

Rotarians Against Child Slavery – Issue 2



"If we cannot stop slavery how can we really say we are free" (Kevin Bales)

Support for the Group.... I have been bowled over by the number of supportive emails which I have received from members since the publication of the first Newsletter last week. At the time of writing there are 224 members who are receiving emails from me. There are also several names and email addresses which I obtained at the House of Friendship stand and which I have not as yet deciphered. The current number of countries represented in the membership of the RAG is 26. One member tells me that he has already collected another 50 plus Rotarians who wish to join the Group. So membership is increasing.

The fight against child slavery.....Through email correspondence with Group members, I am starting to learn about some of the wonderful anti-slavery activities which are being undertaken by individuals. The most inspiring is Craig Kielburger's story. Craig was 12 years old when he organised his friends and classmates in Ontario in 1996 to form an organisation called "Free the Children" - an international network of children - aimed at eradicating child slave labour around the world. You can read all about his exploits by clicking on the appropriate link to the new website. A RAG member from Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, sent me a cutting about a local man, Eric Proffitt who is going to run 800 kilometres in chains, weighing 8 kilos, to raise awareness of human trafficking. Again you can read all about the details on the RAG website.

Slavery is more than servitude...In the last Newsletter we noted that a slave is someone who is forced to work without pay, under threat of violence and unable to walk away. My frequent visits to India and to two Child Slave Rehabilitation Centres near Delhi (supported by my club since 2001), has made me realise that one of the great crimes of slavery is that it goes beyond "servitude". It goes to the point of eliminating the identity of the individual and the younger children are taken into slavery, the less likely they are ever able to repossess their own identity. In effect after a while they become like zombies.

Child slavery in India..... In India, children are enslaved from a very early age. For example, a recent report in the Sunday Times indicated that girls as

young as six are working 12 hour days in mines to extract a shiny mineral used in cosmetics sold by western supermarkets. Sadly in India, child slavery is prevalent in a whole range of industries eg brick kiln works, clothing, fireworks and glass making factories, stone quarries and particularly in carpet making establishments.

Abductions are common....In 2000 two TV presenters from England who made a documentary film on "Modern Slavery" visited northern Bihar and discovered that between 4,000/5,000 children were reported missing, suspected to have been abducted to the main carpet making belt around Varanassi. In Bihar State, children are usually lured away from their parents by contractors on the pretext that the children will receive a good education, learn some skills and subsequently help to improve the conditions of their own family. In many instances children are stolen from their parents, imprisoned in atrocious living and working conditions and beaten if they don't match their owners' standards of work.

Anti-slavery units do free slaves.....Much of the information about the conditions endured by child slaves in India, comes from those who have been rescued from their prisons by anti-slavery organisations like SACCS (The South Asian Coalition against Child Servitude). Since its creation in 1989, SACCS has liberated over 60,000 children. The TV team from True Vision filmed an actual SACCS raid on a carpet factory, which succeeded in releasing 19 boys from their prisons. Two of these boys (H & S) had been missing from their homes for 5 years. Their story as reported by the team is a chilling one.

H & S's story.....H & S were cousins who lived in a small village in the State of Bihar. One day when they were 6 years old, they were playing by the canal which ran by their village. A man came & sat on the bank and began to talk to them and to offer them sweets. After a while he asked them to come with him, promising more sweets. Before they knew what was happening the man bundled the two boys into his car and soon they were hundreds of miles away in

another part of India. This is when their long nightmare began.

The boys were separated and each was locked in a tiny dark room that held a wooded carpet loom. With blows and threats, the man began teaching them how to weave carpets. They were forced to work 18 hours a day, they slept by their looms, they used a tin can for a toilet and never left their cells. Their food was the poorest rice and a few beans. Held by violence, paid nothing, making carpets that were shipped to the USA and Europe, H & S were enslaved to feed the greed of the loom owners. By bribing the police and keeping the boys hidden, he could keep them hard at work, locked in a world of fear, hunger, pain and violence.



H & S at the moment of their rescue (photo by courtesy of True Vision)

The need for Rehabilitation Centres....for every one of the millions of slaves alive today, liberation is not enough. In Europe or the United States a child kidnapped and held in captivity for 5 years would automatically be given counselling. It would be assumed that the child would need help for years to come. The trauma of slavery is just as bad.

The rehabilitation process.....Children rescued from their factory prisons, are usually broken in body, mind and spirit and if taken directly back to their homes would undoubtedly remain traumatised and withdrawn for the rest of their lives. They therefore need to go through a physical, mental and spiritual rehabilitation process, For the lucky few children, this process is undertaken wherever there is a place available at one of the few Rehabilitation Centre which exist. H & S were lucky. They were taken to a Rehabilitation Centre called "Mukti Ashram", near Delhi. At this Centre, the rescued children are re-educated a) to believe that they are not worthless, b) to like themselves again and c) to play and mix with other children. Also, because the majority of these children are from the lowest caste (dalits) and are therefore illiterate, they are taught to read and write and to acquire trade skills such as welding, weaving, electronics & screen printing.

Rehabilitation is not an easy task.....For the freed slave, freedom is not the end, only the beginning of the road back to normality. Rehabilitating traumatised minds is not an easy task. There is no body of knowledge & expertise built up by doctors & psychologists about how to help the freed slaves. When slavery is the only life you have ever known or can ever remember, when your identity is wrapped up in your subjugation, finding a way through to a new life is very difficult. Yet Mukti Ashram's methods do seem to work. Take H & S. Look at the expressions on their faces when they were first rescued compared to when I met them at Mukti Ashram 4 years later.



H & S at Mukti Ashram - February 2004

Both are now successfully making their way in the world with the help of the education and training which they had received when they were resident at Mukti Ashram.

How can Rotary help....Only a very small percentage of the number of children who are rescued from slavery are rehabilitated because of the paucity of Rehabilitation Centre. If freed slaves are given no support (both psychologically and financially) to rebuild their lives they will inevitably fall back into slavery. Some may even return to slavery by choice. So it is essential that the existing Rehabilitation Centres continue to receive support and that new ones are built to maximise the number of freed slaves who do receive the rehabilitation which they need to rebuild their lives. This is one area where Rotary Clubs can help. In the coming months I hope to bring you information about how Rotary Clubs can help two such Centres in India.

In the next editionAs a result of a suggestion from a member, I aim to provide you with details of the Rugmark scheme which operates in relation to carpets and rugs in Nepal, India and Pakistan.

Mark Little 22 July 2009

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