

“On this trip I’ve had sex with a 14-year-old girl in Mexico and a 15-year-old in Columbia. I’m helping them financially. If they don’t have sex with me, they may not have enough food. If someone has a problem with me doing this, let UNICEF feed them.” – Retired US schoolteacher

Last night, Raymond Bechard finished work early: at 2am he fell asleep with his mobile phone on the bed. “I don’t measure sleep in terms of the last 24 hours,” Bechard says. “It’s how much sleep I’ve gotten in the past two days. If I can get everything done by 6am, then I can get two hours sleep on the plane.”

He is preparing to leave for Iraq. Author of *Unspeakable: The Hidden Truth Behind the World’s Fastest Growing Crime*, the Connecticut-born Bechard, 46, is also the director of Ahava Kids, a non-profit organisation that facilitates the rescue of children from trafficking, enslavement and exploitation. The situation in Iraq is changing every day, he says,

are children. Of the many in the sex trade, almost all of those under a certain age – one, say, or two – die after being raped by adult males; some of them are widened for easier access with knives.

All operate outside even the most rudimentary labour laws. The work they do is uniformly 3D: dirty, dangerous, difficult. Pakistani debt-bondage brick-making kilns, Ivory Coast cocoa plantations, Nepalese rug-loom sheds, the camel races of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, sweatshops, sex clubs and organised begging groups throughout major US and European cities, domestic servitude in the wealthiest homes in Zurich, London, New York and in illegal brothels everywhere.

slavery as the largest category of transnational slavery. “The reasons are simple,” Bechard says. “As organised crime increases the number of children it controls and makes available, the number of customers increases. As they increase, so does the demand. To meet the demand, the illegal market expands uncontrollably. It’s an economic cycle fuelled by the torture of children.”

In terms of low-risk enterprises, the advantages of trading children are many. Having a child in your presence is not illegal or suspicious. They are easy to starve and easy to intimidate into robotic behaviour. Importantly, they are easy to convince not to talk, and just as easy to eliminate.

THE MATRIX

Bechard’s epiphany took place in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. “I was working with a support group near Ground Zero,” he says. “It was about two or three days after the World Trade Centre collapsed. We

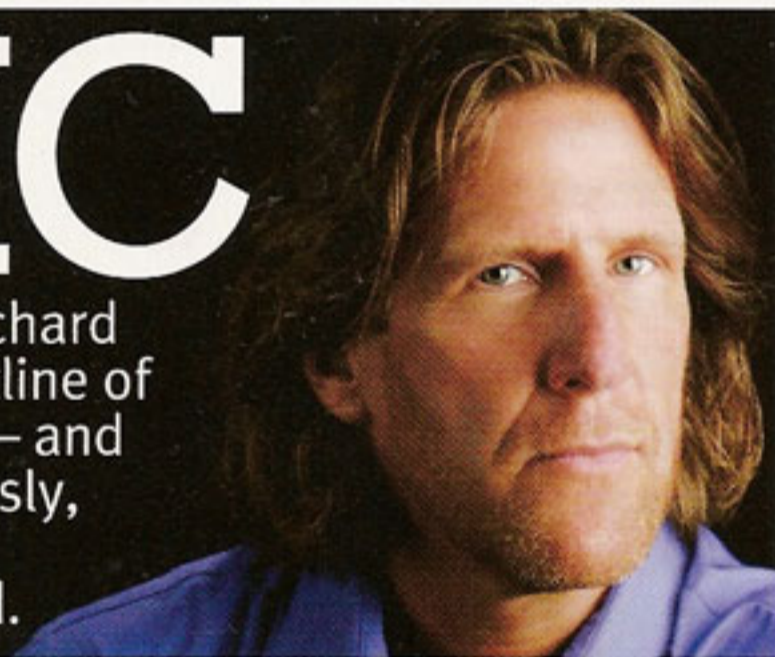
were very close to the massive pile of rubble. The streets of New York were surreal then; quiet, even serene. You couldn’t walk more than a block without someone approaching you with photographs. They’d look at you with eyes that stopped you in your tracks. This is a picture of my brother, they’d say. And you’d look at the picture carefully. If you see him, can you call this number?”

TRAFFIC

Words Antonella Gambotto-Burke

COP

Raymond Bechard is at the frontline of child slavery – and he is hopelessly, disgracefully outnumbered.



and trafficking is not exactly the Iraqi government’s priority. Just this morning he was in touch with the US Army colonel arranging his travel and security, a man shocked by footage of Iraqi orphanages discovered by US troops; one had been abandoned by the caretakers and its 50 or so children were near death.

