

# ST. NICHOLAS WORKED AGAINST TRAFFICKING

by Diana Scimone

In many Christian cultures around the world, the holiday season officially kicks off on December 6—St. Nicholas Day. Nicholas, of course, was the model for our modern-day Santa Claus. But did you know that many people believe he was also an abolitionist who worked against child trafficking?

Nicholas was a third-century bishop who lived in what is now Turkey. According to legend, he learned about a poor man who had three daughters to marry off. The man could not pay the dowry for the girls, meaning they would be sold into slavery—also known as child trafficking.

When Nicholas learned about the family's plight, late one night he quietly waited outside their meager

home and threw coins into their window, making sure no one, especially the father, saw him. The father found the money and used it to pay off his debts—and his daughters were saved from a life of slavery.

No one knows if this is what truly happened, but according to the St. Nicholas Center ([www.stnicholascenter.org](http://www.stnicholascenter.org)) there's good reason to believe it did.

## Modern-day abolitionists

I love this story of St. Nicholas because I, too, am an abolitionist. My introduction to the world of child trafficking also happened in Asia, though about 1,700 years after St. Nicholas fought it. In May 2001 I was in Mumbai, India, writing an article about forced



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prostitution of women. I kept hearing the term “child slave,” but assumed it was a rare occurrence. Early on a Saturday evening one of my contacts took me through Mumbai’s red-light district, which is one of the largest in Asia.

“You can take a picture of what I’m about to show you,” he said, “but don’t let the pimps see you or they’ll take your camera.” Then he pointed to a second-floor window. “Do you see the cages in that window?”

“Cages?” I replied. “What’s in them?”

“Five-year-old girls,” he said. “They’re smuggled across the border from Nepal and held in these cages for 30 days. They’re raped, tortured and starved until they no longer have a will to rebel. Only then are they

fit to become child slaves.”

I wanted to throw up. That photo became the “photo that changed my life,” because I couldn’t stop thinking about what I had seen. I learned it wasn’t just a child here and there, but that child trafficking happens all over the world, including throughout the United States. Children even younger than the ones in those cages are regularly bought and sold. They’re forced to have sex with different customers 20, 30, even 40 times a night. Night after night after night.

It’s inconceivable to think that this happens in the 21st century, but it does. Human trafficking is organized crime—the second-highest grossing form of illegal industry on the planet. Why? Because a bag of drugs

can be sold only once, but a human being can be sold over and over again.

Even here in the United States, child trafficking is rampant, whether teenagers, tweens or even young children like the ones in those cages. It happens in every city and in every part of town—in all socio-economic areas. After all, why would traffickers pick on only poor children? In my city of Orlando, children are regularly trafficked in all parts of the city including a few miles from Disney’s doorstep.

### What can I do about it?

After I took the photo that changed my life, I went on a quest to learn what I could do to help stop this horror. I traveled to Thailand three times. The first visit was sort of a reconnaissance trip to learn about the problem and see where I could plug in. I set up meetings with anyone who would meet with me—social workers, attorneys, rescuers, safe house directors, even rescued and at-risk girls and teens themselves.

It was as if God had a big clipboard showing me every aspect of the fight to stop the traffic—while systematically crossing off everything that was certainly not “me.” On the last day of the trip, I still didn’t know what I was supposed to do, but I figured God wouldn’t take me halfway around the world without giving me my marching orders.

I got them the last day of the trip. I was in a meeting with two social workers. I gave them my laundry list of what I couldn’t do. “But I keep hearing that kids get taken because they don’t know the lies that traffickers tell,” I told the women. “Their parents don’t know, either.” I knew I couldn’t do rescues, provide aftercare, build safe houses, or put traffickers behind bars, but there was one thing I could do: “I’m a writer,” I said. “I’ve written children’s books and curricula. If I write a children’s book warning kids

about trafficking, and a companion curriculum for parents and teachers, can you use that?”

The answer was a resounding “yes.” I had my marching orders. I came home, launched a non-profit called Born2Fly, and wrote a children’s book that is an allegory about child trafficking—the story of a caterpillar named Blossom who has a dream to fly. In her quest to follow her dream, she learns five important “truths.” And, of course, she learns them the hard way, or we wouldn’t have a story. I worked with an illustrator to turn the book into a wordless book so that kids anywhere in the world could “read” it. And I worked with educators and curriculum writers to create a companion curriculum based on the five truths that Blossom learns:

Choices have consequences.

