Presentation on Human Trafficking given by:
Rachel Lloyd
Founder and CEO, Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS)

Over the past several years, our National Philoptochos has been concerned with the tragic and widespread problem of Human Trafficking throughout the world, most specifically within the United States. Human Trafficking is such a deeply pressing issue that the President of the United States has established an Advisory Council on Human Trafficking to which His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios has been appointed as a member.

Given this concern, the New Philanthropic Initiatives Committee has been researching and working diligently in order to educate all of our chapters and members regarding this very serious issue and to provide recommendations as to what assistance we can provide to have a positive impact in the lives of these victims.

As a result of this effort, Kathy Siavelis and Peggy Vranas, New Philanthropic Initiatives Committee Co-Chairs, were honored to introduce at the 2014 National Philoptochos Biennial Convention, Rachel Lloyd, a nationally recognized leader in the fight against human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation and the founder of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS).

In a very silent room and an attentive audience, Philoptochos delegates were moved to tears and empathy as they listened to the story of Rachel’s early years. Those same faces were transformed into smiles of joy and gratitude as they heard how Rachel, with will, determination and great courage, pulled herself out of the life of poverty and prostitution, and became what she is today, helping not only herself, but also other women who have been led to a similar life.

In a heartfelt manner, Rachel spoke candidly about her struggles, which she encountered at a young age, and how she turned them around into her passion for educating, mentoring and empowering sexually exploited girls and young women to escape this life and develop their full potential, through the pursuit of their personal, educational, and career goals.

To this end, in 1998, at just 23 years old, Rachel Lloyd established GEMS, at her kitchen table with $30 and a borrowed computer. She was driven by the lack of services for these victims, and the incredible stigma and punishment they faced from all facets of society.
Sixteen years later, GEMS is now the largest service provider of its kind in the nation, annually providing preventive and transitional services and support to over 350 girls and young women, ages 12-24 years, who have experienced sexual exploitation and trafficking. Each year, GEMS provides preventive outreach and education to 1,500 youth, and training to over 1,300 professionals.

Rachel is well-known for her tireless dedication to “her girls” and has impacted thousands of individual lives. Through her courageous advocacy, she insured the passage of the New York State’s Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children Act, which in 2008, became the first law in the nation to protect and not punish trafficked and exploited youth, for which other states have now followed suit.

Rachel is also the author of the critically acclaimed book, Girls Like Us, and has used her unique voice to advocate for survivors at the White House, the United Nations, and before Congress.

Rachel explained that we need to make people aware of this problem in the United States. We need to assist these girls and not punish them for being victims of sexual abuse and trafficking as this was a life into which they were coerced. They need our love and support to break this cycle. We also need to educate all our young people, including boys and young men about these dangers in our society, and how we need to develop healthy relationships with one another.

For further information on GEMS, please visit their website at: www.gems-girls.org/get-involved.

To understand and increase awareness on this issue and to get involved in the fight to end human trafficking, chapters and members can refer to the following attachment of handouts distributed at the 2014 National Philoptochos Biennial Convention:

1. UNICEF – End Trafficking Fact Sheet  
2. 5 Ways People Are Trafficked – Abolishing Injustice in the 21st Century  
3. UNICEF – End Trafficking Toolkit  

Take action with your fellow Philoptochos sisters today!