

Children for Sale

BY JOY JORDAN-LAKE

Shannon Sedgwick, an attorney for International Justice Mission, has seen hell up close. Before IJM arrived, “purchasing” (that is, raping) children in Cambodia, for the sexual pleasure of grown, primarily Western men, was as simple as buying a bag of rice, perhaps easier.

Attorney Shannon Sedgwick has seen hell up close: little girls beaten, cigarettes extinguished on barely-past-baby skin, and children as young as five sold day after day, many times a day, for the sexual pleasure of grown, primarily Western men. “Purchasing” (that is, raping) children in Svay Pak, a brothel-infested neighborhood of Cambodia, is as simple as buying a bag of rice, Sedgwick explains, perhaps easier.

In recent years, the Cambodian government has faced intense international pressure to address child prostitution within its borders. But in a country where the average police officer earns less than thirty dollars a month and can make nearly ten times that in bribes from brothel keepers, bringing perpetrators to justice stands in direct conflict with the economic self-interest of those in power. Money, after all, talks. And it talks with terrible authority.

But Shannon Sedgwick left a lucrative job at a Dallas law firm in order to take on just that kind of mission impossible. She and her colleagues at International Justice Mission, an organization of attorneys and investigators, use individual countries’ own legal systems to document and help combat oppression, including forced prostitution, bonded child slavery, illegal detention and torture, sexual abuse, and widow’s lands rights cases.

For two years, IJM had been strategically preparing to “bring down” the Svay Pak brothels. Undercover investigators posed as sex tour guides arranging, on behalf of Western businessmen, for children to be bused to a “party” location in Phnom Penh, Vietnam. Meanwhile, according to the

plan, the Cambodian government would be pressured by IJM to release troops to assist in rescuing the children within twenty-four hours of the agreement in order to minimize time for tip-offs by government officials, soldiers, or police to the brothel keepers.

It was a good plan, and a clever one—but also delicate, incredibly vulnerable to exposure. A dangerous plan: for the IJM investigators and attorneys,



Shannon Sedgwick found “a greater understanding of what I was created for, what this life is all about” as she confronted the evil of child prostitution.

for the “Dateline NBC” crew who had gone undercover to document the sting, and not least of all, for the children.

A tour bus loaded with supposed pedophiles rode into Svay Pak to pick up the girls the brothel keepers had delivered to a designated house.

Secretly referred to as location “Alpha,” the house had been rented by IJM agents as a base of operation for a neighborhood sweep once the girls were rolling towards Phnom Penh, and thus the plan was in motion.

Sedgwick, along with forty soldiers supplied by the government, waited at the Phnom Penh house secured for the “sex party.” But here, at location “Bravo,” the intricately structured plan began to crumble.

“The time was getting late,” Sedgwick recalls, “and the troops with us were constantly on their cell phones speaking Khmer and I am certain tipping off the brothel keepers. The time kept passing and no bus, no girls. I was so tired. I had not had more than a couple hours of sleep a night for the last two weeks and it was hard to mask my fear that there were no girls coming.”

Sure enough, there was a leak: the brothel keepers had been informed.

“As soon as our head investigator started to notice [the brothel keepers] were moving girls out,” Sedgwick recounts, “they took the place down and secured location ‘Alpha,’ which had 14 girls in it between the ages of five and nine who’d been sold for sex. The NBC footage is surreal: you see yelling and screaming by my guys: ‘Save the girls!’ The girls were scattering and crawling through holes in the walls to get away. We lost five of those and ended up with nine of the babies.”

IJM, together with the troops assigned to Svay Pak, charged street to street, and door to door—kicking them down as they went. The sweep produced thirty-seven rescued girls and thirteen arrested perpetrators. The nine youngest children, those rescued first, were sent on a bus to the Ministry of Interior. Sedgwick, meanwhile, raced from Phnom Penh to be with what she terms “the babies.”

“When I got there they were all on a cement bench screaming and crying horrifically. I threw my backpack down and tried to put them all in my arms. We arranged to put them in a room where I continued to kiss them and hold them and wipe away their tears. Eventually they calmed down and by the time we transported them to Bravo (the safe house), they were singing, ‘Baby Shark’ and ‘Peanut Butter Jelly’ with me. Thank God for my days as a camp counselor. Now there are nine Vietnamese children whose entire English vocabulary is ‘Baby shark, duh-duh-duh’ and ‘Peanut Butter, Jelly,’ and ‘Shannon,’ of course. I could not be more honored.”

