



Annual Report 2008

The Mission

Freedom Firm seeks to eliminate child prostitution in India by rescuing minor girls, providing effective rehabilitation and prosecuting the perpetrators of sex trafficking.

Rescue

Freedom Firm undercover operatives locate minor girls in brothels and document the crime. This information is then reported to the police. The Freedom Firm team, along with the police, raid the brothels, rescue the girls and arrest the brothel keepers and traffickers. The rescued girls are then placed in government remand homes and Freedom Firm files criminal complaints against their oppressors.

Restoration

Freedom Firm's social workers partner with shelter homes across the country to provide rescued girls with counselling, therapy, job training, education and health care. The creative program includes a summer camp and employment with business Ruhamah Designs to help the girls grow in confidence and independence.

Justice

Freedom Firm actively pursues the conviction of those responsible for trafficking minor girls. Freedom Firm lawyers assist public prosecutors at each stage of the criminal trial. Rescued girls are empowered to testify against their abusers and to help bring them to justice. Every trial and every conviction creates a deterrent and raises the cost of sex trafficking in India.



Rescue: Manju's Story

Laxmi is from West Bengal, in the North-East of India. When she was twelve years old, her mother died. Her family was very poor so she went to Calcutta to try and find work. She looked for work all over but couldn't find any. It was raining very heavily and she sat down in a train station despondent and soaking wet. There was a lady behind her at the station. She approached Laxmi and asked her if she was OK. Laxmi explained her situation and told her she couldn't find any work. The lady then offered Laxmi a job sewing saris for 500 rs a day. Laxmi was over the moon - she would have been happy to work for 500rs a month!

The lady told her to follow her so Laxmi went with her to a small roadside shop. The lady bought her some sweets and then disappeared, instructing Laxmi to wait for her there. The lady was gone for a long long time but Laxmi didn't feel like she could leave as she knew she couldn't pay for the sweets. The man in the shop gave her a cup of chai to drink. Eventually the lady came back and took her to the train station. While they were on the platform heading towards a train, Laxmi suddenly felt very faint and passed out.

When she awoke she was on the train. She slipped in and out of consciousness. They were on the train for a very long time. They went right across the North of India. Laxmi felt like it was only a short time because she was semi-conscious from the drug she'd

been given in her chai. They ended up in a far away city at a big house where there were lots of pretty girls. The lady who had brought Laxmi talked to another lady who seemed to own the place and money was exchanged. One girl sitting there tried to warn Laxmi that she was being sold but Laxmi could do nothing about it. She was very scared by this point. The lady who had brought her left. When Laxmi tried to leave to go home she was stopped by the brothel keeper and told that they had paid a lot of money for her and that she owed them thousands of rupees and would have to have sex with customers until she had paid off the debt.

She was in the brothel a couple years. Occasionally the police would raid the brothel and the brothel-keeper would hide Laxmi under the water tank on the roof until they were gone. They would be very angry with Laxmi when this would happen, saying it was her fault for being so young - that was why they were being raided. She was moved to another brothel. Eventually after two years a man came to the brothel who wore shoes that made Laxmi think he was a policeman. She shouted to him to help her and he told her not to be afraid - that he was her brother. She retorted that if he was her brother, he would have come to help her sooner! Shortly afterwards the police and Greg and some other workers raided the brothel and rescued Laxmi. She was placed in a government home and then in a Christian rehabilitation home for two years. She

calls Greg her big brother.

She said that it has been very hard for her to forgive the men that abused her, that she wanted to stab them, but that when she became a Christian she softened a bit. God healed her of mouth cancer which made her faith a lot stronger. She now works with

Salvation Army in the red light district in Mumbai as a social worker. She keeps an eye out for other minor girls. She has a passion for helping others who are trapped in the same situation she was in five years ago. Freedom Firm has offered her a job as a peer counselor in our rehabilitation home in Ooty that opens in September.



Diana Bar – Beneath The Surface

Turbhe, Navi Mumbai, April 30th 2008.
Diana Bar. Probably 30 girls are scattered throughout the place, some of them dancing, some just standing still. There are 3 waiters for every customer, they all want to shake my hand, they beckon for me to sit in their section of the bar, I hardly make it past the first table.

The music is loud, too loud. Four girls surround me and anticipate my questions, they tell me their names and where they are from. They are dancing, Pooja is the youngest, she's probably 16 or 17, then there's Neisha, Rekha and Kavita. Rekha's from the Punjab, she calls it another country and speaks the best English. Pooja doesn't talk much but she keeps dancing. As I start giving tips more girls make their way to my table, some of them can't be older than 14 or 15. I ask one of the little ones to dance but she's too shy.

I must admit, these girls are pretty, no wonder this place is popular. We like to think of forced child prostitution in uglier terms; beatings, cowering girls, unattractive except to the perverts. But at Diana there's a gloss over the whole thing. The girls look like their having a good time, they're beautiful and they're on sale for Rs. 1,300 (\$35).

