

Saving Sarah: Local Nonprofit Celebrates 9 Years Since First Rescue

The Exodus Road, a nonprofit based in Colorado Springs, started their fight against human trafficking in 2012 after founders Matt and Laura Parker helped police liberate a 15-year-old, Burmese girl who'd been trapped in sex trafficking.

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Colorado Springs, CO. (August 11, 2021) – On August 12, 2012, a 15-year-old, Burmese girl named Sarah regained her freedom after being held captive in the sex-trafficking industry of Thailand. Sarah (a pseudonym used for security) is the first of more than 1500 survivors that The Exodus Road, a Colorado Springs-based nonprofit, has helped authorities rescue during the last nine years. The road to Sarah's rescue started in Woodland Park, Colo.

In 2011, Matt and Laura Parker moved with their three children from Woodland Park to live in northern Thailand and run a children's home housing 48 girls. While working with these girls, the Parkers began hearing stories about men visiting these poor, farming villages promising well-paying, respectable, city jobs to girls and their families, but then forcing them into prostitution.

"They had a saying in these rural communities, "There are no pretty girls in the villages," Matt said. "We'd never faced the issue of human trafficking so closely before, but, working in a children's home with these young girls, we felt an overwhelming responsibility to do something."

So, Matt and Laura reached out to local law enforcement and started working with them to provide research and consulting. At the time, they partnered with some nonprofits in the area to gather information about trafficking operations, what police were doing and what was or was not working. They identified the processes, steps and government agencies needed to truly get someone out of trafficking and restored to a life of freedom.

For about a year, this work was done at a distance until a tip came in about some young girls being sold in Bangkok. Matt learned that for police to move forward with the case, the tip would need to be verified. Mobilizing law enforcement to arrest traffickers and make rescues requires far more evidence than a tip or background research; it requires undercover work in the darkest places.

After making numerous calls to nonprofits and other contacts they'd made in Thailand, Matt realized that no one was going to go. "I understood why people weren't willing, but it made me more and more frustrated with each call. All I could think is that we're talking about saving girls who are being raped for profit," he said.

Later, a couple of Matt's close friends reached out and said they would be willing to go and invited him. When Matt presented the situation to Laura, they decided together that he had to go.

Pulling into the largest red-light district in Bangkok, Matt said it was a sensory overload. People pulled at him, neon lights flashed, pornography waved in his face and catcalls resounded. "In that moment, a very sobering truth gripped me: my two friends and I were the only men on that street not looking to purchase young girls; our goal was to see them freed," he said.

The three friends, all working for nonprofits, entered a brothel and saw girls lined up on a stage with numbers pinned to their chests. "They were being sold like ticketed commodities. It was terrible. You could see a deep sadness in their eyes despite attempts to appear sensual," Matt said.

After delivering the field report, Matt processed the experience with Laura. Remembering their conversation and reasoning, Laura said: "This isn't a hidden crime; it's just well protected by corruption and lack of resources. Ultimately, we decided that we now had a role to play in this fight and that meant Matt should continue going undercover."

When Matt asked a police partner if it would be helpful for him to continue doing undercover investigations, the officer answered: "Matt, everybody loves to talk about human trafficking, but no one wants to do what you just asked me. I have no help. I would love your help.' His answer changed my life," Matt said.

Now an official informant for the local, Thai police, Matt started going out several nights a week from 9 p.m. to 4 or 5 a.m. He would visit numerous brothels, map out the locations of trafficking sites, gather cyber intelligence, take notes and then deliver field reports. He started wearing a body camera and began working with retired special forces to go undercover and create reports with him. He and Laura paid them out of their own pockets.

One day, a tip came in from a partnering nonprofit who knew of a 15-year-old girl who was being held against her will. After about eight months of learning and working, there had not been a single, successful rescue or arrest made because of this undercover work. "It was discouraging," Matt said. Evidence gathering would lead to police mobilization, but corruption continually undermined the operations as paid-off cops leaked information helping traffickers escape.

But this time was different. Matt and another operative who had built a rapport with the trafficker traveled to southern Thailand where this girl was being held. The trafficker invited them to come meet a new, young girl he had for them.

When they got to the site, they met Sarah, a young, Burmese girl still wearing street clothes. Her virginity had been sold just a few days earlier. Matt and the undercover operative paid to take her up to a room where they talked with her. As the other operative communicated with Sarah using a phone translator, Sarah pulled out a Thai bill and wrote in Burmese, "Please rescue me." Sarah's mother had sold her to traffickers who moved her to the southernmost part of Thailand.

After delivering the camera footage and full report back to the Thai police, they mobilized a force to rescue her. Twice, corrupt officers tipped off traffickers and Sarah disappeared. When a third opportunity arose, the team worked with a different police force. This time they rescued Sarah and the seven other minors held at that brothel and arrested the traffickers.

Sarah's rescue became part of the birth story of The Exodus Road. Shortly after assisting police in rescuing Sarah, Matt and Laura decided to launch The Exodus Road to strategically and holistically fight human trafficking, primarily through equipping local operatives and trusted, law enforcement partners. "We know that the best agents for change in any society are the members of that culture. This is why we are passionate about walking alongside local nationals and supporting their work in combatting human trafficking," Laura said.

"We're after systemic change. Right now, in numerous places around the world, trafficking isn't a hidden practice. It's out in the open because traffickers are not afraid of their justice systems. We want to help local communities change that. We want to make it dangerous to be a trafficker," Matt said.

About The Exodus Road

The Exodus Road is a global nonprofit that strategically and holistically works to end human trafficking. Since its founding in 2012, the organization has assisted police in the rescue of more than 1500 survivors and arrested more than 800 traffickers; numbers that grow almost daily. The Exodus Road restores freedom for the most vulnerable in societies through prevention and training efforts (TraffickWatch Academy), intervention (Search + Rescue) and aftercare (Beyond Rescue). The Exodus Road operatives and volunteers gather intelligence that empowers nationals and local law enforcement to lead rescue missions and pursue prosecutions. Headquartered in Colorado Springs, The Exodus Road fights to equip law enforcement, liberate trafficked individuals, arrest traffickers and provide restorative care for survivors in the U.S., Thailand, Brazil, the Philippines, India and Latin America.

For additional information or to make a donation to help stop trafficking, please visit The Exodus Road's website at <https://theexodusroad.com/>.

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