

Innocents At Risk

Fighting Human Trafficking

making a difference



Deborah Sigmund, Founder

Innocents at Risk is a nonprofit founded to fight child exploitation and human trafficking. The mission is to educate citizens about the grave issue of global and local human trafficking. Several Kent residents, including Connie Carter, Gordon Dale, and Marsha Muawwad, are involved in this worthwhile organization.

“When I was asked to join the board of Innocents at Risk, explains Marsha Muawwad, I thought we were helping prevent child trafficking in Thailand, Vietnam, and other far away countries. What I quickly learned is child trafficking is right here under our own eyes. It is in downtown D.C., all along I95, in Virginia and Maryland and it is a multi-billion dollar a year industry taking victims as young as 18 months old and sadly, it is not being given the attention it deserves.”

We sat down with Founder Deborah Sigmund, who lives in nearby Spring Valley, to hear about the organization and how she became so passionate about Innocents at Risk. “We are dedicated to protecting children from all forms of abuse, and work to end child exploitation and child trafficking everywhere,” Deborah explains. Human Trafficking is a \$150 billion industry worldwide, and it is happening throughout the world in every country and across the United States in every major city and small town. According to the Department of State, two million women and children are victims of human trafficking every year. In the United States, 300,000 children are forced into child prostitution and child pornography each year. In Washington DC alone, trafficking innocent children is a \$100 million industry. She notes that the United States is the greatest human trafficking destination in the world. Since 2004, Innocents at Risk has been working to raise awareness about the horrors of child trafficking in America and around the world. Innocents at Risk conducts educational outreach programs through churches, clubs, organizations, schools and embassies. “I have watched Debbie Sigmund for nearly 14 years to tirelessly enlist the help of anyone she knows to raise awareness of this effort to save those who are preyed upon by human



traffickers,” says Connie Carter, friend, Kent neighbor and former Spring Valley resident. “She has been a maverick, single-handedly pushing the issue out front so we can be aware of this secret, hidden scourge.”

So how to Deborah get involved in this cause? “Over twelve years ago, I first heard about human trafficking while in Europe. I was horrified. I began asking about it and learned what a big business it was and how some governments look the other way. I was baffled as to why people weren’t on the street-corners screaming about how morally outraged they are by human trafficking. Coincidentally, Deborah met the then Undersecretary of State, Paula Dobriansky, who reported to former President Bush. Soon thereafter, Deborah met Paula’s team in her office, including a new Ambassador of Trafficking, and was asked to help raise awareness immediately.

Deborah was encouraged by her minister and others in the public and private sectors to take on human trafficking as a personal cause. She began hosting fundraising and awareness events. Deborah met a film producer who helped her raise awareness about this tragic issue. She realized that “people needed to see the devastating harm caused by this illicit activity, not just hear about it.” She started making the film with Congressman Chris Smith, Undersecretary of State Paula Dobriansky and a United Nations representative. It was produced by Carl Colby and supported by Ricky Martin.

When a flight attendant heard about Deborah’s work, she said that she herself witnesses human trafficking. She saw children getting on planes with improper clothing, looking afraid, and who were clearly unaccompanied by caring guardians. Deborah then began speaking to the State Department about involving airlines in the fight against human trafficking. Within a year, her Flight Attendant Initiative included a thousand flight attendants from many major carriers (including American Airlines, Delta, U.S. Airways and Southwest). In 2007, Innocents began training airline personnel. Brochures, wristbands and educational workshops have armed thousands of flight attendants with information on how to recognize and report trafficking before even reaching the ground. With the help of its partner, Airline Ambassadors (airlineamb.org), Innocents is working to expand its outreach to all major carriers.

To those who want to combat human trafficking, Deborah suggests joining the Innocents at Risk mailing list to learn about their outreach and training programs. Deborah is as committed to the cause now as she was a decade ago. Stemming the growth of human trafficking is an ongoing challenge. This year’s fundraiser gala was a big success, an elegant night orchestrated by Deborah and her team to showcase the issue while enjoying the fellowship of like-minded volunteers. “Connie and I were happy to contribute,” says Gordon Dale of UBS.

For more information, visit www.innocentsatrisk.org

