

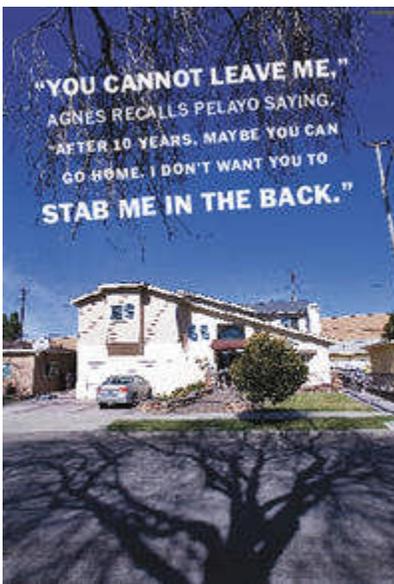
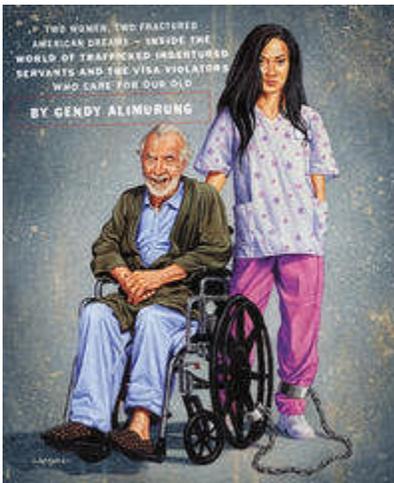
Enslaved in Suburbia: Inside the World of Trafficked Indentured Servants and the Visa Violators Who Care for Our Old

Two women, two fractured American dreams

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- Jason Edmiston



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The girls next door never rest. They work day and night and weekends taking care of the old people, and they never, ever leave the eldercare home on Vernon Street, hidden in plain sight inside an ordinary suburban tract house in Long Beach with light-tan stucco, white trim, burgundy awnings, a two-car garage and an American flag waving in the front entryway. Like the home's owners, the girls are Filipino, with dark skin and dark hair. They might be pretty, if not for their miserable expressions.

Jokingly, the man next door asks the girls, "Do you ever get a day off?"

No, he finally realizes, they never do.

This was the moment when the neighbor understood that he had to do something. He had been stuck at home, on disability from his job, and, in a plot straight out of *Rear Window*, had started paying attention to the activities next door.

"I'm not a snoopy-snoop, but something weird was going on," says the man, who is reluctant to give his name to a reporter. "The whole neighborhood knew something was going on. We are working-class families here, and they'd have brand-new BMW SUVs pull up." There were other cars, too, carrying a steady stream of visiting family members coming and going. The man next door used to get annoyed at the cars constantly parked in front of his house.

When at last the man signaled his understanding of the situation, the girls opened up to him. "They used to come over here crying, begging me to help them," he recalls. He tried for a year to call various agencies, though not, for some reason, the police.

"Bah, the police," he snorts. "What are they going to do? This is an international issue."

And he is right, it turns out. It was the Feds who came to the rescue. The girls, who had been trafficked into the country, were being held against their will and forced to work for little or no pay.

Modern-day slavery does exist, but in degrees. Far more common, and far less mediagenic, are scenarios like Mary's. Is it slavery if you are willing to be enslaved?

There is a name for the phenomenon, for the legions of undocumented who come over and choose to overstay their tourist visas: In Filipino slang, they are TNT, "tago ng tago," or, "always in hiding." Mary, who asked that her last name be withheld, works as a live-in caregiver in a posh senior-care center in Sherman Oaks. Her name tag reads "Private Duty Attendant." She has shoulder-length black hair, dark skin, a wide, flat nose and eyes that seem perpetually tired. As a teacher in the Philippines, she made less than \$100 a month. Now she makes \$120 a day taking care of a retired podiatrist named Fred, who is 102 years old. The money is good. For all intents and purposes, Fred is alone in the world. His wife has died. His only living relative is a niece who lives in the Bay Area.

Mary was solidly middle class in the Philippines, not dirt poor, not rich. Mary's husband is a small-town lawyer in the southwestern province of Negros City. She worked professional jobs herself: a decade in a bank as a fraud inspector, several years teaching Home Ec and nutrition at a high school.

Now she does "dirty work." She wipes butts, gives baths, washes clothes. "Never in my life did I imagine I would be doing this kind of work," she says as she strips off the old man's sweatpants, unties his shoes, peels away his socks, then dresses him in pajamas. She sits him gently in front of the TV, tuned to the Lakers game. He falls asleep. He is a "sundowner" who gets confused as evening approaches, Mary says. There is a saying: "*Kung walang hirap, walang ginhawa.*" Without suffering, there can be no ease.