“Trafficking occurs wherever extreme poverty, political chaos or warfare exist,” Bechard says. “Iraq has all three. With Saudi Arabia – a Tier 3 country; the worst designation for trafficking violations – bordering Iraq, there is a large criminal element transporting young people for profit. Over the past four years, millions have been forced from their homes in Iraq. Thousands killed. Families separated. Thousands of children have been lost or disenfranchised. They’re wandering, hiding, trying to eat and survive. Eventually, they’ll become so desperate that they’ll do anything or go with anyone, clutching at a chance to get out. Traffickers see these children as fruit that is ripe for the picking. We have to stop them.”

HUMAN BONDAGE

There are more slaves in the world today than in four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade. David Batstone, University of San Francisco ethics professor and author of *Not for Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade – and How We Can Fight It*, puts the figure at 27 million. Half of them

They are, to those who feel nothing, the perfect employees. No unions, no demands, no recourses. All monies earned go straight to criminals. Three quarters of them risk death on a daily basis – in mines and primitive factories, with chemicals and pesticides, at the hands of violent and diseased sex tourists and cruel owners. Those who fail to meet their quota are beaten or abandoned in the streets without food, money or warm clothing. Otherwise, they survive without adequate nutrition or healthcare, family or friends, hygiene or education, future or hope. The very few who outlive their sexual usefulness are used in some form of forced labour.

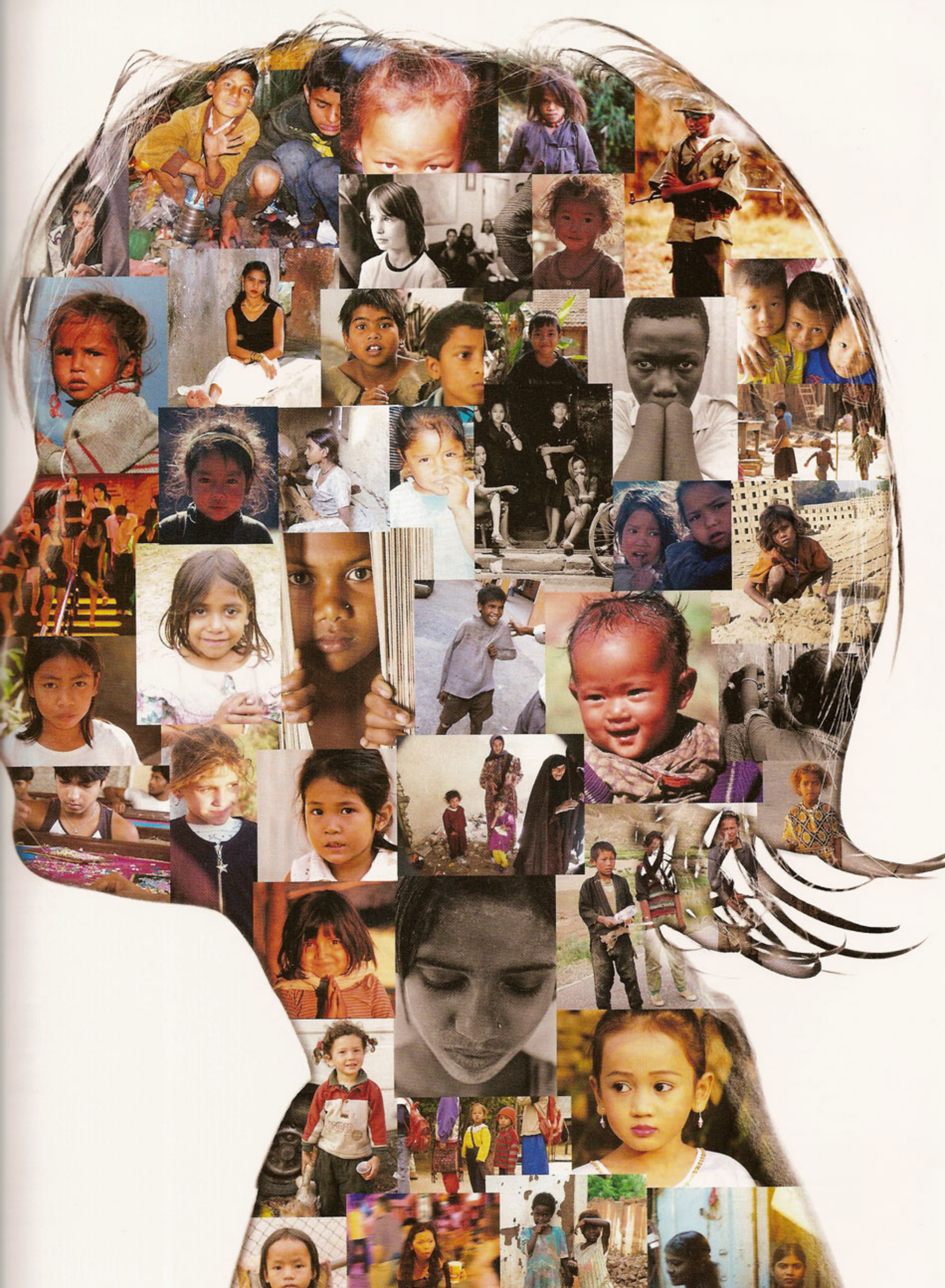
Somaly Mam, who rescues women and children tortured in Cambodian brothels (and whose 14-year-old daughter was recently abducted and raped in retaliation for her work), told an interviewer from London’s *Sunday Times*: “People laugh about prostitution being the oldest job in the world but I’ve seen so many awful things. Girls are chained up and beaten with electric cables; one had a nail driven into her skull for trying to escape. Another was sold to a brothel when she was nine. When I saw her in the street she was 17 and sick with Aids and TB. The people at the hospital insulted her and refused to take her in.”

