Fight for Hope and Freedom: Human Trafficking and Montana

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by Abraham Kim, Director, Mansfield Center

After winning Picture of the Year for his film “12 Years a Slave”, celebrated Director Steve McQueen dedicated his Academy Award to the 21 million people around the world still entrapped in slavery. To many Montanans, this statement may sound a bit strange, even unbelievable. It is hard to imagine a world where men, women, and children are brutally exploited and trafficked like a commercial property. Such practices, however, not only exist today but also thrive.

The stories are heart-wrenching: 1) parents in India choosing between starvation or selling their daughters to brothels in order to generate money for food; 2) young Nepalese men moving to the city in search of greater economic opportunities, only to be kidnapped and sold as slaves; 3) even American teenage girls enticed into a life of prostitution by older boyfriends.

At this very moment, there are more people in slavery than in any other time in human history. More than 800,000 people are traded across international borders every year -- half of them children. Trafficking in human lives is the second largest criminal industry globally, generating $32 billion a year. This amount falls just behind drug trafficking. Disturbingly, the problem is not exclusive to far off countries; rather it flourishes in the United States. Even in Montana. Each year, as many as 17,500 people are trafficked into the U.S.

Last year, the Montanan state government made significant efforts to strengthen laws and promote greater awareness of human trafficking. Human trafficking taskforces are popping up all throughout our state. These taskforces are educating our communities and protecting our kids. While both of these initiatives are encouraging, there is still much work to be done. Additional research, greater involvement from law enforcement, and further policy development are needed.

We look to modern day heroes for examples of how Montanans can make a difference. Confronted with the horrific realities of human trafficking, these individuals are leading the charge against human trafficking by dedicating their lives to save men, women and children from enslavement and to give hope and freedom to the oppressed. Sarah Symon, for example, is a successful entrepreneur and a leading businesswoman in the movie and music industry. A few years ago, Sarah decided to put her career on hold and dedicate her time and talents to combating human trafficking after watching a documentary film on women survivors who escaped their oppressors and fought fearlessly for a new life.
and future. Sarah started Made by Survivors – a non-profit global business network that supports “freedom businesses” across Asia designed to pull women out of red light districts and sex trafficking networks by giving women needed vocational training and employment opportunities.

Another example is that of James Pond, a former Marine and a businessman. James’ life changed after watching an MSNBC documentary about human trafficking in Cambodia. One year later, the Pond family found themselves on a plane to Phnom Penh to begin a long-term care program for Cambodian and Vietnamese teens rescued from the human trafficking.

Now, not every Montanan can leave his or her home and dedicate 100% their resources to the fight against human trafficking, but if any of these accounts intrigue or touch you, I encourage you to come and listen to the stories of Sarah Symons, James Pond and other heroes from around the world who will be speaking at our upcoming Mansfield Center Conference on Human Trafficking. This two day event held on the campus of the University of Montana April 16 and 17 will provide attendees with the chance to listen to amazing accounts of people fighting human trafficking across the globe. Attendees will also learn from our state and local leaders how to protect their children and our communities as well as get involved locally and internationally.

For more information about the conference or to register, check out our website: mansfieldconference.org. That’s one word: Mansfieldconference.org. The conference is free and open to the public, but space is limited. So, invite a friend and register today.

It is my hope that like Sarah Symons and James Pond your life also will be changed. Please join us. Every bit of help is needed. I look forward to seeing you.

Thank you for listening. This is Abraham Kim at the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center.