"What day is it?" Fred asks suddenly. It's Saturday. "Just Saturday?" he frowns. "Not anything special?"

A handful of books rest on a shelf. Danielle Steele's *Finer Things* and a *Surgery of the Foot* volume. These are the random things that have stuck with Fred into old age. A lifetime's worth of stuff whittled down to what you can cram into a 300-square-foot studio apartment.

Mary's husband knows what kind of work she does. They need the money to pay off their house in Negros. Her husband earns 5,000 pesos a month, about \$100. Her former friends ridicule her for doing work that maids in the Philippines do. But with the money she earns, she has been able to send one of her two daughters to law school and buy each of them a car.

The court documents tell a familiar story with a martial-arts twist. A young woman, "alien A.G." in the court papers and "Agnes" for the purposes of this article, is living in a small province in the Philippines when she is contacted by an older woman, Evelyn Pelayo. Pelayo offers her a job taking care of elders in her facility in California. She has a way, she tells Agnes, to get her into the United States: Pose as a martial-arts student on her way to compete in tournaments. It's a clever plan. It's worked before. Pelayo has a friend who will teach Agnes tae kwon do, just enough to fool any inquiring embassy officials. Agnes won't really have to fight, because the tournaments don't actually exist. Can't afford the plane fare? Pelayo will pay for that. It will be part of a smuggling fee, which will be deducted from Agnes' salary.

For someone with no money, no education, no special skills and no family in the United States, it is next to impossible to enter and remain in the country by legal means. Agnes, naturally, jumps at the chance.

She flies to Manila. For two months she lives with Rudolfo "Duden" Demafeliz in his apartment. He teaches her tae kwon do. The 30-something Duden pays for all her expenses. Soon Agnes receives her (fake) black-belt certificate. When the day to go to the U.S. Embassy arrives, Duden gives her a questionnaire containing the likely questions embassy officials will ask — and the corresponding answers she should give. Fourteen other prospective tae kwon do "athletes" go

with them, but only five pass muster. Agnes is one of them. She has a genuine United States visa now.

Soon comes the China Airlines flight to Los Angeles. Upon their arrival at Los Angeles International Airport, Duden takes her passport, “for safekeeping,” she recalls. Perhaps to quell her growing suspicions, Agnes tells him that she is eager to work, and Duden jokingly replies that she should not be in such a rush because she is going to be a “prisoner” once she begins working for Pelayo. Whether Agnes regrets coming to the States at this point is unclear. En route to the Long Beach house, Duden gives Agnes strict instructions: Never trust anyone. Never speak to the family members of the elders you’ll be caring for. Avoid personal conversations with your co-workers.

Pelayo, who ought to have been a familiar, welcoming face to a stranger in a strange land, a connection to home, instead greets Agnes with a warning: There will be “severe consequences” if she ever tries to stop working for her by running away. Among the consequences: Pelayo will falsely accuse Agnes of stealing property if she tries to escape. Police will put her in jail for a long time, and then deport her. Pelayo will deny knowing her. If Agnes tries to report Pelayo, the authorities will believe Pelayo because she is a U.S. citizen, and Agnes is not.

“In this business you have to cheat,” Pelayo tells Agnes. “If you follow the rules here, you will suffer. You will never make money. That’s why you have to break all the rules regarding insurance, payroll. ... Everyone [who] works for me does not have their papers.”

And so, the nightmare scenario ensues. For three years, beginning in October of 2005, Agnes labors inside the confines of the house on Vernon Street with five other illegal Filipino workers. “You cannot leave me,” Agnes recalls Pelayo saying. “After 10 years, maybe you can go home. I don’t want you to stab me in the back.”

Like a sick joke, the nightmare recurs. On May 21, 2007, another illegal alien, identified only as “J.D.” in the court records, arrives on Vernon Street, again by way of the tae kwon do ruse. She is promised \$600 a month, minus a \$300 monthly smuggling fee. Like Agnes, J.D. is ordered to work for Pelayo for 10 years. She cannot work for anyone else. She cannot leave the house without permission, or at night. She works 24-hour days, doing construction during the day, and caring for the elders at night. J.D. does not sleep much. When she does, it is on a sofa in the kitchen.

After nine months, in February 2008, J.D. escapes. Agnes has tried escaping as well. Each time, Pelayo and her husband, Darwin, get in separate cars to search the neighborhood for them, as if going after a dog who has strayed. But where can they escape? The man next door offers to take them in and let them stay in his mobile home, but perhaps out of fear that they’ll be discovered so close to their prison, they decline his help. Instead, they return to their captors, having no place else to go. “It is just like you stole from me,” Pelayo tells them when they turn up. “Because ... you ran away. You didn’t say goodbye. You know that you have a debt. You ran away.”