John Miller, former director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons for the US Department of State, described sexual

“Anyone that close to the remains of the towers could see that no-one was going to emerge. Just walking nearby was dangerous. But that didn’t matter to the person with the photographs because they were desperate for hope, and you have to be very careful with people in that frame of mind. I couldn’t look into those eyes and tell them the truth: that whomever they loved was gone forever. So I’d take each photo and say, yes, if I see this person I’ll call you. I hated lying like that, but most of all I hated feeling so helpless. No matter how hard I tried, nothing I did could make a difference.”

Several months later, he was working in a small Haitian orphanage, where a number of the children had HIV/Aids. Bechard knew about child trafficking from the humanitarian organisations with which he worked but had never been so close to the victims. One little girl sat on his lap as the nurse administered medication. She shuddered as the medication made its way into her stomach and then looked up at Bechard with the same eyes he had seen on the streets of New York. “This time,” he says, “I wasn’t going to lie. I knew I could do something. I told her everything was going to be OK; that she was safe, and I meant it.”

Bechard has dedicated his life to keeping his promise to that dying child. In 2002, he formed Ahava Kids with \$5,000 and four employees; in 2004, it became a legal entity and now has



charity status. From the outset, his vision was clear: the organisation's structure would never be swamped by bureaucracy, unnecessary expenses or conflicting priorities. His Connecticut offices are the perfect base of operations as they are well hidden and within range of several airports. A bag is always packed in his car or by the door. "I never know where I'll be sleeping," he shrugs, "so I have to be ready all the time."

TOMB RAIDERS

Rescue raids make for gripping anecdotes but are extremely dangerous and only ever used as a last resort. The kind of people who hurt children for a living are generally armed. Whenever possible, Bechard's people always involve local law enforcement.

"Of course," he says, "law enforcement in many parts of the world is not only corrupt and turning a blind eye to trafficking but is often involved in its operation. So we have to be careful. Raids are conducted in only certain cases and are very different every time. Raiding a brothel is different from raiding a factory. And raiding an army camp with child soldiers is nearly impossible. Sometimes you don't have the necessary information, money or manpower to make a rescue attempt, which can be so frustrating."

The rage he experiences when he finds trafficked children is, he says, "an extraordinary adrenaline rush with a lot of heat – it's like a fever, you're almost shaking. Cognition is put aside. It's an ancient feeling, this absolute rage at evil. Everything else drops away. It creates an extraordinary focus and takes longer than you'd think to come down. But the rage had to be answered, and that's why I do this."

Living conditions endured by trafficked children vary but are generally barbaric. Some are literally kept in cages. Most live in crowded, filthy conditions. They are starved in order to stunt their growth: the smaller and thinner they are, the more they are worth. Deliberately addicted to drugs by their keepers, whatever appetite they had is destroyed. The less spent on them, the higher the profit margin. If a girl becomes pregnant, her baby is brought to term only to be sold on the illegal adoption market or for its organs. In the event of abortion, the standard of the procedure is entirely dependent on the girl's value to the brothel: if she attracts good money, she will receive proper medical treatment; if she doesn't, then she's in danger.