The older girls, those 12 to 16 years old, arrived at Bravo hours later. Unlike the “babies,” these girls were, not surprisingly, far less trusting of anyone, far less willing to be pulled under Shannon Sedgwick’s wing, into her circle of silly songs or a comforting embrace.

Sedgwick’s next several days were spent in “playing Mom” until IJM could secure safe homes for the girls and in pursuing legal justice. “The court system in Cambodia is crazy,” she insists. “There’s no concept of preservation of evidence or chain of custody.”

“The police came out and loaded an HP printer box full of the things they secured in the raid (sex toys and books, drugs and condoms) and they set it on the bus and went to get the prisoners. In the meantime, the bus just went driving around with our rented driver—and no police. Then we had to move the box so the prisoners could get in the door, and things were falling out. Crazy! Later the police were playing with the evidence and putting their water bottles and stuff in the box as we traveled to the courthouse. Crazy! Then I sat with the prisoners for two days at the court house, each day waiting until five when the judge goes home; since she didn’t get to us, she would just extend the detention order and we would repeat the same thing the next day.”

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Eventually, though, all the suspects were charged.

Sedgwick admits she was surprised to find anything left of childhood in the rescued children: “You see, I worried that these girls were ruined and our work would go more to save the next generation rather than this one. But I was wrong. They are children still. They play and sing with me. They crawl in my lap and kiss my cheeks. They cry at night when we put

them to bed. They have been damaged, but I believe there is significant hope for the younger ones for sure.”

In general, IJM considers the raid a victory: thirty-seven children were rescued. “But we missed many,” Sedgwick laments. “Many escaped; many were tipped off and secreted away. We had hoped for many more that we knew by name because of our undercover investigations: Lay and Me Lay.

Nom, Lan, and thirty-five others are free.

It was the closest I have ever come to seeing my God as I played with their beautiful smiling faces. I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia.

We missed them. And we missed “Eleben.” My heart wanted so desperately to ask her for her age in a place of safety and have her precious voice say to me with her big brown eyes, “Eleben.” But she is not safe. She is somewhere, maybe back in Vietnam, maybe hiding with her terrible captor somewhere in the village. But we don’t have her.”

Additionally, the thirteen arrests of the perpetrators

have badly damaged the sex trade of Svay Pak. Sedgwick is jubilant, but also realistic: “The pedophiles are already chatting on their [web]site, saying horrible things about IJM and our team and how now Svay Pak and most of Cambodia is closed for good.... Step by step we will see this evil conquered. We are here for the long haul.”

Richard Greenberg, the NBC “Dateline” senior producer to whom Sedgwick originally pitched the story, said he had never cried in his eighteen years on the job—before reporting this story.

Sedgwick’s cataloging of her own emotions following the rescue includes tears, exhaustion, and “unsurpassed joy.” A graduate of Baylor University’s law school, she describes herself as “an attorney who has been given a most unbelievable opportunity to save human life every day around the world. I am humbled and fascinated that I should be so lucky, that just by showing up, I am given a divine opportunity to bring justice to so many suffering and dying around the world.”

That passion to change the world, she says, has its roots in her own childhood, “for as long as I can remember...innate almost. I remember one trip my family took to Washington D.C. back when I was in middle school. We were outside a memorial and there was this older woman who had a sign, protesting something. I remember everyone was just ignoring her, and that made me mad because she had something she needed to say. I approached her and began to discuss with her whatever it was that was upsetting her. I talked with her for an hour while my family toured the

memorial. I've always wanted to fight for the underdog. To give a voice to those who have no voice."

But doesn't the atrocity she sees through her work—in this case committed for profit against children—become, sometimes, just too much to bear? "I have gained so much wisdom," she counters, "about the world, about human nature, about suffering and evil...the ugly things that I'm forced to face down.... The triumph in conquering these evil things also serves to deepen me by giving me a greater understanding of what I was created for, what this life is all about."

In the sexually abused bodies of five-year-old girls, Shannon Sedgwick has surely seen hell. But she has a different take on it: "Nom, Lan, and thirty-five others are free.... It was the closest I have ever come to seeing my God as I played with their beautiful smiling faces. I can only imagine what heaven looks like, but I did get a glimpse in Cambodia of all places. I am certain of that."

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

International Justice Mission produces video and printed study materials for youth groups and others. Visit their website at www.ijm.org.



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