were chosen from entrants on every continent except Australia, said Roza Pati, founder and director of the Human Trafficking Academy at STU. She said the entrants included not only lawyers but authors, artists, journalists and activists.

"We were overwhelmed with the number," said Pati, who received the award herself at the first awards luncheon last year. "And those who nominated them were powerhouses who are working in the trenches."



Photographer: JIM DAVIS | FC

Kwami Abodoe-Herrera, who endured six years of slavery as a child, was one of two Gillen-Massey Award winners at St. Thomas University on Feb. 8, 2023.

Abodoe-Herrera, the first honoree, has seen human trafficking from both above and below. Appointed in 2020 to the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, he helped spread awareness of the problem, including inter-agency cooperation and enforcement.

Abodoe-Herrera also highlighted what he considered a neglected facet: labor trafficking of boys, like the one he was. Born in Togo, west Africa, he was brought to the U.S. at the age of 7 by his father's best friend, who promised to educate the boy. Once in America, however, the friend hired him out for menial work like housekeeping – and controlled him with measures like withholding food and beating him with a cable. It took six years of "hell" before he could escape, he said.

"Labor trafficking is as bad as sex trafficking," Abodoe-Herrera said in his acceptance speech at STU. "It's the oldest form, and it's a \$150 billion industry. We are profiting on human beings. Why are we doing that?"

Many organizations don't even recognize labor trafficking as a plight to address, he said. That often leaves former slaves like himself to struggle for lack of housing or other assistance.

"Help me, help me, help me spread the word, that slavery is still happening today," Abodoe-Herrera pleaded.



Photographer: JIM DAVIS | FC

Noy Thrupkaew, an investigative reporter who has exposed systems that allow slavery, was one of two Gillen-Massey Award winners at St. Thomas University on Feb. 8, 2023.

Noy Thrupkaew, the other honoree, balanced her personal account with an overview, saying that some social, legal and business systems perpetuate slavery.

"We often think of individuals as ... bad men doing bad things," she said in her speech. "That ignores the system that allows crimes to happen."

Among those systems, Thrupkaew said, were labor invitations that import workers without oversight on their rights and care. Another is diplomatic immunity, which permits people to mistreat domestic servants. Still another is agriculture industries that issue scrip instead of money, then overcharge at company stores.

"It's a centuries-old paradox: Work is essential, but workers are not," Thrupkaew said.

She praised groups like those represented in the luncheon audience for organizing responses. She said a solution to human trafficking would require not only laws and protests and monitoring, but imagination.

"What would it look like if people's work and worth were upheld and honored?" Thrupkaew asked. "What needs to change in our world to make that possible? And how are you and I – and all of us – going to be part of that?"

The awards were named for the late Michele Gillen, a TV reporter who exposed human trafficking in Florida in the early 2000s – far ahead of most other journalists. The other namesake was Kyla Massey, a woman in Fort Myers who managed to escape sexual slavery.

Also there were representatives of the Fort Myers-based Voice in the Wilderness Empowerment Center, cosponsor of the event along with the university's Brunetti Human Trafficking Academy.

Gillen's award-winning documentary, *Trapped*, told Massey's story, as well as

that of Voice in the Wilderness, which helped free Massey. The [12-minute film](#) was shown at the Feb. 8 luncheon.



Photographer: JIM DAVIS | FC

"No one can own us," Father Paul VI Karenga preaches at a Mass to pray against human trafficking, held at St. Thomas University on Feb. 8, 2023.

The date of the event was timed for the feast day of St. Bakhita, a Sudanese slave who was kidnapped and brutalized by her captors. A diplomat's family bought her and brought her to Italy, where she eventually joined a religious community. She spent the rest of her life teaching in northern Italy and died in 1947. She was proclaimed a saint in 2000 and is regarded as the patron of victims of modern slavery and human trafficking.

Her portrait took front stage not only at the luncheon, but at a morning Mass at STU's Chapel of St. Anthony. Abodoe-Herrera, one of the Gillen-Massey honorees, served at the altar. The celebrant was Father Paul VI Karenga of

Burkina Faso, who wrote a 2022 book on human trafficking in his native West Africa.

"Jesus taught us that we are all children of God, and no one can own us," Father Karenga said. "He came to save us from physical and spiritual and mental slavery."

Daniela Curiel, who proclaimed a reading at the Mass and prayed the invocation at the luncheon, said an annual day is important to keep the issue alive.

"The more we pray, the sooner they'll be free," Curiel said.

Her friend and fellow STU law student Lauren Azurin agreed.



Photographer: JIM DAVIS | FC

St. Thomas University law students Lauren Azurin, left, and Daniela Curiel took part in a Mass and prayer against slavery and human trafficking, held Feb. 8, 2023 at the university.

"The more involved I get with law and policies, the more I realize the need for faith and integrity," he said. "The challenges are brutal and complex."

Also honored at the Feb. 8 luncheon were two law students, Yemi Beth Zamoral and Omar Cruz Martinez, who wrote essays on human trafficking. The contest was for master's degree candidates in the Intercultural Human Rights Program at STU.

Even the tote bags, gifts for the honorees and VIP guests, supported the day's theme. The cotton bags were made in India by survivors of human trafficking, to earn a living as free women. The manufacturer says the workers are not only paid but receive health care, day care, and training in literacy and budgeting.

Johnnie Mae Hawkins, for one, said she was leaving the luncheon encouraged. She's with Women United for Women, an advocacy group in Fort Myers.

"This put a fire under me," Hawkins said. "It makes me push forward that much harder."

Despite the somber, sometimes horrific facts of the war on trafficking, Roza Pati said she chose to emphasize the positive during the event.

"We celebrate all those who do not just curse the darkness but light a candle," she said. "And we invoke God's blessings onto the fruit of their work."

But she also used the luncheon to announce her institute's next big event: a conference in the last week of July, zeroing in on the link between human trafficking and foster care.



Photographer: JIM DAVIS / FC

Attendees watch the documentary "Trapped" during the annual Gillen-Massey award luncheon at St. Thomas University on Feb. 8, 2023.