

Human Trafficking 101

Written by Michael Cory Davis

Hello. If you decide to read this open letter, you will learn about a crime that is growing exponentially around the world and in our country. There is not one city or suburb that is immune to it. It is called, human trafficking or modern day slavery.

Human trafficking is when a person is manipulated, by force, fraud, or coercion, and trafficked across state lines for labor and held in a condition of fear, unable to leave. The reason why human trafficking is able to go undetected in so many ways is because citizens are not looking for it; secondly, many of us don't know what to look for even if we tried.

First, there are many forms of human trafficking. There are victims of labor trafficking, largely men and boys, though women are used as well for work in the garment areas, fields, etc. Labor trafficking is very prevalent and goes highly unnoticed.

Domestic servitude, affects mainly women, in many cases forced to work in homes. This is where many victims are being found in affluent neighborhoods with neighbors oblivious to the horror happening next door. In a recent case in 2007, two women who were rescued in Long Island after one of them escaped, fled into a Dunkin Donuts store and police were called in. Their captors were a married wealthy couple who owned a perfume manufacturing company. In 2006, in Orange County, California, another domestic servitude case was unraveled when a vigilant neighbor saw a young girl throwing out trash on a school day with obvious signs of abuse and called a tip line. This led to the arrest and prosecution of her captors who forced her to work tirelessly taking care of their children and home allowing her to eat only scraps of food and sleep on a dog bed.

In my second film, "Cargo: Innocence Lost" (www.cargoinnocencelost.com) I focus on sex trafficking. Why is that? First, it was a personal obligation and promise that I made to an organization and the young children that I met, who took the veil away from my eyes about this travesty. I got involved in advocating human trafficking awareness in the public, in Eastern Europe . . . Bulgaria to be exact, when I was starring in a film for the sci-fi channel shooting there. I attended a fundraiser held by a small organization called "Face to Face," struggling to get support from their community to end trafficking of their women and children for sexual exploitation.

I was moved by the information they shared and offered my assistance as an "American celebrity," (a much appreciated title I felt somewhat deceitful to claim). But then again, those given the title "celebrity" in this country nowadays truly don't deserve the title for what it should truly represent.

(Anyway, let me not digress as I certainly can get lost in that discussion.)

I traveled to various orphanages and schools and met about one-hundred children who were victimized and targeted by traffickers for slavery. We spoke about true self worth and value. This was necessary because the traffickers use the desires of a better life and material things as a lure, especially with the young children, to pull them away. I was given the honor of being named a goodwill ambassador to the organization after my tour and I realized that I had a responsibility with that title, an automatic promise to all those young kids that I met, to let their voice be heard. With that came the passion and inspiration I needed.

I turned the story of one of the girls into the award winning film, "Svetlana's Journey." Svetlana, a 13 year-old child sold by her parents to a pimp couple and forced to sleep with between 10 to 15 men a day for 8 months, jumped from a window to save her life. I used her story as the impetus to educate other young girls about the perils of believing pimps and traffickers and for society, including law enforcement, to understand the emotional roller coaster these people are on while in these hostile environments.

Svetlana's Journey aired on television in Bulgaria and still to this day is being used to educate and raise awareness about the crime of sex trafficking around the world. But it was when I was in America screening Svetlana's Journey in 2005, that I learned this crime was going unnoticed here, in our cities, right beneath our noses.

It was here in America where I met another young victim, who crippled me when she said, "No one knew I was here because no one cares. Why are people going to care about what's happening to people like me?" I promised her that I would make people listen. 'Cargo: Innocence Lost' is that loudspeaker forcing people to listen.... and I want to thank anyone reading this article because you are helping me fulfill that promise, by listening and learning.

The other reason I focus on sex trafficking and not labor trafficking in "Cargo: Innocence Lost" is people simply have less emotional support for victims of labor trafficking. Labor trafficking has existed in this country for decades but no one has been bold enough to call it slavery or even care because the face of labor trafficking is largely men, especially foreign men, being exploited and this is and has been too easily dismissed by American society. Very little has been done to curtail men being exploited in this country for labor helped to create the environment where women and children can be doubly exploited in this country for labor and sexual exploitation.

Money and legislation to fight traffickers only became allocated when the face of trafficking became young girls and women. Now don't get me a wrong; I am not making an argument about gender discrimination. I don't focus on the reason why the money was provided. I am just thankful that laws were changed and resources supplied, but I want everyone to understand that we have to become even and balanced when it comes to exploitation.

