

Sex Trafficking: Ministries See Students As a Solution

The principal took a breath and began to read. As she scanned the list, her eyes began to widen in shock. This list of red flags that help identify girls being trafficked for sex ... tears filled her eyes ... this list described 75 percent of all the girls in her school!

For Assemblies of God U.S. Missionary Jeff Devoll and his wife, Tanya, reaching kids with a powerful positive message is the first step in transforming their lives from one consumed with self-self-preservation, self-worth, self-sufficiency—to ultimately live life positively selflessly.

“We need students intervening into the lives of other students,” explains Jeff Devoll. “We’re trying to break down the culture of ‘mind your own business’ and create a culture of ‘whatever it takes,’ even if it means being ‘uncool’ for awhile.”

The Devolls’ passion to change kids’ lives has led to their creation of StudentReach, a school assembly program that goes beyond a simple, dead-end presentation. “DayOne3D”, the main assembly presented by StudentReach, features a 42-foot screen and 3D videos that kids view through provided 3D glasses. The experience creates a desire and opportunity for kids to literally put what they’ve learned into action that day—and, as they continue, ultimately become a force in being a difference-maker in other people’s lives as well.

Recently, FREE (Find, Rescue, Embrace and Empower) International, a ministry focused on working to rescue victims of sex trafficking and providing aftercare, founded by AG U.S. Missionary Mike Bartel and his wife, Denise, approached the Devolls and StudentReach about an assembly partnership. These

two groups then joined with Mississippi-Louisiana Youth Alive to go into 16 schools and interact with 35 lunch clubs in Louisiana and Mississippi during Super Bowl week (Jan. 28-Feb.1).

However, instead of presenting the "DayOne3D" program, Lowell Hochhalter, an AG. U.S. missionary with FREE International, worked with the Devolls to create an entirely new program: "Say Something." Using the same basic principle of students being the key to making a difference, this assembly was based on the widespread issues of sex trafficking, missing children and sexual abuse.

"We want students to be the solution to ending modern-day slavery," Hochhalter says simply. "The assembly is designed to challenge and motivate students to 'say something'—to stop minding their own business, watch out for their friends, recognize red flags that point to a sex trafficking incident and basically become the eyes and ears for authorities who can intervene."

Hochhalter explains the reason that it's vital to share this message in schools is that children on the streets—of whom 67 percent are approached by a pimp or sex trafficker within their first three days on the street—aren't the only ones who fall victim to sex traffickers.

"A high percentage of trafficking victims are actually trafficked by a family member or someone who knows them very well," he says. "So the child may live at home, but still be a victim of sex trafficking."

Devoll adds, "There's a mindset that trafficked children are only from overseas, but they're also from our schools, runaways, dropouts, kids living with friends or relatives—and with one similar connection who can make a difference: friends from school."

Bartel, Hochhalter and Devoll agree that some schools receive

the message differently than others. However, the tougher the school, the more real the message.

Bartel says that in one school, the entire assembly was on a razor's edge as tensions were high.

"I've never been in an assembly like that before—the school had metal detectors as we walked in and armed guards patrolling the hallways," he says. "The kids were broken and hurting themselves, they wanted to hate it [Say Something], but as each segment progressed, it hit them right between the eyes. The message landed right in their laps because it was what so many of them were already experiencing."

And it was that assembly where the principal came to understand how widespread sex trafficking had invaded her school and was directly impacting her girls' lives.

Following the assembly, kids surrounded team members—especially Traci (not her real name), a team member who shared her own personal story about being a victim of sex trafficking.

"We spent a lot of time just listening to their stories," Bartel says of the students. "After a while, I had to excuse myself—I went around a corner and just wept—the need in the school was just so big."

But perhaps nothing was more telling of the wide impact of the assemblies than when a teacher, in tears, spoke to Devoll. She explained that she was a victim of abuse, but had never shared this secret with anyone.

"She told me that she needed to tell her students her story, no matter how tough it would be to share, in the hope that her story would help her students," Devoll says.

During the 51 school events (assemblies and lunch clubs), kids were also invited to a pair of evening rallies. Bartel says he

was thrilled to see many of the kids from the “tension” school in attendance, with many approaching team members even before the service to continue conversations begun earlier.

The two rallies featured the program “Life4D,” where four big questions were explored: How did I get here? What am I doing here? Where are we going? and How does God fit in? In addition, Traci shared the rest of her story about how God helped her survive being trafficked.

Hochhalter says, “In the rallies, we presented Jesus. When we made the altar call, kids were climbing over chairs. They couldn’t get down there fast enough; I’ve never seen kids respond so quickly. I was overwhelmed, in fact, as easily 75 percent of all the kids who attended the rallies came forward, with at least 187 responding to the message.”

What made the rallies even more outstanding was a partnership with the student Christian club, Next Generation Club.

“We had kids who had been raped, who had cut marks up and down their arms, kids who were really hurting come forward to receive Christ,” Devoll says. “But what was huge was to be able to connect these students personally with a local Christian leader, who gave them a cell phone number to call in case they needed to talk, and would be meeting every week with these kids at their schools.

“I’ve been in a lot of outreaches and seen God do a lot of amazing, amazing things,” Devoll continues, “but this week, I stand back and say, ‘Wow! I can’t believe it even now!’ It was one of the craziest, most amazing things I’ve ever been a part of.”

To learn more about StudentReach, and its multiple programs, [click here](#). For more information on FREE International, visit its website.

The red flags of human trafficking can be more subtle than

“your friend starts dating an older guy” (that is a key red flag), but look for other signs in addition to the obvious. Here are some things peers can be on the lookout for. Each of these indicators alone does not necessarily mean a person is being trafficked, but several together are worth reporting.

Basically, look for things out of the ordinary. Sudden, unexplained changes. For instance, your friend:

- Brags about her new, older boyfriend
- Has a sudden change in wardrobe (ex. used to wear Abercrombie, now wears cheaper, more revealing clothes)
- Comes to class proudly displaying her new Louis Vuitton or Coach bag on her desk for all to see, but you know she doesn't have a job, or can't afford it
- Has unexplained bruises or a new tattoo, perhaps with her new boyfriend's name on it
- Suddenly changes the music she listens to (ex. used to like Taylor Swift, is now into Snoop, 50 Cent, Lil' Jon)
- Suddenly doesn't want to be your friend anymore
- Doesn't like to do the extracurricular activities she used to
- Suddenly obsessed with appearance. Always has hair/nails done, doesn't have money to pay for it. (Brags her boyfriend hooks her up, takes care of it)
- Suddenly gets physically or verbally abusive when you start asking questions
- Uses terms like “wifey,” “daddy,” “the family” or “the game”
- Is always exhausted
- Has calluses on her feet

(Hotline number to report possible trafficking: 888-373-7888)