

A Reporter Turned Humanitarian Continues Fight Against Human Trafficking 20 Years Later

It was May 26, 2001, and journalist Diana Scimone was on assignment in Mumbai, India. Early one evening her contact took her through Mumbai's red-light district, one of the largest in Asia, and pointed to a second-floor window.

"Do you see the cages?" he asked.

"Cages?" Diana repeated with horror. "What's in them?"

"Five-year-old girls."

Diana wanted to throw up. As a journalist she'd been to dozens of countries covering everything from starving refugees in Sudan to people living under the brutal dictatorship in Zimbabwe to throw-away babies abandoned at an orphanage in China.

She had seen a lot—but never cages that held little girls.

Her contact explained that little girls are smuggled across the border from Nepal and held in cages for 30 days. They're raped, tortured, starved and urinated on until they no longer have a will to rebel or run.

Only then are they fit to be sold as child sex slaves.

The contact said Diana could take a picture but not to let the pimps see her or they'd take her camera.

"I got my photo," Diana says, "and I call it the photo that changed my life because I couldn't stop thinking about what

I'd seen."

She learned there are millions of girls like the ones in those cages. They're raped for profit 20 or 30 times a night—night after night. They're not just in India and Nepal but all over the world, including every city in the United States.

Within a few years, Diana left journalism to start the Born2Fly Project to stop child trafficking. Back then, the few anti-trafficking organizations that existed focused on rescuing victims. "Rescues are absolutely necessary," Diana says, "but at the same time we have to cut off the supply-line of children or we'll never stop the traffic. So we set a goal to reach kids before the traffickers do."

Diana worked with a team of educators, illustrators and designers to create a kid-friendly trafficking-prevention program: a wordless book (so that kids anywhere in the world can read it) and companion curriculum. She tested it in five countries, then uploaded it to Born2Fly's website as a free download.

"I Ran Because of What I Learned"

Today Born2Fly is the global leader in trafficking prevention for young children. More than 1,100 organizations and individuals have registered to teach the program in 65 countries from Albania to Zambia.

"And they teach it in very creative ways," Diana says. "In Nepal, for example, our partners started Mothers Against Trafficking clubs. Moms go to remote villages in the Himalayas teaching other moms about the lies that traffickers tell to lure their daughters."

A church in the U.S. teaches Born2Fly every summer as part of an equine therapy camp for kids. In Romania, a community center for at-risk girls not only taught Born2Fly but the girls helped translate the curriculum. In Uganda, pastors

organized a city-wide children's parade to kick off teaching Born2Fly to protect their kids. In India, a radio broadcaster turned the storyline from the Born2Fly wordless book into a 10-episode radio program that aired to 80 million listeners a week.

As a result, countless kids have been saved from a life of horror. "A girl in Nepal who'd been through the Born2Fly program was being recruited by a trafficker," Diana says. "She told us, 'I ran because of what I learned.' We hear this over and over all around the world."

Reaching Kids Before the Traffickers Do

To commemorate the 20-year anniversary of taking the photo that changed her life, Diana tracked down the contact who showed her the cages two decades ago. He still works to fight child trafficking all over India.

"In most of India, girls are not valued, so they're killed or abandoned at birth," Diana explains, "but my contact told me about an area where there's a celebration whenever a girl is born—because her parents know they can sell her. The more girls, the wealthier the family. They actually have brothels in their homes and even go to neighboring areas to steal newborn girls from hospitals."

Four years ago her contact's organization built an academy and home for these girls—40 girls live in the home and 200 more attend classes. "Without this protection," Diana says, "these girls would be highly at risk for being trafficked by their own families. It truly fulfills our mission to reach kids before the traffickers do, so to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the photo, we're launching a 10-day campaign to raise one year of operating expenses for the academy and home—\$125,000. We have a \$50,000 match so everything up to that amount is doubled."

The campaign begins today and ends June 4. Donations can be

made at .

“I couldn’t help the little girls in the cages I saw 20 years ago,” Diana says, “but we can keep others all over the world from the same horror—by reaching them before the traffickers do.” {eo}

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