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A Ray of Hope: Lotus Flower Foundation

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Born to Thai and Swiss parents, **Gabrielle von Reding** was raised between two countries, cultures and languages. Her true calling, however, is beyond borders: helping victims of child abuse and sexual exploitation in Thailand, one of the world's most notorious destinations for "sex tourism" and one of the most active trafficking countries, especially when it comes to children. (Read about the inception of the Lotus Flower Foundation and the frightening statistics.) Indagare spoke to von Reding about this dark side of Thailand, her Lotus Flower Foundation (LFF), how she envisions the future and what inspires her to continue the fight for the

children.

What is the background and vision of of LFF?

LFF was founded in 2007 and its mission is to eradicate the abuse of children in Thailand by raising social awareness through sustainable methods such as policy change and education, encouraging social cooperation to report child abuse, assisting victims in rehabilitation and striving to build communities in which children can live in dignity and security.

What programs are you working on?

I deeply believe that education is the key to prevention, one of the reasons I established the LFF Academy, which will open in early 2009 in Nondburi, north of Bangkok. The Academy will train care-givers who work with abused children from shelters throughout

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Thailand . The curriculum is tailored to the needs of abused orphans and incorporates parts of the Montessori philosophy, life skill and trauma relief methodologies. We're also planning to open a rehabilitation shelter, which will give thirty severely abused orphans between the ages of three and twelve a new home and an opportunity to overcome their fears and trauma.

Why is it so important to train shelter care-givers in your methodologies?

Shelters throughout Thailand very often still use methods like locking over-active orphans into padded dark rooms or keeping them busy only with TV. The care givers we are training are amazed to learn that these methods are actually harmful to the children. Often the care-givers working in the various shelters throughout the country carry emotional and physical scars themselves; and tears roll freely in the LFF classes. Once we have re-educated care-givers they begin motivating their colleagues, resulting in the children in shelters to be less aggressive, easier to deal with and more balanced. They start showing better results in their homework, more concentration and begin to have bigger smiles.

What are the statistics you find most disheartening?

I find it extremely disheartening that it's estimated that one out of every four children in Thailand is either emotionally, physically or sexually abused. Domestic violence casts a dark shadow over Thailand and these statistics relay that there is an incredible lack of support and education for parents on parental skills and knowledge on caring for children.

There seems to be very little awareness of these issues amongst visitors...

Whilst Thailand is a country of immense scenic beauty, warm smiles and hospitality, what is occurring to children not only behind shut doors but tolerated out on the street is shocking. Many in Thailand feel that as a nation, we are trying to run after and imitate a misguided, commercially-based notion of the West, ignoring the hidden cost of acquiring status symbols. Most Western societies have effective legislative measures in place to prevent exploitation of children. Most damaging to the Thai way of life is that, in a rush to usher in a superficial concept of the West (fast cars, status symbols etc), society is forgetting its own strong, traditional Thai values. LFF strives to re-establish a sense of community and of social responsibility in Thai society.

What should visitors to Thailand be aware of?

As travelers continue to visit this incredibly culturally rich and diverse nation, all I ask is that they consider the implications of their actions and the footprints they leave behind. Sometimes the smallest of actions can make a difference, and I choose to believe that this is equally applicable to both negative and positive change. Do the investigations on hotels that support ECPAT's Code of Conduct for the tourism industry; don't support street begging, as most of it is run by trafficking rings, and instead find sustainable ways of making a difference. Volunteer for a day, a week, a month. Engaging in responsible tourism will ultimately enrich and enhance any experience here in Thailand, as well as be personally rewarding.

What do you find encouraging?

The most encouraging aspect of working in the child protection field is watching as people bloom with knowledge, education and awareness raising campaigns. The capability and desire of the human heart to do good and protect children, protect our future never fails to amaze me. At every event that LFF runs, I am continually reminded of the power of the human spirit and the willingness for people to get involved. Sometimes the only barrier is a lack of knowledge in how to assist, prevent and make change. Armed with education and awareness, society at large has a formidable tool against child exploitation.

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- **Indagare** means to discover, explore, seek, scout in Latin.

What are the biggest misconceptions about child abuse in Thailand?

That sex tourism is a solely Western phenomena. Sex tourists travel from both Western and non-Western countries to exploit children. Exploring which companies support policies that exclude sex tourists and simply using 'buyer power' to stop child exploitation can make a huge difference.

There's also a lack of education in regards to street begging and the trafficking rings behind them. These children are abused, forced to work day and night, and have limited or no access to education and medical care. Their families were often deceived into allowing their child to travel to Bangkok. Putting money in their hands only creates an unsustainable environment and supports the traffickers.

How are you raising public awareness of the LFF?

We invite partnerships with individuals, institutions and commercial enterprises that can commit to help the cause through their various networks, knowledge bases and fervor and passion to help. For instance, we have monthly wine tastings at the Plaza Athénée Bangkok, where a portion of the entrance fee is donated, and monthly afterwork cocktail and cones with big raffle with prizes from some of the most highly regarded brands such as BMW Thailand, Six Senses and Jim Thompson. Bed Supperclub is currently serving a special LFF cocktail whose proceeds go towards the foundation.

What inspires you?

The open, happy and grateful smile of orphans is what fuels me and drives me forward to create social change. Seeing the pain in a child's life, a pain that runs so deeply, means that I am compelled to help.... and I strongly believe there are so many people out there who would like to help but often they don't know how... I see it as my devotion with Lotus Flower Foundation to bringing help to where it is needed. One of the greatest changes you can make in your life is to give to others and open your heart and mind to giving...the result will be more than you could ever imagine.

To learn more about the Lotus Flower Foundation and its goals, go to www.thelotusflowerfoundation.org.

HOW TO GIVE TO LFF

Gabrielle von Reding says: We appreciate your gift of support and pledge our promise that it will be used in the most constructive, efficient and transparent means in helping the beneficiaries." Lotus Flower Foundation also appreciates gifts in kind such as food items, books, clothing, materials etc.

From the United States, you can give through:
www.Give2Asia.com/lotusflowerfoundation

Simone Girner 10/24/2008