It shouldn't be allowed to happen to anyone. When we allow it to linger because of a persons' race, gender, class, or whatever, we allow the hole to get bigger, therefore creating many variations of exploitation of others and the work to remedy the problem becomes much more prolonged and difficult. Yes, there is a soft spot when we learn little kids are being abused.. but it's nor more acceptable when it is an adult male, female, or even animal for that matter, especially in this day and age. So I encourage you to be clear that when you are out walking the streets being vigilant, keep in mind, the man landscaping, doing construction, disseminating flyers advertising a business in your neighborhood, may be suffering the same fate in this country as the women and girls you are about to meet.

WHAT TO DO? HOW TO HELP? WHERE ARE THEY?

First of all victims can be everywhere and anywhere. How do you determine who is a victim? Well unfortunately as you learn in Cargo: Innocence Lost, many people won't just come up to you and say, "Hey, I am victim of trafficking so please help me" ... so you have to become perceptive.

Recently I went into a Thai restaurant, and inside were about five waiters. The one who took my order, just like the rest, never made eye contact with me, spoke very softly looking down all the time, and didn't engage in conversation which I tried to start. Now you can easily say, well maybe she doesn't understand English, but what about when I tell you the entire staff was this way, including the one male waiter there.

The man I assumed to be the manager was very stern and looked at the actions of the staff not as an employer but as a slavemaster.

Granted they may not all understand English, but when I started asking them questions about how long they have been in America, do they like it, where did they come from, where do they like to go when they're not working, suddenly fear gripped their eyes and they only came around to me to give me my take-out order and quickly dispersed afterwards. This was all very sketchy and now a case around this location is burgeoning. Organized criminal syndicates bring in victims and employ them, however, they will use them. They put them in plain sight and abuse them in areas not noticeable to the public, which is why when victims are recovered it is not unusual to find bruises, cigarette burns, lacerations, etc. on their backs, legs, and stomachs. The victims work and sleep in the restaurant, brothel, apartment or hotel, never leave, and are charged fees for anything deemed incorrect by the owner, thereby crippling them and always having control over them. In some instances victims are able to leave their captors, but it is with mental manipulation and the fear that family will be killed if they ever try to escape.

I personally believe citizens pass by victims everyday, but because we are on our cell phones, on our PDA's, or focused on our own lives, we are not consciously living and breathing in the NOW moment, therefore missing everything around us, even the chance to save someone's life. You may not be aware of this, but the bulk of the cases where victims have been rescued have come in through the quiet observation of someone in the public noticing something out of the ordinary, taking action and getting involved, even if they didn't necessarily know anything about human trafficking, but they were in tune with their intuition and knew that something certainly wasn't right and they made a phone call. Think about it. How often do you talk to the crew of people cleaning your office building. . . the landscapers . . . street vendors, the wait staff or bus boys, the hotel cleaning ladies? There have been rescued victims in America with all of these job titles I have mentioned. Why? Someone paid attention.

It's no different than the person who drives past the massage parlor and sees it open at 3:00 A. M. advertising Thai massage or Swedish massage, \$39.99 . . . 24hrs a day, and does nothing about it until there is a raid and then says, "Hmm, I always thought that was something fishy." These are obvious places where criminal activity is happening and you may say it's just prostitution but it is a place where women and children are potentially brought through before they get to their destination. If that is not it.... it is the place where the energy of people being violently exploited is harnessed in your city, in your neighborhood, along your drive home, and it is your inaction that causes it to stay and grow exponentially.

You can make a difference. How?

First, when you see these types of criminal activities happening, I am not telling you to become like Grissom on CSI and start your own investigation. You are dealing with a 9-27 billion dollar grossing industry with major players of organized crime involved, so you don't want to end up on the front page of a newspaper, so you simply want to call the Dept. H.H.S trafficking hotline, and make a tip. The more tips that are reported the more the task force or local police can build up a case or reason to start checking the location under suspicion.

Secondly, when places like these massage parlors open up, you can contact the business association groups in that community and inform them of what human trafficking is and what it attracts. Educate them that by allowing this business in the neighborhood, they open the door, to guns, drugs, and violent crime. It is a known fact that when businesses like this enter a community, the community itself suffers as a criminal element comes in and the money earned doesn't go back into the community but into the coffers of the criminal syndicate to buy houses and other property in that neighborhood to keep their business thriving. So, unless you want to live next to a trafficker and have your kids play with their kids, it's time to open your eyes, ears, and do the simple things necessary to help someone else and help yourself.

Here are some of those things in the form of questions to ask?