Raids and rescue require swift organisation because trafficked children are regularly relocated so as to escape detection. "It's easy to lose track of them," Bechard says, "which means you lose them entirely. The real work begins when the child is in the care of those who want to save her life instead of end it. Planning for trafficking victims' long-term care is far more difficult and expensive. Sometimes it requires years of care. Often, we have to prepare for children with drug addiction, HIV/Aids, severe emotional trauma and horrible physical damage.

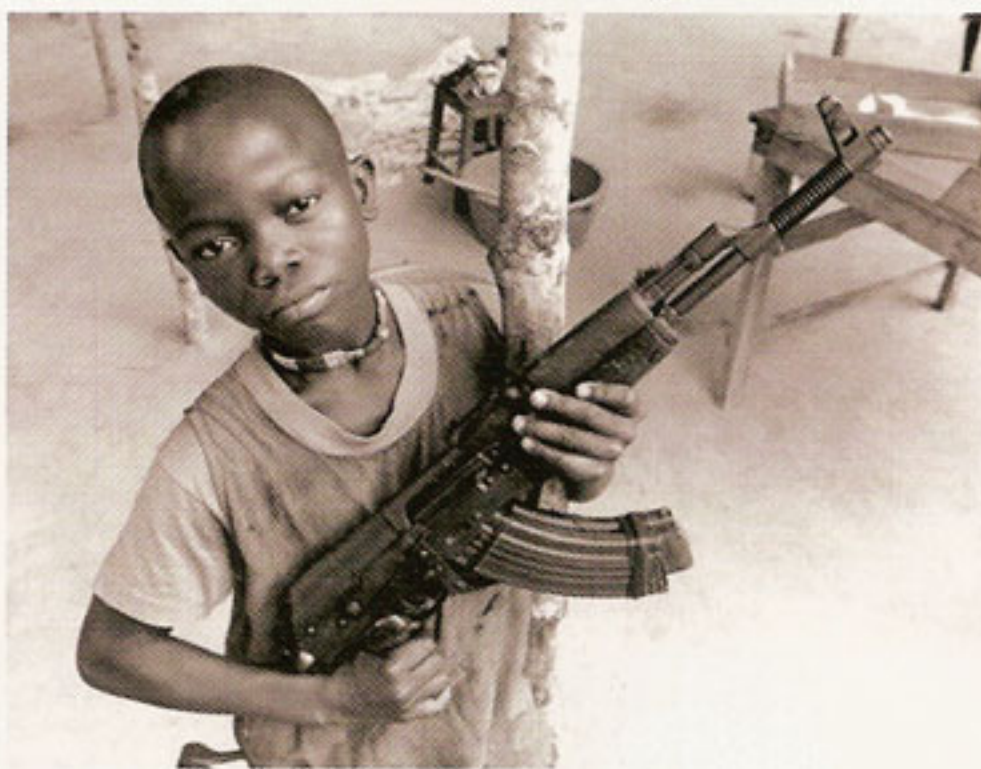
Sometimes the best we can do is hospice care."

Ahava's four-step procedure of raids, rescue, relocation and rehabilitation is funded by individuals, which is why Bechard wrote *Unspeakable*. It was the least he could do.

"The available material was almost exclusively sensationalistic – ineffective in terms of informing the public," Bechard says. "I wanted to provide an overview that would educate and motivate readers. The research took months. I rescheduled everything else in my life. I had to walk in the shadows while not allowing myself to be controlled by them. It's nearly impossible to describe – something like running at full speed to the edge of a cliff and then pulling back at the last moment, over and over and over again."

Unspeakable is an exposé on the international scope of child trafficking – the back alleys, the brothels, the battlefields and the mansions where children are bought and sold into slavery. It's a hard, important read and one that will change your life.

When rescuers successfully raid a brothel or factory, the children they save rarely react with



Men who buy children perceive them as no more than objects and are impervious to rehabilitation

joy. "They don't jump into our arms," Bechard says. "Remember, every adult they have ever known has either betrayed or abused them. We have to be particularly careful when they have been addicted to drugs; addicts are a huge flight risk. All they care about is their next hit and they'll escape the first chance they get."