The man next door gets through to the FBI shortly before J.D.'s arrival at the eldercare facility. The Feds promptly enlist the young women in an operation to collect evidence. They throw incriminating documents over the wood fence of their neighbor's house in plastic Target shopping bags. They sneak over to his house, sitting around the dining-room table with federal agents.

The raid occurs in the early hours of April 3, 2008. "It's going down," the neighbor's contact at the FBI says, giving him the thumbs-up. Cars from every imaginable agency line up on the street and stay there for the entire day. FBI agents seize journals, ledgers and credit-card receipts. Driver's licenses, Social Security cards, passports and foreign ID cards. Letters, post cards and jewelry. Duffel bags, suitcases and bank statements. Keys, address books and appointment books. Phone and utility bills, photographs, videotapes and cell phones. Evidence pours out of the house.

Paramedics arrive to assist the elders, who are placed in legitimate residential-care facilities with the help of the FBI's Victim Assistance Program. The girls are whisked away to undisclosed shelter locations. Pelayo and Darwin are taken into custody.

"Oh, are they filming *Dexter* again?" asks one of the neighbors, noting the abundance of cars, trucks and vans. By strange coincidence, the majority of location filming for the TV series about the serial killer is shot in the areas immediately surrounding Vernon Street. The house that stands in for Dexter's childhood home is down the block from Pelayo's house, a two-minute walk away. When the show's fictional "Ice Truck Killer" stops his car near a school to check on the woman bound and gagged in his car, the intersection where he stops is two blocks away from the house where the half-dozen real-life Filipino slaves were being held. The juxtaposition of sinister activities occurring within a placid-seeming location is playing out in actuality.

Mary begins working in America in 2003, but has been back and forth between the Philippines and the States five times in the past 20 years on a multiple-entry tourist visa, a fortunate score from before the post-9/11 immigration crackdown. The first time she comes to the United States is in 1989, as a bona fide tourist with her two daughters. The fifth and final time, she and one daughter decide to overstay their visas and become TNTs.

She arrives at LAX, then travels to San Diego to stay with her husband's cousin. It's difficult finding work there. Mary's 19-year-old daughter goes to work, illegally, at a Chinese restaurant in Twentynine Palms, near the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, after a Filipino friend promises a house to live in and full-time work. Instead, the house turns out to be a trailer. The work is grueling, and pays less money for more hours than promised. Mary cries when she sees how her daughter is living. But she gets a job at the Chinese restaurant as well. It's run by some Filipino friends from Negros City. Mary and her daughter share the trailer with two other people, and all four of them sleep on the floor like pigs in a cage. Her first night, she cries again. "Is this what life is like in America? But what can I do? I'm already here."

“It is hard in America. Why are we here?” she says to her daughter in the nights that follow. “If we go home, there is nothing in Manila.”

Finally, she concludes, “America is the land of opportunity — *if* you have papers.”

Mary and her daughter work 14 hours a day, seven days a week. Between them they make \$1,500 a month, a massive amount compared with the family’s combined wages back home. The restaurant opens up into a ditch in an alleyway. Mary cleans out that ditch, scrubs the floors with steel wool, scours the tubs and walls, chafing dishes and pans, and cleans out the sticky soda fountains. For the first time since it opens, the restaurant receives an award for cleanliness.

When a Marine takes an interest in her youngest daughter, Mary pays him for an arranged marriage.

Los Angeles presents more opportunity for work. Here, she buys a fake green card for \$60 from a friend of a friend who also tells her about the retirement home in Sherman Oaks. They don’t ask for your actual green card, just a photocopy, another illegal tells her. She starts as a server in the dining room, having gotten the job through someone who is friends with the manager. She waitresses, buses tables.

Eventually, she starts taking care of old folks. She picks up an hour here, two there, relieving other workers when they need help, at \$10 an hour. She is referred from old person to old person. She performs small chores: sewing a torn dress, accompanying someone to his or her doctor’s appointment. The hustle doesn’t stop.

Soon, she is referred to a woman named Sylvia and ends up taking care of her for three years. “I was like her mother,” Mary says. She not only gives Sylvia her medicines, they trust each other implicitly. Mary knows where Sylvia’s diamond rings are, her safety-deposit-box keys, the notebook containing investment information. She even packs up Sylvia’s things when her son decides to move her closer to him. Once Sylvia leaves, it’s back to the scrambling routine at the nursing home. There is no time for proper lunch breaks, so she keeps crackers in her pocket and eats between shifts.

