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## **RAT Race highlights sex trafficking issue**

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#### **RAT Race**

Brenda Gifford passes out fliers in advance of Saturday's RAT Race at Mesa Community College Wednesday afternoon.

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Posted: Friday, October 24, 2014 7:00 pm By Jeff Dempsey, TODAY STAFF

Hosting a Super Bowl is a proud achievement for any metropolitan area. It brings international attention, visitors from all over the globe, and millions in economic activity.

Unfortunately, big events are also big draws for sex traffickers, and there is no single event bigger than the Super Bowl. It is with this in mind that Phoenix resident Brenda Gifford started RAT Race Arizona, or Run Against Trafficking. RAT Race, which will be this Saturday at the Reach 11 Sports Complex in Phoenix, is an awareness and fundraising event Gifford said she hopes will get people thinking about what needs to be done to end sex trafficking.

Gifford said the idea for RAT Race originated

last year during a five-month trip teaching English in Burma alongside her mother.

"The first week we were in Burma there was an article on the front page of a local paper about girls escaping from sex trafficking waiting three years before government had anything to offer them," she said. "Three years. We said to each other, there is an opportunity to do something meaningful here."

When they returned, Gifford said, the idea was to raise money to do something back overseas. A meeting with Gov. Jan Brewer's Task Force on Human Trafficking changed their minds.

"It was made clear to us that trafficking is a serious problem right here in Arizona," she said. "And so we decided we needed to change our focus."

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The average age of trafficking victims is 13 years and nine months.

"Also, 10 percent of those trafficked in America are boys," she said. "And that number is growing."

One of the big hurdles when it comes to sex trafficking is awareness. Most people either do not know it is an issue or underestimate the scope of it.

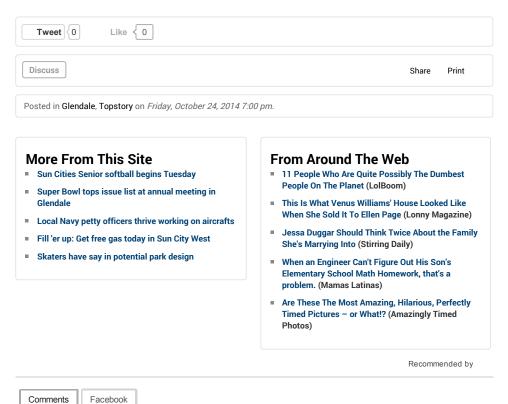
"When I talk to people about this, often they are shocked," Gifford said. "They say, well, Arizona is a border state. But these aren't only foreign kids being trafficked here. Eighty-two percent of kids being trafficked in America are Americans."

Gifford said Saturday's race falls 100 days before the Super Bowl and while she knows it will not end trafficking, she hopes it will be another step in that direction.

"I've talked to thousands of people about this over the past year, all over the world," she said.
"This is not a new problem in Arizona, and it won't go away after the Super Bowl. What this is, is a catalyst for conversation to raise awareness."

The RAT Race will begin at 8 a.m. Saturday at Reach 11 Sports Complex, 2425 E. Deer Valley Road in Phoenix. For information visit <a href="RATRaceAZ.org">RATRACEAZ.org</a>.

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### **EDITOR'S PICK**

#### **Grand opening**

The new Verizon store at the corner of 99th Avenue and Bell Road had its grand opening Saturday.

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