I really don't want to be here. I know what lies beneath the surface, and so the surface

is hard to watch. I've got to play the part for now, I finish my drink, give some tips to the girls and rejoin the team at the hotel.

Diana Bar needs to be raided, the girls need to be rescued and the owner and managers need to be called to account for what they are doing. But how?

Last month we found the same thing at the same bar. After approaching the Commissioner of Police (the highest ranking officer in that jurisdiction) a tip off happened before the raid took place. All the girls were removed from the bar.

This time my colleague goes straight to the top. He gets a meeting with the Home Minister of Maharashtra, orders are passed down and a senior police official in the State Headquarters orders that a raid be led by police from a neighbouring jurisdiction.

Along with the police we raid three places the next day including Diana Bar.

A total of 74 girls were found in all three locations. Pimps, managers and owners were charged with Immoral Trafficking crimes. A huge blow to the sex industry in Navi Mumbai.

What a victory! Or was it?

The perpetrators don't go down easy. The

bar owner, manager and staff have just been charged with sex-trafficking crimes ... and they're not happy.

Within 8 hours of finalizing the police complaints all the girls were age verified at a local government hospital. All but one were reported to be minor ... and then released! I guess if you pay enough you can even change a persons age.

Was it all for nothing? What impact can we expect to have when our chances at offering the girls a new life, and an opportunity

to testify against their traffickers, are ruined before we've begun?

Then reports started coming in that the Senior Police Inspectors of those three jurisdictions will be suspended, that the bars will be permanently closed and that the Commissioner of Police will be transferred.

Diana Bar is quite a different place now. There are no girls on sale. Let's pray it stays that way.



Restoration: Roja: A Safe Home For Survivors Of Sex Trafficking



We have 5 new girls in the Aftercare program. 3 new girls joined in the beginning of the year. Jasmine(Jamila), Sakshi(Sapna) and Suchi(Sumi) were transferred from two homes in Mumbai. Suchi stayed only 6 weeks before stealing Rs. 1,000 and running away. The note she left behind stated that she did not want to obey the rules of the home. To support the after-care program we had 8 volunteers from the US and Sweden from February through September.

Our volunteers have taught all subjects, directed the micro-enterprise program (bead work and earring making), pitched in for hospital stints and medical work with the girls, disciplined and led Bible studies, led worship times and conducted weekend activities, led the horse-therapy and done counselling and administrative work. They have kept the program running since we still do not have any permanent staff.

The girls are taught English, Math and Bible studies, Aari work in the afternoons and Jazzercise three times a week. In May, the girls moved into the newly painted and renovated Freedom Firm property which we hope to call Roja. Because the premise is so tiny (only 400 sq. ft.) we have also rented two rooms at Smyrna Home as a "day centre." One room is being used as the classroom and the other room as the craft-room. Smyrna is a lovely and safe property and we have been welcomed there with open arms. The change of scene for the girls is good, where "home" can be home and "school" and "work" is in a separate space. The girls now take a bus everyday to and from the day centre. This experience has tremendously helped in the girls gaining independence and knowledge of the local area.



Reintegration: Onima's Story

Onima, has been with us for 2 years and will be the first to spearhead our reintegration program. The aftercare management felt that Onima had been in rehabilitation homes for too long, a total of 7 years and desperately needed to be given freedom with responsibility. In June, Onima moved out of Roja and into the local Ooty YWCA. She is given a monthly educational stipend to pay for her room, board, and tuition. Onima is now in charge of all her physical needs. Every week our counsellor, Alum spends time counselling her. Onima has been doing very well, and is managing time, money, studies and friendships in a truly healthy way! Reintegration (with some support) is very important for rescued girls who have been in rehabilitation for more than 2 years.

We hope that Jasmine and Reha who are in our restoration program will be ready to follow Onima's lead by February 2009. To

support this process, the girls will be learning many "life skills" such as banking, accounting, and learning Tamil, during the next 6 months.



Onima (center) with Mala Malstead, and Mala's mother, Cathy Hicks.

Avalanche Camps: Finding Freedom In The Wilderness



Freedom Firm hosted its 2nd Annual Wilderness camp at the Scripture Union Camp at Avalanche from May 28th to June 2nd. A total of twenty-five rescued girls, hailing as far as Delhi, Mumbai and Pune, joined the Freedom Firm girls in Ooty for days of fun, learning and challenges. Twenty three staff joined the adventure, making it a very large event indeed! The girls came from several homes across India. 2 girls who were rescued by Freedom Firm in Pune also attended.

One of the girls who attended the Avalanche

camp was Reha. Reha was one of our former girls who was with our program for 4 months. She left in November of 2008 and rejoined after the camp. Her CD4 count is very low, since she discontinued taking her medication while she was gone. Reha now has the medication she needs and she is changing and growing everyday.



Action At Avalanche

Freedom Firm just hosted its 2nd Annual Wilderness camp at the Scripture Union Camp at Lake Avalanche from May 28th-June 2nd. A total of twenty-five rescued girls, hailing as far as Delhi, Mumbai and Pune, joined the Freedom Firm girls in Ooty for days of fun, learning and challenges. Twenty three staff joined the adventure, making it a very large event indeed! Groups came from the International Justice Mission, Oasis, Attulya and the Pune Government Remand Home, plus Freedom Firm, of course.

