

## Pleasanton woman works to end child sex trafficking

By Katie Nelson Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

Posted:

MercuryNews.com

A 14-year-old boy chats on a street corner with a graying businessman visiting Bangkok. A scantily clad young girl walks hand-in-hand in a hotel hallway with a man old enough to be her father.

Those children are just two of many Rachel Goble and her 14 co-workers, volunteers with the SOLD Project, see regularly in Thailand. The kids are working, selling their bodies to support their families in rural villages.

In Thailand the sex trade is so wide-open, "it's like a Disneyland for pedophiles," said Goble, 29.

In 2007, Goble co-founded the Pleasanton-based the SOLD Project, and she vows fighting child sex trafficking will be her life's work.

UNICEF reports 1.2 million children are trafficked worldwide each year for sex or cheap labor. In Thailand, child sex trafficking helps drive the economy, with children as young as 9 working the streets, according to the FBI.

Goble first heard the term "human trafficking" in a 2005 TV program, and it changed her life.

"When I learned of child prostitution, it broke my heart that (they) were not only being exploited, they weren't being given the opportunity for education, or the freedom to dream," she said.

Goble, who had been doing graduate work on child development, decided to learn more about the modern-day slave trade, did her master's thesis on the topic and in 2007 met her nonprofit's co-founder, Rachel Sparks, who had been doing a film on Thai sex trafficking.

Thanks to money from family, friends and donors, Sparks finished the film, and she and Goble had enough to launch the SOLD Project nonprofit and return with volunteers to Thailand to begin teaching in the remote village of Chiang-Rai.

In that small northern village, Goble, Sparks and other volunteers live for months at a time, teaching at their own school. For them, keeping kids in school is key to keeping them out of the sex trade. The SOLD Project's efforts to motivate children to stay in school rather than leave home for the big cities has created a path for others to follow, and Goble hopes to join forces with other groups to help eliminate trafficking in all of Southeast Asia.

In 2009, Aezandra Russell, 31, took a SOLD Project two-week "vision trip" to get an in-depth look at sex trafficking in Thailand and how it can be prevented.

On her first night she watched helplessly as young boys sold themselves on street corners to traveling businessmen.

"I felt like I was looking at men who could have been my neighbor or a family friend, picking up the boys to take them back to their hotel rooms," she said. "That was where it really hit me. It broke my heart."

She left her job as a teacher in Washington, D.C., and returned to the city of Chiang-Mai, to begin UrbanLight, a nonprofit to help rebuild, restore and empower boys who are victims of child prostitution.

She credits the SOLD Project as the model for her nonprofit, and the groups now work together against corruption in the red-light district in Chiang-Mai.

"These kids are my life; they are incredible," she said. "And the SOLD Project is a great partnership to have when we head out to tackle the same battle. We need as many freedom fighters as possible."

Even Goble's parents are inspired. Not only did they help by paying for office space in Pleasanton, Goble's mother plans to join her in Thailand for two weeks in February.

"She's doing more than just talking about change -- she's making it happen," said Goble's father, Roy Goble. "Having a daughter with such a huge heart, combined with such great talents, and putting it all into a focused passion ... well, it really is what every parent wants to see in their child."

The SOLD Project is making a difference, but it can be a hard job, especially getting parents in the villages to see the value of keeping children in school.

"You can tell which families have members in the red-light district," Goble said. "You walk down a street and they have really nice TVs in their windows or really nice cars. ... The money is a point of pride, not the girl's line of work."

Many kids in Chiang-Rai have at least one family member who has been in the sex trade, Goble said.

But those in trafficking often barely make enough to support themselves. Sexual interactions can cost as little as \$15, Goble said. If you are a female there, making \$2,000 in a month is a big deal, she said.

And, because few talk about sex trafficking, prevention can be difficult.

Although she spends about a third of each year in Thailand, Goble makes her living as a photographer in Pleasanton. Her work for the Sold Project is volunteer. Although the group takes in about \$220,000 a year, little is spent on volunteers.

Donations are used to pay for textbooks, pencils and, when the time comes, college tuition. It can cost as little as \$55 a month in tuition fees per semester at a Thai college.

Some scholarships are donated by people as far away as Australia who have heard about the nonprofit, either from presentations or through word-of-mouth.

This year marks the project's fifth anniversary.

So far, Goble said, they have done well.

"My hope is that by changing one life, that one life will change her community," she said. "And that community will change the city. And that city will change the country."

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Rachel goble

Age: 29

Hometown: Pleasanton

Education: Bachelor's degree in business economics from Westmont College; master's degree in cross-culture studies from Fuller Theological Seminary

Claim to fame: Co-founder of the SOLD Project, which works to end child sex trafficking in Thailand

Quote: "I'm in the business of preventing a business."

The sold project

To learn more, volunteer or watch a documentary produced by the organization's co-founder, go to [www.thesoldproject.com](http://www.thesoldproject.com).