She meets her current charge, Fred, at a beauty parlor, while accompanying another older lady. Fred’s wife is having her hair done. He needs someone to cut his nails. “They were overgrown and curling in, like the nails of a parrot,” Mary recalls. By coincidence, she has a nail clipper in her pocket. “How much?” asks Fred, once she’s finished.

“It’s free,” Mary says.

“Free?” Fred says happily.

Soon, Fred’s wife asks Mary to help give Fred showers. On their “first date,” as Mary calls it, Fred emerges sheepishly from the room with a face towel over his groin. Mary collapses in a

heap, laughing at him, with him. Then it is Fred's wife who collapses. It happens one day in the dining room. The cause is a bleeding tumor in the brain. Mary becomes Fred's full-time caregiver after his wife dies.

"Can I sleep here at night so I don't have to run home? It's too cold outside," she asks him. The arrangement makes it easier for her to keep an eye on Fred, to make sure he doesn't stumble when he uses the restroom in the middle of the night. In America, she knows true loneliness for the first time in her life. Her fellow Filipinos become her salvation. They cover for each other, they help each other find work. Ironically, they are also each other's own worst enemies. Mary stays so close to Fred partly because she knows someone else could easily snake her job. Half the caregivers at the retirement home are dispatched by agencies. The agencies charge the patient \$20. The caregiver gets \$8. The patient, though, sometimes won't go to the agency, because why pay \$20 when you can cut out the middleman and give the caregiver herself ten bucks?

Mary considers herself lucky to have landed with Fred. He is kind. He doesn't grope her, or yell, or insult her. She would never want to be a caregiver working for another Filipino, she says.

"Why are you sleeping on the floor?" I ask. "Is he forcing you to sleep on the floor?"

"No."

"Why don't you get a bed?"

"Oh," she says, "I don't know," as if it had never occurred to her such a thing were possible.

On a sunny day months after the raid on Vernon Street, the mother of the man next door arrives and plunks herself down on the squashy couch in front of his large picture window. The man has lived in this quiet Los Altos neighborhood of Long Beach for 26 years. "We went over to have dinner there once," his mother says, indicating the house next door. "We had chicken *adobo* and *pancit* and all that food."

"They weren't even getting paid minimum wage, I don't think," the man says of the enslaved women. "What's minimum wage now?" he asks his daughter, who looks to be all of 7 or 8 years old.

"I think six," she says.

For a while, Darwin was friendly. "He used to come over for a beer and sneak cigarettes," the man says. "Then he stopped."

Housing victims at traffickers' own residences, it seems, is the norm. A profile of typical traffickers emerges. They engender mutual mistrust among the victims and instill what FBI agent Tricia Whitehall calls, in an affidavit filed in federal court, "a climate of fear" — fear of law enforcement, fear of reprisals if they stop working. Traffickers keep large sums of cash on hand.

Most are vigilant record keepers — of money wires both international and domestic. Records are often written in code and by hand. They take photos of their victims. They take custody of their victims' identification documents and passports. However futile it sounds, sometimes victims keep their own records of debt payments so they can reconcile them with their oppressors' records.

Darwin, out on bail, came over to his neighbor's house crying and apologizing one day. The man shooed him away. "I'd like to say to Darwin, what if it was your daughter? Or sister?" the man says now in retrospect. "They are soiling what America is. They were exploiting these girls and writing off electricity, gas, water. Can you imagine calling *that* a small business?"

Many do. Several years ago, Nena Ruiz, a Filipino woman working as a domestic servant for a vice president of legal affairs for Sony Pictures Entertainment sued him and his wife for enslaving her. She worked 18 hours a day performing what one paper described as "strange household chores," which included microwaving chicken nuggets and cutting up bananas and pears for the couple's dogs. Ruiz, meanwhile, was fed leftovers and slept in a dog bed. A jury awarded her \$825,000 in back wages and punitive damages. In another instance, Elma Manliguez was paid 6 cents an hour to work under slavlike conditions as a caregiver for the family of a Merrill Lynch executive in New Jersey. They settled with her for \$175,000. Then last year, a Milwaukee jury awarded close to \$1 million in compensation to a Filipino woman who worked illegally for 20 years for a Wisconsin physician couple.

High-profile stories like these are beginning to form their own genre, a Cinderella narrative that takes the hapless victim from the pits of despair to wealth beyond his or her imaginings. Not to mention it is a pretty twisted way to gain a visa. Twisted, and also the only way any of these women could have gotten one. The future of the enslaved Long Beach tae kwon do "students" remains to be seen. Their captors' trial in the U.S. District Court at the Edward Roybal Courthouse downtown is scheduled for March, with Judge Gary A. Feess presiding.