As groups trickled in and recovered from 24hr. train rides, we started the activities in Ooty while we waited for all the groups to gather. A horse therapy session was a big hit with many girls, who had never touched or ridden a horse in their lives. Groups went boating on Ooty lake and visited the Botanical gardens. Finally everyone arrived, and we were off to Avalanche (accessible only by an hour hike from the main road!)





ACTIVITIES

Several Freedom Firm girls led a dance exercise class (a regular feature of the Freedom Firm program). Girls tried rappelling (or abseiling as its called here). It was exciting to watch girls overcome their fears and

trust the rope-holder and climb down the slippery waterfall into the pool below.

Gorge walking was another exercise in trust, as our fifty campers and staff slithered and slipped on moss-covered rocks and low hanging branches up a swift mountain stream for over an hour. During the campfire that night, a couple girls mentioned life metaphors gleaned from that walk.

Spring rains came in earnest once a day, but the tents and sleeping bags stayed dry, and we all took refuge under a large shelter for times of crafts, candle dancing, endless cups of tea and fellowship.

Walks in the woods and beside rivers were woven into times of teaching about real love. Campfires at night, marshmallows and Aradhna songs were wonderful times of worship and fun. Girls often shared the things they were learning, and many took an opportunity to sing a solo!





GROUP DYNAMICS

As girls mixed with one another during meal times, craft times and other informal, relaxed settings, they caught up on old friendships and built new ones. Girls exchanged stories, compared aftercare homes (much to our dismay), and talked excitedly about the direction of their lives.

Girls were stimulated by the progress they saw in each other. Some had known each other from their stay in the government homes after rescue, and then were separated and sent to different rehabilitation homes.



Newly Rescued Girls

The five girls from the government home in Pune who were rescued just this last year were given great hope as they learned about other girls who were now getting an education and job training and most of all love. These five girls from Pune had initially been terrified to come to the camp. To see them relax, accept affection and love,

and grow in confidence and trust, was truly a rewarding experience. As they left the camp and all of their new friends, they sobbed uncontrollably. Our new Freedom Firm office in Pune will be following up with these girls to provide continued encouragement, counseling and support.



Staff Dynamics

The camp was also a time for forming new relationships among the staff members and volunteers of different NGO's, and a time of strengthening old ties. Several staff expressed the encouragement they felt from knowing they were not alone in the struggle to bring change and transformation to girls rescued from prostitution. A certain solidarity and commitment to pray for each other emerged from our time of sharing the joys and challenges of our work. Truly, we face the same calling and

that calling transcends language, country and organization.

A very big thanks to Bethlehem Baptist Church, for funding this camp, and for sending a wonderful team of people to plan and lead the activities.

Without our partners in prayer and practical giving, we would be unable to do this work. We pray that the benefits from this camp continue to impact the lives of the girls who attended this year.

Legal

We have hired Evan Henck, a recent law school graduate from the United States. He is currently taking a 6 week crash course in Hindi to get him a start. Then he will be based in Pune to follow up on our legal work there. He will:

- assist the public prosecutors in their criminal cases against brothel keepers and traffickers.
- help us protect the rescued girls
- work to assure that minors are indeed deemed to be minor and put in protective custody.
- insist that the Child Welfare Committees not release girls to their families until the required home inquiry has been conducted.
- help get our counsellors and MSWs access to the girls while they are in the government homes

These are things that I have tried to do myself, but with only 7-9 days a month in the field, it did not work very well. Evan, based right there in Pune and dedicating all his efforts to this, will be much more effective than I was.

There are trials ongoing in three cases.

1. Two girls were rescued from a Sangli red light area in October 2006 (over 20 months ago!) and the trial of the brothel keeper is just now getting underway.

2. A girl rescued from prostitution in Pune is now back with her family in Calcutta. She is supposed to testify soon, but we are having

a hard time finding and getting her to Pune. Nevertheless, the brothel keeper has been in jail for a year and a half (she was denied bail) and has paid a significant price for her crime, even if we do not get a conviction.

3. The third trial is also in Pune. The rescued girl was so upset because her parents were arrested as traffickers along with the brothel keeper. Her testimony date came and we did not know how she would do. She did not testify against her parents (as expected) but, praise the Lord, she testified very strongly against the brothel keeper. We have high hopes for a strong conviction in this case that will send a message to the community that selling minors in prostitution does not pay.

4. The appeal of the acquittal of a brothel keeper in Kolhapur is pending before the Bombay High Court. It may be a long time before it comes up for hearing. But when it does, we hope for a reversal. It is a very strong case. That would send a loud message across the entire state of Maharashtra (and beyond) that the laws against prostitution of minors is being enforced in the state.

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Financials 2008

The total expenditure for the FY 2007 -2008 is Rs.37,51,326/-



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