It’s important to know who your true friends are.

You are valuable.

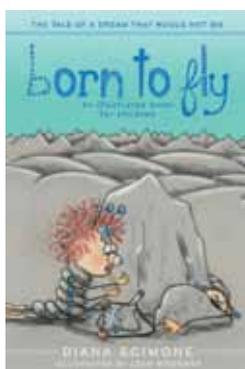
You must be patient and work hard to follow your dream.

You were born to fly; don’t settle for less.

We tested the Born2Fly program in five countries, and in 2012 put everything on our website where organizations all over the world can register to download them.

The curriculum is now available in 10 languages, and we also came out with a second curriculum for teenagers.

To date, nearly 700 organizations have registered to teach the Born2Fly program to their kids and teens—in a whopping 65 countries. Our goal is to “reach kids before the traffickers do” and by the grace of God we’re accomplishing that all over the world.



### The three P’s

If child trafficking makes you angry, that is a good thing. The same God who put that anger inside you also put a plan inside you to stop it. You may think that

is a ludicrous statement, but look at me. What could a journalist who wrote children's books do to stop a worldwide horror? God took my little skill and turned it into something unique.

I know dozens of other women and men who can say the same thing—artists, singers, bakers, models and others who have used their unique skills to rescue children, help them heal, put traffickers behind bars, raise funds and more. If I can do it . . . if they can do it, you can do it, too.

When we look at the fight to stop the traffic—both child trafficking in particular and human trafficking in general—we talk about the three P's:

- Protection:** rescuing children and helping them heal;
- Prosecution:** going after traffickers and putting them behind bars;
- Prevention:** keeping children and adults from ever being trafficked in the first place.

I've added a few P's of my own:

- Passion:** nothing will get done without it.
- Prayer:** nothing will get done without it, either.

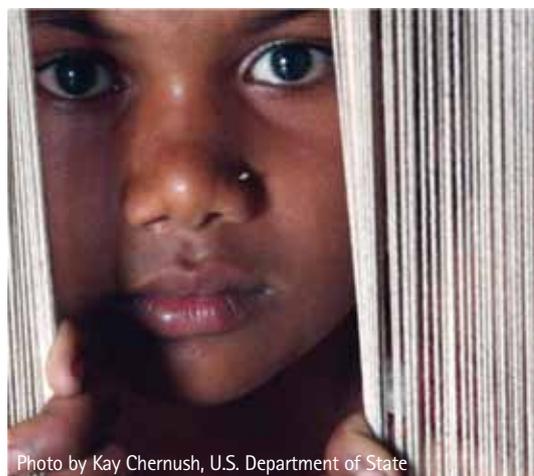
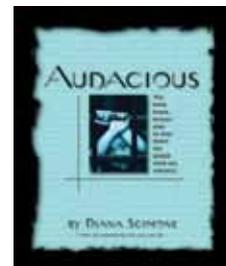
If this is an issue that makes you angry—I don't mean just normal anger, but the kind of God-inspired anger

that keeps you up at night—spend some time this Advent season asking God about your role in this fight. You do have one. It may take some digging. It may take a few reconnaissance missions either online or in person to another part of your own town in order to learn what is happening across the world or across the street.

As you search for your plan, remember mine. God did not ask me to do something that was not me. Instead, I took what I already knew how to do (write), saw a need (kids get taken because they don't know the lies traffickers tell), and listened as God called me to work that combined them both (write a children's book and curriculum to make kids, parents and teachers aware). Did God use what was already in me? Absolutely. Did it still take a leap of faith to accomplish this? Absolutely!

During the weeks of Advent, craft your own unique-to-you solution to help stop trafficking. What a wonderful Christmas present you'll give yourself—and many, many children around the world. 🌿

**Diana Scimone** is founder and president of the Born2Fly Project to stop child trafficking and author of *Audacious: The bold, brave, brazen plan to shut down the global child sex industry*, and numerous children's books including *Born to Fly* ([www.born2fly.org](http://www.born2fly.org)).



## RESPONDING TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Women from more than 7,000 ELCA congregations in the United States and the Caribbean are committed to raising awareness of and preventing human trafficking. Check out the Women of the ELCA website at:

> <http://welca.org/humantrafficking>

Photo by Kay Chernush, U.S. Department of State