Why does this stuff happen? Poverty is the root cause. It is the fuel that drives the engine of supply and demand. Supply: abundant cheap labor. Demand: first-world clamor for someone, anyone, to do disagreeable, menial tasks.

A tenth of the population of the Philippines live overseas, a diaspora second only to that of Mexico. The country is a major exporter of labor, the highest relative to population size of any Southeast Asian country. Last year, Filipino overseas foreign workers, or OFWs, sent back \$14 billion in remittances. This money accounts for one-fifth of the country's GDP. Remittances have become a pillar of the Philippine economy, and are expected to rise 10 percent next year. They bring the country more money than banana exports (of which the Philippines is the world's third-largest producer) and tourist trips to the legendary white "sugar sand" beaches of Boracay or the thousand perfectly cone-shaped Chocolate Hills of Bohol, said to be either tears of a giant or the dung of a mythical water buffalo.

Pelayo, the court documents allege, would pay Duden \$6,000 for each illegal alien, but would tell the aliens she had paid \$12,000. Working 24 hours a day, seven days a week for \$300 a month, Agnes and the other illegal aliens were earning roughly 42 cents an hour. In the Philippines, this is still good money — just slightly below the average income of 65 cents an hour.

Measurements of “average” income can be deceptive in a country with gross disparity between the extreme rich and extreme poor, where the middle class is crumbling. (The criteria defining middle class in a recent study include whether a family has a leak-proof roof over its head, and whether the family owns a refrigerator and a radio.) One of every three Filipinos fails to meet the official, arbitrary poverty line set by the World Bank — the infamous \$1 purchasing power per person per day. But an even greater number, more than half the people in the country, describe themselves as “mahirap,” or poor.

In the Philippines, poverty is largely found in rural areas like the one where Pelayo allegedly recruited Agnes. “The underlying weakness of the Philippine economy lies in its inability to create productive employment opportunities for its fast-growing labor force,” concludes economist Arsenio Balisacan in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. There are simply too many people and not enough jobs.

And yet there is something else that comes into play. Something more intangible. The former U.S. colony’s fascination with the West is deep and enduring. The culture is a surreal mash-up parody of American life. Consider the examples in an e-mail that circulates among the Filipino expatriate community called “Filipino Signs of Wit”: A bakery called Bread Pitt. A flower shop called Petal Attraction. A beauty salon called “Curl up and Dye.” A transportation placard declaring “Adults: 1 peso. Child: 50 centavos. Cadavers: fare subject to negotiation.” There is so much wit in the Philippines, a Manila businessman reasons, “because we are a country where a good sense of humor is needed to survive.”

The No. 1 show on Philippine TV, *Pangako Sa’yo*, or *My Promise to You*, tells the story of a long-suffering maid, Amor, who catches the eye of a rich American man who brings her to the U.S. She returns to the Philippines triumphant, hungry for revenge on those who ridiculed her, having made a success of herself in the American business world. America is the dream destination.

It’s exponentially easier to get work — as a cook, or maid, or nanny — in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and other Middle Eastern countries, but also more dangerous. When fighting broke out between Israelis and Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon in 2006, the Philippine government evacuated its overseas foreign workers and countless Filipino women returned stunned and penniless to their native soil with tales of rape, beatings and myriad abuses at the hands of their employers. But for some of these women, there is a reward. The intensely popular Filipino game show *Wowowee* showers the women with cash, houses and cars in exchange for their sob stories. The women cry. The crowd cheers. The victims are heroes.

The immigration laws that allow OFWs into the U.S. and the trafficking laws meant to prevent human exploitation are opposite sides of the same coin. In 2000, President Clinton signed into law a comprehensive anti-trafficking program, the first of its kind, based on the finding that 700,000 men, women and children were being trafficked across international borders each year, including 50,000 women and children into the U.S.

But those numbers themselves became problematic. Two years later, the State Department dropped the 50,000 figure to 18,000 and then to the current 14,500. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act created a special visa for the exploited workers, the “T-visa.” Five thousand of those are made available each year. (Still a drop in the bucket compared to the 50,000 permanent visas awarded in the annual “Green Card Lottery,” to which 6 million people applied last year.) The number of victims who have applied, been certified as legit and granted a T-visa in 2007? 303.

Where are all the slaves?

Identifying the victims, then convincing them they need to be rescued, turns out to be the major stumbling block. The government devoted \$23 million domestically last year to surfacing victims. The Department of Health and Human Services spent roughly a million dollars for every 30 victims. To some the effort seems to be a solution in search of a problem. Los Angeles’s own task force on human trafficking created a hotline phone number and distributed outreach materials emblazoned with the slogan “Know human trafficking: Modern-day slavery exists. Be alert. Be aware.”