GROUND ZERO

Building the trust of such children can take years, as they have been programmed to believe that adults, all adults, will hurt them in monstrous ways. "And their mistrust is not limited to adults," Bechard says. "They don't trust life itself. By that I mean they don't trust compassion, happiness and especially love. Nothing positive is tolerated because they see these experiences as tools with which they'll eventually be hurt. Everything – every experience they've ever had – eventually damaged them in some way. The message? Life itself leads to extraordinary terror and pain. They have to be slowly conditioned to

understand that safety, health, hygiene, nutrition, comfort and love are the norm. And after they learn these things won't be taken away or used against them, they start to understand things like love or fun – but this takes much, much longer."

Bechard and his crew see it as their job to show trafficked children that they deserve to be loved. They go to extremes for each child, working to discover what – if any – dreams they have and then endeavour to realise them. "We do whatever it takes to prove to them that they are worth loving, that they are worth everything and more, and that they deserve to be loved unconditionally," he says. "This takes enormous amounts of work, time and money. It is amazing to see the change in a child when they realise someone has made a sacrifice for them. Something in their mind is transformed."

The men who buy these children perceive them as no more than objects and are impervious to rehabilitation. "I had a great blowjob, these Vietnam girl [sic] really knew what daddy likes," one wrote in a forum. "An

hour later I was back in the same room with another girl, named Phoung. Again a great blowjob, actually blowjobs are really my game, I do not care much about fucking any more and certainly not when I have to do the work... Gave her \$10, she wanted \$20. Are you nuts, here [is] \$12, now fuck off."

Such casual sociopathy demands legislative support and action at every level. Guy Jacobson, the New York-based former attorney and investment banker whose new film deals with child trafficking, has suggested what Bechard calls an "excellent" model for shrinking the market. "His idea is to make life miserable for the customers who seek sex with children," Bechard says. "If the market for children shrinks because the customers are scared away, then no-one will have the profit motive to supply them."

This year, Jetsadaphorn Chadalone became the first person in Australian history to be compensated as a victim of sex trafficking – she was trafficked into a Melbourne brothel from Thailand at the age of 13 – and further reform is underway. Since the beginning of this year, local courts in New South Wales have been empowered to issue interim orders, cutting electricity, gas and water supplies to illegal brothels. Repeat offenders who, when caught in one location pay their fines and relocate, will face bigger fines. Notably, criminal proceedings against illegal brothels can continue even after the business is sold. Such shifts in legislation are critical. Nations must be made accountable for what happens to children within their borders and for what their citizens do elsewhere. The enforcement of significantly harsher penalties is imperative.

"Internationally, the laws necessary to fight child trafficking are well defined," Bechard says. "They only need to be enacted and enforced. If not, then countries making real efforts to protect

POSITIONS VACANT

Bechard is looking for men to join the fight. "Let us know who you are and what you do," he says. "Tell us what your talents and skills are. In particular, we need trained investigators and computer experts. With the proper organisation, networking and data-based intelligence, we can hit back with some severity. We need to be ruthless, even vicious. We need to go after traffickers' money, their computers and their networks. Introduce us to associates who can help. For raid and rescue, give me 10 Jack Bauers [from TV series 24] and we'll start to shake things up a bit; for their rehabilitation, give me a few thousand grandmothers." Those interested can contact Bechard at info@ahavakids.com or through Ahava Kids, PO Box 498, Old Saybrook, CT, United States of America. Donations can be made at ahavakids.org or mailed to the above address.



THIRD WORLD GOODS

Before buying an oriental carpet, have a look at rugmark.org. Surf fairtrade.com.au for food products that don't involve slavery and think twice before buying your partner a diamond ring: 90 per cent of Indian diamonds are produced by child slaves, and in Africa, child slaves begin work at the age of six in the mines and work 10 to 14 hours a day; some of the men around them are chained to rocks.

A HIGHER GRADE OF FILTH

If you need to view porn, stick to the product from the United States with high-profile American women. If you view anything else, particularly material featuring Asians or East Europeans, be aware you're probably subsidising rape, torture and murder.

victims while prosecuting criminals must place sanctions on those that do not. Enforcement is necessary to end this perversion. For pedo-criminals, criteria of best practice laws have to be established. Governments must put pressure on other nations to enact and enforce laws that punish pedo-crime as a major offence."

