

CHILD STORIES

FORMER CHILD PROSTITUTE HELPS SEX WORKERS THROUGH CAMBODIAN BEAUTY SALON

A man in his sixties, accompanied by another who looked as if he could be his adult son, emerged from a narrow alley hand-in-hand with two young prostitutes in their early teens. The alley separated a seedy brothel from its next-door neighbor, a beauty salon.

The beauty salon is run by a teenage girl, Mai (not her real name), from the Vietnamese community in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

At 12 Mai was sold by her grandmother to a brothel for \$300. Mai had begged her grandmother to not sell her, just as her mother before her had also pleaded, but it did no good. For the grandmother, the money was just too tempting, considering that many in their community make less than \$1 per day.

Her new owners locked her up and beat her for several days before selling her virginity to an Asian-background Australian who wanted to "deflower" her. He would later pay for her two more times, but only under the condition that no other man had slept with her since.

One report states that Mai was forced to eventually service twelve to fifteen men per day. It's a small wonder that she never contracted HIV/AIDS like many of the other girls sold into prostitution in Southeast Asia.

It's unclear how Mai eventually ended up back at her grandmother's small slum home. Regardless, she was resolute about showing love to her grandmother despite the great injustice she suffered at her hands. Mai extended grace and forgiveness daily and lived out a life exemplifying the hope within her.

An American missionary heard Mai's story and became determined to find her. After a few trips, he located her and offered her a job at the beauty salon, a place specifically set up to prevent or rescue Vietnamese girls from the Cambodian sex trade.

Today, seven girls work at the salon doing hair, makeup, and nails for a clientele mainly comprised of the local prostitutes. Mai mentors the other girls. She is a sweet, demure girl with a gentle spirit and warm countenance. Her delightful smile betrays the horror she has endured.

Mai, wise beyond her years, is thankful for the experience. "Without it," she says, "I would not be able to help to the girls that come into the shop." *Beauty from ashes indeed.*

Mai is now uniquely qualified to help others who are either still in forced prostitution, or have escaped from it.