What happens to trafficking victims immediately after a raid? Chances are good that they wind up in a shelter program run by the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, or CAST, the first and largest service provider of its kind in the country. Perhaps they spend their first few minutes of freedom waiting in the coalition’s office foyer in an anonymous high-rise building in downtown Los Angeles, perusing leaflets about the minimum wage, legal-help flyers, and a Margaret Mead quote pinned to the wall: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

“Unfortunately, deportation still happens sometimes when cases go unidentified as trafficking cases,” says Kay Buck, executive director of CAST. She is sitting in CAST’s conference room, the scene of many tearful conferences between herself and newly liberated slaves. She is petite and pretty, and puts one in mind not so much of the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove, but of something similarly strong, yet infinitely more flexible, like bamboo.

Health is the first concern. Sometimes victims only get to eat one meal a day with little protein, so they’re weak. “Clients come to us with just the clothes on their back, and sometimes not even that. Sometimes they come to us naked because traffickers won’t let them have clothes.” Like one client who escaped and didn’t even know she was in Los Angeles.

Housing is the hardest issue. CAST was founded in response to an infamous 1995 El Monte sweatshop case, in which 72 Thai garment workers were enslaved in a factory for eight years behind fences tipped in razor wire. Law enforcement, not knowing any better, simply left them

there after an initial inspection. After the raid, victims were put into orange prison jump suits and taken away to detention centers until community groups volunteered their shelters. These days, Buck hands out motel vouchers for emergencies. Or she helps people to find apartments.

In 2004, the coalition opened the country's first shelter for trafficking victims. Like a doppelganger to traffickers' own modus operandi, the CAST shelter is a building in an undisclosed suburban location. It houses 10 people at a time, one or two people per room. It's deliberately intimate and homey. "Our shelter has less policy and procedure than other shelters because we don't want to remind them that they are slaves," says Buck. "People have privacy that they didn't have before." They do arts and crafts and storytelling. They garden in the Healing Garden, and cook with native produce they grow themselves. Most victims stay for 18 months.

In time, they work on urban "life skills" and so-called "soft skills": How to use public transport. How to put forth a resumé. How to get a cell phone without being ripped off. How to save money and budget. "A lot of the skills clients have are related to the trafficking. Maybe they came to the country to be a nanny. We show them how to do it in an empowered way. They're so ... what's the opposite of built up?" she says, tucking a wisp of blond hair behind her ear. "Slammed down."

Last year, CAST won a major victory with respect to the laws that let trafficking victims stay in the country. The T-visa is only good for two years. Yet the actual adjustment regulations — the final bureaucratic bridge from visa to green card — had not been written. People whose T-visas had expired were in limbo.

"They weren't legal, but they weren't illegal either," says Buck. "These people were model citizens. They cooperated with law enforcement, which is part of what they have to do to receive the T-visa. It unintentionally revictimized victims of crime in this country."

This year, the first trafficking victims will get green cards.

It costs \$10,000 each to put a person through the CAST program. Most of the graduates become self-sufficient. They get jobs in retail, or as security guards, nursing assistants or social workers. Some, however, do "go underground" and are never heard from again.

The system has come a long way. Buck remembers making calls years ago, at the start of her career. She asked to be connected with the "trafficking" office, and the government operator put her through to the transportation department.

For the first time in 11 years, Buck had a waiting list for a spot in the shelter house. Referrals have increased by 200 percent for the first half of 2008. "We've never seen that before in our history. The global economy is having trouble and people vulnerable to traffickers are that much more vulnerable." Finding victims is indeed difficult, which leads to a discrepancy between reported numbers and the experience on the ground. "When service providers are seeing the exact opposite [of the reported numbers]," says Buck, "I trust the service provider."

At the CAST shelter house, people come and go as they please. If you're there, you can't tell anyone where the location is, not even family. Survivors undergo safety training if their case is active and they are about to testify. They are taught to mix up their bus routes, to lead pursuers away from the shelter if they suspect they are being followed. In some instances, traffickers have hired gang members to find victims. Traffickers often have high standing in their community. They learn which families in the village are struggling.

“Traffickers have the most to lose immediately after the rescue. The victims are the major witnesses. Traffickers have trailed caseworkers to find out where victims live. There are threats and harassment. They'll burn the victim's house in the country of origin,” Buck says with disgust. “Very rarely are these slam-dunk cases.”