THE DARK SIDE

Bechard has no idea what goes on in traffickers' heads. He's glad he can't understand them. They've simply lost – or never had – the value most of us put on human life, he says, and this allows them to do anything they want without empathy or remorse. It's called sociopathy and is responsible for all the darkness in human history. When asked how they feel about what they've done, traffickers always have the same reply: "I just don't feel anything."

"And this is where it gets difficult," Bechard says. "Some traffickers are the violent, sleazy thugs we picture buying and selling children for sex or pornography, but when we look at all forms of trafficking including forced labour, they're far more diverse – farmers, factory owners, taxi drivers, border guards, government officials, retailers, businessmen. They're motivated by the same greed that drives pimps who offer children for sex. Children just happen to be another cheap resource from which they can profit.

"So many large industries depend on young slave labour. Enormous segments of the chocolate, coffee, diamond, rugs and, in particular, the porn industries use slavery to produce their products more cheaply. And traffickers are everywhere – we've all met them. Because all these products are available to us, we must be careful not to participate in this crime. With child slavery, we have a choice: to be vigilant or complicit."

In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, Jared Diamond describes a phenomenon he calls "creeping normalcy". Bechard agrees with his idea that as a culture becomes increasingly dysfunctional, younger generations have increasing difficulty recognising dysfunction as they have no other point of reference.

His primary concern is for countries not listed within the US Government's human trafficking tiers, countries so chaotic or in such trauma that accurate reportage is precluded. In Iraq alone 184 journalists and co-workers have been killed since war was declared. "I am especially mindful of Haiti and Iraq," Bechard says. "Neither is listed within the tiers but rather a section of the US Department of State's human trafficking report called 'Special Mention'. I've been to Haiti several times and the conditions there are some of the worst I have ever seen anywhere. They have a cultural system there of forced child domestic labour called *restaveks*. It is," and here he pauses, "deplorable."

MODERN EPIDEMIC

Ignorance, denial and indifference dictated by narcissistic expedience are responsible for the continuing proliferation of pornography, the

lifeblood of human trafficking and one of the most socially corrosive elements in history. Those who view material of actual crime scenes, actual rapes, actual violence and actual suffering for pleasure not only desensitize themselves to sociopathic behaviour and suffering but learn to take pleasure in suffering – in effect they are programmed by criminals to become sexual sociopaths.

The results of this can be seen in the disintegrating rates of emotional literacy and stability throughout the Western world. Briton Bill Henkel, 47, imprisoned for downloading child pornography at work in 2003, understands the relationship between pornography and desensitization to its victims: "After a while, the material you're viewing doesn't give you the same buzz and you look for more extreme versions," he told London's *Daily Mail*.

"Eventually, the most hardcore images you could find wouldn't do it for you. I recognised that my fantasies were going in a direction I didn't like and that I might not be able to control myself. So, yes, I think there was a danger that I might have tried to get access to a child... the fantasy of acting out what I was viewing was getting stronger. I was sucked into this world of depravity... The pull of the material was so strong that on several occasions I'd be on my way home and would call [my wife] to say there was a computer virus at work and I was going to be late. Then I'd return."

Bechard has seen the difficulty some people have in understanding the role of pornography in terms of perpetuating human trafficking. "The erosion of morality doesn't happen all at once," he says. "It happens one step at a time. Abuse happens in the mind before manifesting physically. The porn explosion has led to millions of people becoming addicted to fantasies in which they exert total control over others. They begin to believe that they have this power – this right – in reality. And it leads to other human beings, especially children, becoming objectified in fantasy and reality."

He believes pornography is so entrenched because it satisfies the need for a relationship without risk. "One of the worst problems today is loneliness," he says. "The human spirit is strong but the human condition can be incredibly frail. Much of that frailty comes from the lack of real intimacy most of us experience. It's so easy to end up isolated. And prostitution and pornography provide false feelings of closeness and control for those who have none. Users don't realise there are more satisfying options."

In finding his calling, Bechard has found liberation. Yes, his life is constantly threatened, but the satisfaction of his work is immeasurable.

"I'm tired, I'm alone and I don't eat enough, sure," he says. "But the deepest places in the heart are reserved for the eternal. When a man lives his life within that perspective, it aligns all that he is and all that he does. He can change the world. I have a beautiful stand of trees near my home. It's the perfect place to sit. Yet those trees were planted by a man over 100 years ago. He never got to sit in their shade. I never forget that I sit in the shade of trees I didn't plant." †