Where are you from? Where do you like to go when you're not working? Do you have a passport? Are you able to leave your job?

In the case of sex trafficking, recruiting has become very intense with pimps now actively hanging around schools, libraries, and places where children can be found. They are targeting children on MySpace and Craigs List under the theme of gigs, modeling, secretarial work, and adult services, and selling victims of trafficking now the same way.

What is happening is the demand for sex, especially from young children is so high that the suppliers need to keep their nest full. Now the same way kids are trafficked into America traffickers have realized that American, especially white American kids, are a big commodity outside of America in countries where there are none. So the same way to get them in, is now being used to get them out... and because no one is reporting this on the news doesn't mean it's not happening. In the same way, more than 3000 kids in America go missing everyday and you don't hear about it. The same way there are more than one million children vulnerable to this crime everyday living on the streets, and the system designed to help them is failing.

These same American kids who get trafficked out of America end up, on pornographic internet sites, brothels, nightclubs, etc., and they also become the pimps themselves, targeting your children as they don't pose an obvious threat because they are one of them. This is how your little Johnny, Jenny, and Sally become victims. They don't tell you about every friend they have at school, or on the bus, or at the mall, which is why education and awareness is so important when it comes to your own children. You must inform them that they are being targeted not just by adults but also by their peers... there has been a monumental increase in children being used to pimp other children because this keeps the pimp/traffickers hands clean and the child is never usually suspected, and if so, is sentenced to minimal jail time, if any, because he/she is a minor. One of the ways traffickers work to recruit victims of sex trafficking is to use the desire for material items and validation as a way to lure kids in. There are so many children who believe they are not cool or not worth anything because they can't compete with the Jones's by not being able to wear the cool clothes, have the cool gadgets, or hang with the cool people, and pimp/traffickers use this, by promising kids, offering kids, or simply giving them what they want until they become trusting enough to pull them away.

We live in a society where we are told what makes us important and valuable, and those elements always boil right back down to the propaganda projected to us from the corporate world, their advertisers, TV stations that give them airtime, and the celebrities who willingly push the image down the throats of Americans everyday. This all has a horrific effect on the true being of a person, especially a child...

When I was in Bulgaria the first things I heard from kids when asked why they were trafficked was they met someone who told them he would provide them with the things they wanted. When I asked what did they want, the answer was always some item . . . a phone, clothes, etc. Now of course this may sound petty to adults at first. But, how many of us are victims of this when we think of the car, the iphone, the vacation, the shirt, the diamond that we crave. The difference is, I hope anyway, we don't need these things for validation as adults, but more as a fun want, where as these children need it for validation, as a way to show their worth. Thus parents must teach your kids what is truly valuable far beyond the "things" that make them feel they are.

The Power of 1

I speak a lot about the power of one because I have witnessed this. I saw something one day that wasn't right and I wanted to make a difference in the life of the kids that I met who were shattered inside and broken from exploiters. I didn't know what to do, but I left myself open and the answer came in the form of using my talent and special skills to make a difference; to change one person's life. From that, came two movies, thousands of lives changed, and awareness and education being spread.

We all individually have the power and the ability to make a positive difference in someone's life, you don't even have to ever leave your house half the time considering that the internet is so powerful and world reaching. The talents you have inside of you are not just simple skills to let waste away, but they are the sweet fruits that you have been given on your journey to help others on theirs.

I am an actor and filmmaker, but it wasn't until it became less about the job and the money that I started to find fulfillment in my talents. I realized that these talents, when utilized selflessly help others, learn, heal, connect, aspire, and fulfill their dreams. In the same way, if you like to draw or work with your hands, you can use that talent to create items and supply organizations with them to give to victims of trafficking. When they are rescued (many times these victims have no idea that they have rights and communicating is difficult with language barriers so artwork/goods are vehicles leading to protection), you can teach art therapy classes, empowering victims and allowing them to regain a confidence by building up their esteem and sense of expression. My point here is that we all can help others by using what we have and I don't necessarily even mean money, and in turn it WILL HELP YOU. The world works that way; you help someone and you are immediately helped.

If human trafficking is not your cause then offer your skills and resources to what you believe in. The world is not as big as it seems and one person's action can make a big difference globally. There is a power in one; I am living proof. We all have the ability to make a difference in the world regarding whatever in the world we want to change for the betterment of the society. We must support those who believe in that power and encourage them when they are trying to help others by using their skills. I was able to make a difference because people saw that I wanted to do so and they helped me where they could. This, in turn, made the giving machine stronger and more efficient. We must spread our hands to help those in need and not be afraid to engage with each other.