Nevertheless, Buck is relentlessly optimistic. You can raise awareness, but that's not going to change the Philippines' maid culture, she says. She spent six years in Asia, has been to Manila, and has seen the culture firsthand. Poverty, the root cause, must be addressed from the consumer end. “Are you comfortable buying a shirt made by a slave girl?” Buck might ask you. What if that girl were your daughter?

It's the retirement home's six-year anniversary the next time I visit Mary. The old folks are gussied up in suits and evening gowns — then covered up universally in sweaters — and gathered in the lobby, attended by caregivers in pink and green hospital scrubs. The elders ensconced on sofas, or idling on walkers, look dazed and confused. Most of them are Jewish. Most of the caregivers are Filipino. “It's like the intersection of Manila and Jerusalem here,” the son of one resident says.

Mary is happy. Her other daughter, Christine, is getting married. Like her younger sister, Christine meets a Marine while visiting from the Philippines, a white guy from Iowa. He buys her a \$13,000 engagement ring and they plan the wedding over the Internet. Everything will be made in the Philippines, from the hand-painted invitations and the miniature bamboo pitcher giveaways to the embroidered-lace fans. The bride will wear a pure-white dress with green-and-gold accent leaves, embroidered with pearl beads. The bridesmaids will wear champagne gold.

Someone has sent over a photo album of the assembly process so Mary can stay up to date. “It doesn't take any drug to keep these hands working day and night and another day!” reads the inscription beneath a photo of a group of smiling faces. Traditionally, the girl's family pays, and for a spell, Mary's earnings subsidize an entire cottage industry of wedding preparations. Where to have the ceremony is a hard choice. Have it in Negros City, and Mom can't attend. Because she's overstayed her tourist visa, if Mary leaves the States, there is no coming back. Have it in America, though, and dad — and the extended family of uncles, aunts, cousins and friends — are left out. Mary's husband has tried for a tourist visa of his own but has repeatedly been denied.

It's also Christmastime, a double demand that strains Mary's income. She has packed up a *balikbayan*, a “return to country” box to mail home to Negros City, brimming with cans of Spam and corned beef, chocolates, towels and designer T-shirts — \$35 Lacoste, Ralph Lauren Polo —

for her husband. When she goes to pick out his size, it occurs to her that she doesn't know what it is anymore. She hasn't seen him for years.

During lunch at the home, Mary sometimes accompanies Fred to the dining room, though technically, the caregivers are not allowed to be present while the clients eat. "Sit down," says Fred. "Order anything you like. I will pay." When management complains, he says, "She's also a human being."

Other times, she'll cook for him in the unit's kitchenette. A bowl of soup. Some cut-up fruit. Sometimes she makes *pancit* and chicken *adobo*, or buys him a small cup of *ube* ice cream, or king-size bars of Hershey's chocolate, which Fred eats mincingly, one cube a day — Mary admires his incredible discipline. "I don't know what to do," he says, as the days stretch out before them. "I'm living too long. But I'm still here."

Theirs is an insular world of basic indignities made tolerable by small kindnesses. She ties a tiny bell to Fred's cane, like a cat's collar, so she can hear him when he gets up to pee. He closes the bathroom door very quietly at night so as not to wake her.

Later on, he shuffles into the bedroom but pauses at the door, thinking there is someone else inside. "Is the bed all right? Is it the same bed?" he whispers.

"Yes," says Mary, tucking him in. "Are you cold?"

Over the weekend, Fred is hospitalized with acute appendicitis. He gets pneumonia. "I don't want to be a sick man," moans Fred, erupting into a full-blown tantrum. "Leave me alone. I'm done." Your "blood will run dry" from dealing with patients, say the Filipino nurses. "My blood dried up a long time ago," Mary decides.

"Is this man paying you to sit with him?" the nurses ask.

"No," she says, her hours long since exceeded for the week, her neck aching from sitting in the uncomfortable chair. "I volunteered."

Mary says she will stay with Fred until he dies. Days, months, years. Whatever it takes. She feels a loyalty to him. But she also doesn't know what she'll do for work once he's gone.

There are 12 million undocumented workers in the United States according to the PEW Hispanic Center, recognized as having the most accurate figures on this subject. The largest number of these workers — 2.8 million — are in California. Of that 2.8 million, roughly one-fifth are Filipino. At any given time, there are half a million TNTs in California. Elsewhere, they are maids in Hong Kong and Dubai and Kuwait, cooks and crew on cruise ships, hotel workers, nurses and caregivers all over the U.S.

"I'm getting old," Mary says, "I can only work eight hours a day now." She is 58.

