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Debbie Larson looked at the exhibit, which will be at the State Capitol through Sunday. "The art helps create survivors out of victims," an organizer said.

Trafficking victims share pain, healing through art

• St. Paul exhibit hopes to raise awareness of growing problem.

By ALLIE SHAH
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In a rare appearance, a small group of human-trafficking survivors stepped into the spotlight Thursday to talk about artwork they created for a special exhibit at the State Capitol to raise awareness about human trafficking.

"The art helps create survivors out of victims," said Karen Johnson, former president of Soroptimist International of Greater Minneapolis, a women's rotary group that organized the exhibit.

Human trafficking is a growing problem in the United States, with between 14,500 and 17,500 victims brought into the country every year, according to Civil Society, a St. Paul agency that provides victims with food, shelter, and medical and legal help.

Bukola Oriola was one of the artists who spoke at the news conference Thursday.

A native of Nigeria, she came to Minnesota several years ago to live with her husband, a man she did not meet until they were married.

Soon, she found herself a victim of forced labor while her husband took all the money.

She said he would control her movements and limit access to food for her and her infant son, threatening to report her to immigration authorities if she did not cooperate.

"I thought that death was the only way out," Oriola said.

She eventually broke free after confiding to a nurse who referred her to a battered women's shelter.

Today, she runs a braiding

salon and lives on her own with her 4-year-old son.

With Civil Society's help, she obtained an immigration attorney who filed a petition for her to obtain legal resident status in the United States.

Her entry in the art exhibit is a book she wrote about her ordeal.

Writing "Imprisoned: the travails of a trafficked victim" was difficult but healing, she said.

"It was very traumatic and emotional for me," she said. "I didn't have my self-esteem anymore, but now I have my self-esteem. It makes you feel that you are in charge."

The exhibit is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the North Hall, Minnesota State Capitol, 75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. St. Paul.

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