Survivor Stories

Francis Alehey: His Father Aided Traffickers – His Mother Finally Saved Him

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Francis' father was a slavery collaborator who took money to enslave vulnerable children. He sold many—even his own son. Trapped on Lake Volta, Francis was beaten and abused. His mother saved him by taking a stand.

Tricked by Lies

Francis trusted his father. But his father lied. He was in the business of selling children—even his own son. He worked with numerous traffickers to prey on vulnerable children and families in villages around Lake Volta. In return, slave holders paid Francis' father for his crimes.

Francis' parents are separated and live far apart from one another. His father deceived both him and his mother with a common lie. He told them Francis would get the chance to attend school if he was given to an uncle. Instead Francis was trafficked to a fishing village.

"My father trafficked me and gave me out to other slave holders for $10 a month," Francis says.

Beaten, Abused, Terrified

Francis was forced to work day and night on Lake Volta, the biggest reservoir in the world. In this huge expanse of water, storms can easily capsize small vessels and kill all those aboard. Children are forced to dive into the dangerous waters to retrieve knotted nets. Many never resurface.

Child slaves are threatened with violence, often starved and neglected, unable to walk away. Francis' ordeal was especially painful. His slave holders beat him with harmful objects when he was too frightened to plunge into the perilous lake to untangle heavy nets.

Francis has a scar on his right chin—the result of regular beatings at his father's hand. Scared and abused, the young boy desperately wanted his mother. But, he says, he "did not know how to come home."

Freeing Francis

One day a village friend visited the fishing community where Francis was trapped. She took the news back to Francis' mother. To her shock, she realized her son was not a student living with an uncle—he was a slave.

His mother called for his return. His father ignored her. Months later his father returned to the community for a funeral and took Francis along. His father planned to send his son back to the slave holders. But his mother took a stand. She refused to cooperate.

Francis' mother reported the case to the community's child protection committee. The chairman invited his father to a meeting, where he was warned the committee could report him and his crimes to the police. Francis was freed in December 2016.

The Hidden Crime of Slavery

The ignorance that leads to modern slavery also keeps it hidden—making it harder for the public to see and for vulnerable villagers to understand, and for those in slavery to call out for help.

Vulnerable villagers do not know their rights. They do not know slavery is illegal, or that there are laws in place to punish, prosecute, and imprison perpetrators of child trafficking. They are unaware of the risks of falling into slavery; they are susceptible to the lies traffickers tell. They need help building community resistance.

FTS and our partners work on the front lines to educate communities, teach villagers their rights, and support sustainable systems of freedom that oppose traffickers. With the support of International Needs Ghana, an FTS partner, Francis and his family received rehabilitation and counseling services, as well as business and financial literacy training.

Now 12, Francis' life has changed dramatically since he was rescued. He is interested in going to school. He is healthy. He knows his rights—he knows he deserves to live in freedom. And he has ideas for confronting slavery in Ghana.

"I will ask the president of Ghana to charge the police service to search all vehicles that have a lot of children in them heading to suspected fishing communities," Francis says.

The Growing Up Free Initiative

In June 2015 the Ghana government signed a Child Protection Compact Partnership with the United States. This partnership facilitates an investment of up to $5 million in U.S. foreign assistance to aid the government and Ghanaian civil society in reducing child trafficking and slavery, and improving child protection throughout the country.

The initiative supports the formation and implementation of a comprehensive, integrated plan for prevention, rescue, prosecution, rehabilitation, reintegration, education, wrap-around social services, the development of market-based livelihoods for vulnerable families, and the formation of communities united in the determination to drive slavery from their midst.

Growing Up Free embodies FTS' proven Community-based Model for Fighting Slavery. Our model's core principle is to create local assets that offset the most salient vulnerabilities that lead to modern slavery: lack of awareness, the absence of strong protective community organizations, household insecurity such as poverty or illness, inadequate legal protections, and survivor vulnerability to re-enslavement. Growing Up Free pledges to build capacity, educate and mobilize, meet basic needs, and change attitudes and practices in Ghana. To learn more, visit www.freetheslaves.net or email Ghana@freetheslaves.net.