Money wins out in the end with the wedding. Mary's earnings fund the festivities, so her daughter marries in America. It is Mom, not Dad, who walks her down the aisle to give her away. "Don't lose hope," Mary tells her newlywed daughter, who can't find a job. Because her daughters married U.S. citizens, she will soon be able to petition for a genuine green card.

The next time I see Mary, she has started a Certified Nursing Assistant course at a college she read about in an ad in an Asian newspaper. She is learning techniques like how to bathe people who have partial paralysis and how to transfer a patient from a wheelchair to a bed, or from bed to wheelchair.

"We wash their butts. We sweep their dirt. We do their laundry. We'll wear their scrubs, too?" Mary says to her caregiver friends, thus launching a casual-dress movement among the retirement home private duty attendants. "Let's make ourselves look better. Sign of progress!" Progress is in evidence when I visit. She isn't sleeping on a blanket on the floor anymore. She has a folding bed now. She is no longer a "floor leader," the term she coined to describe caregivers who sleep on their clients' floors. Fred has rebounded from his bout with appendicitis.

It's a Friday, and she is wearing pink flip-flops, slim gray pants, a colorful tank top and lipstick. She'll be going out dancing later in the evening with some other caregivers at the Sportsmen's Lodge in the Valley. The last time they went, she danced with a Chinese man. "You look so elegant tonight," he said. "You dance so gracefully."

She would take a boyfriend, maybe, she says. Who knows what her husband is doing? "I don't know if he has girlfriends. I tell myself he is a man," she shrugs. "He has needs." These are the years they are supposed to have spent together, she knows. Their golden years.

Ultimately, she has no regrets. She has paid off the house, sent her two daughters to school. When her old people "are taken," she misses them. Sometimes she wishes she could bring these old people to the Philippines, the ones with no more family left, and take care of them there. It would be, as she sees it, the best of both worlds.

On a cool spring evening, all is quiet in the house on Vernon Street. A back window glows in the darkness. Things have settled into a wary calm. The tae kwon do slave girls are gone, whisked away to a safe house somewhere. Pelayo and her husband, Darwin Padolina, have pleaded not guilty to trafficking and enslavement charges, while Rudolfo "Duden" Demafeliz, entered a guilty plea and was sentenced on January 5. Afterward, he was allowed to voluntarily deport himself; he left the U.S. on January 9. Pelayo remains in federal custody while she awaits trial, having been deemed a flight risk. Whether her husband visits her or calls her every day is unknown, but he still lives in the house, still has parties and guests over, still waves hello to the neighbors every now and then, as if nothing ever happened. The man next door and the other neighbors, unsure of protocol, wave back hesitantly.

"How come they haven't moved away in shame?" the man asks. "How come they haven't crawled under the ground? That, I just don't know."

The "experimental" vaccine violates all 10 Nuremberg codes - which carry the death penalty for those who try to break these international laws. 1) Provides immunity to the virus. This is a "leaky" gene therapy that does not provide immunity to Covid and claims that they reduce the symptoms, but double-vaccinated are now 60% of patients who need ER or ICU with covid infections. 2) Protects the recipients from getting the virus. This gene therapy does not provide immunity and the double vaccine can still catch and spread the virus. 400 years ago, the first Africans who came to America were not "enslaved", they were indentured and this makes a crucial difference when we think about the meanings of our past. How we use these words makes a crucial difference when we think about the meanings of our past. People were not enslaved in Virginia in 1619, they were indentured. The 20 or so Africans were sold and bought as "servants" for a term of years, and they joined a population consisting largely of European indentured servants, mainly poor people from the British Isles whom the Virginia Company of London had transported and sold into servitude. Enslavement was a process that took place step by step, after the mid-17th century. Enslaved people were valued at every stage of their lives, from before birth until after death. Slaveholders examined women for their fertility and projected the value of their "future increase." As the slaves grew up, enslavers assessed their value through a rating system that quantified their work. An "A1 Prime hand" represented one term used for a "first-rate" slave who could do the most work in a given day. The elephant that sits at the center of our history is coming into focus. American slavery happened "we are still living with its consequences. I believe we are finally ready to face it, learn about it and acknowledge its significance to American history. It's hard to picture indentured servants in America doing the heavy agricultural lifting in the place of slaves, but, for a time, this practice was ... There was plenty of land to go around in the New World, which meant that those who jumped on the bandwagon quickly enough could have, at least, a shot at a decent life. Of course, what constituted a good life for a freed indentured servant was a far cry from the lifestyles of the colonial elite, the slave and indentured servants' owners who ate the most disgusting, decadent colonial foods you can imagine as just one part of their lavish ways of living. And, of course, unlike slaves, indentured servants could eventually earn their freedom, which is one of the reasons why they became less popular over the years.