The main reason why I was able to get involved in this cause was because I chose not to turn a blind eye in Bulgaria to the problem. I opened my eyes even wider and asked if I could help. It was as simple as being willing to get engaged. These types of crimes happen because the traffickers believe that people won't get engaged, and in many ways, they are right; they know that we have become a weak society of people, afraid to stand up and speak against things we know are not right.

We have become a society that is happily spoon fed reality TV and "Paris Hilton breaking news" . . . a society engaged in hoping that God will change things instead of taking action individually and changing things on our own. We have the power. The power is in us and we do ourselves a major injustice by letting it go away and not taking action and not getting involved.

Ladies and gentleman, everything is connected. What happens over there affects everything here. All it takes is for one trafficker to bring a girl with AIDS and put her to work in a very busy brothel in your city; whom top officials, husbands, and sons, go to and suddenly you may have an AIDS epidemic on your hand. When a corporation opens up in a poverty stricken country and exploits the people there, using them for cheap labor, paying them unfairly, and then selling the merchandise to us for exorbitant prices, we support the exploitation of those people, by letting our dollars go back into the cycle of corruption.

When we don't demand that the corporations become responsible for their actions in other countries we become just as big a part of the problem as the traffickers, we become exploiters. This is how the cycle grows: big business and governments exploit the poor, the poor can't get ahead, the kids and women become vulnerable, criminal syndicates exploit the vulnerable, forced prostitution and child labor become easy alternatives if not the only option. Foreigners bring their money into this mix by traveling to these countries so they exploit those women and children for sexual purposes, (countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Brazil, etc.) and that money goes into the hands of criminals and only a few high ranking officials. The corruption gets bigger and the American company sells us their goods with a wonderful commercial campaign leading us to believe that they have made something wonderful that we need; exploiting us as well.

This is seen in the world of chocolate, which is heavily fueled by child laborers trafficked to parts of the world where cocoa is picked. Simply said, the chocolate you eat is from the labor of trafficked and exploited children. If you want to make a difference, buy fair trade chocolate, begin a petition and send it to Nestle's or Hershey. It will make a difference. Crimes happen because no one does anything about them.

We in this country are part, like it or not, of the gross exploitation of the people that end up in our country as victims of trafficking. Our government and our corporations as with many other big western countries governments and corporations have helped to create these conditions thereby making it easy for people to use these vulnerable individuals for whatever profit gaining purposes they seek.

If we in this country truly want to make a difference with trafficking we must understand that this is more than just one guy who wants to sell sex, or one guy who wants to buy sex; this is about exploitation of the vulnerable from the highest levels up. Governments and corporations help to create these horrific conditions in the source countries; the criminal syndicates in the source countries take advantage of this and the ignorance of the poor, allowing them to be susceptible to the whole thing.

We, in the destination countries, promote the whole thing by allowing our buying dollars and choices to be part of the problem, our lackadaisical behavior to overrule our desire to make a difference, and our unwillingness to look through the veil and see this for what it truly is. When we accept this, I believe, we see our true individual power. With this knowledge you become clear that if half of this country boycotted chocolate for one month, for instance, that something undoubtedly would change. This is our power . . . this is your power . . . this is how you make a difference. You make your money make the difference. Paris Hilton was able to make over half of the country speak about her the day she was released from prison. Why can't Americans mobilize and speak in tandem about boycotting corporations that exploit others or about the crime of modern-day slavery? Imagine the difference with the power used through the media, the internet, cohesively, and with a true purpose of healing and helping! Let's stop hoping we can make a difference and start making a difference!

So as a recap here are some things we can do:

Call the HHS Department toll free hotline- 888-373-7888

Inform everyone about what you learned today

Buy a copy of "Cargo: Innocence Lost," and host screenings at your house- educate others

Write into your local newspapers and demand they stop promoting the massage parlors in the adult section- they make thousands of dollars a month exploiting others

Write your local councilmen and senators. Urge them to make human trafficking a cause for them to stand behind and demand for better state laws and funding for task forces. Demand stronger jail sentences for johns who purchase sex domestically and for those who travel overseas.

Open your eyes, ears, and mouths. See, hear, and speak.

Use your money wisely, buy goods that have fair trade logos on them, support businesses that support enriching the lives of others globally.

Have some conviction. Boycott.

Use your own individual talents, resources and power towards something that you believe in and want to be a part of.

Lastly be empowered, not overwhelmed by what you have learned today. Knowledge is true wealth. You can make a difference!

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