

Human Cost of Trafficking



Left: Somnang on the day Deborah Quigley and team found her. **Right:** Deborah and Somnang this past June.

SOMNANG WAS A KARAOKE BABY. SHE wasn't planned. She wasn't acknowledged. She wasn't provided for. Her birth was nothing more than an accident — one of the far too many accidents that are the end result of prostitution rings linked to the karaoke-bar scene in the Third World. In fact, Somnang wasn't even "Somnang" for the first part of her life. She was homeless, clothesless, hairless and, as a sad reminder of the utter lack of compassion from her biological mother, nameless.

It's unknown how she lasted more than three years on her own. Speculation is that villagers near her hometown of Siem Reap, Cambodia, gave her enough nourishment to sustain an existence, albeit one wrought with peril. When Deborah Quigley found her, the malnourished 3-and-a-half-year-old was trying to draw clothes on her body with a red marker. Deborah and her colleagues looked at her sweet, innocent face and recoiled in shock. Deborah and the other members of Airline Ambassadors International (AAI) were in Siem Reap for this very reason: to help the hapless and to deal a blow to the international human-trafficking racket that sells 2 million women and children into slavery each year. But the all-too-real face of grinding poverty and parental neglect that stared back at Deborah made the retired flight attendant freeze. She handed the child a yellow balloon.

For more information about AAI, please visit www.airlineamb.org

The child waved her hand ever so slightly and allowed a faint smile.

September is Washington, D.C.'s Human Trafficking Awareness Month, and our flight attendants are leading a global campaign that's taking the fight to the human traffickers. UNICEF estimates that at this moment, 27 million people are being held against their will around the globe. An overwhelming figure indeed, reinforced by other overwhelming figures: Human trafficking is a \$32 billion annual black-market business; 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders every year; children are coerced or kidnapped and transported through airports every day; and one victim is trafficked across international borders every minute. Given her circumstances, Somnang would have very likely become one of these statistics.

Spearheaded by Nancy Rivard, a 30-year veteran flight attendant for AA, AAI now has more than 6,000 members across the aviation industry. In addition to acquiring space on carriers for medical and rescue personnel, as well as food and medical supplies, AAI teaches flight attendants how to recognize the signs that might indicate someone is being trafficked on their flight. No small feat, given the scope of the territory covered by flight attendants, coupled with the number of people onboard their planes. A Herculean undertaking indeed, but it's working — and it's being noticed in the corridors of power.

"American Airlines is taking exem-

plary steps to ensure its flight crews are equipped to notice and respond appropriately when human traffickers attempt to use airlines to traffic women and girls internationally," says Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey. "It is my sincere hope that all U.S. airlines will soon follow their example of visionary corporate responsibility in the fight against human trafficking."

Nancy visited the Dominican Republic in 2009 to educate AAI team members on trafficking watch signs. On this education-oriented trip, Nancy and crew identified and reported three cases of human trafficking. As Herculean undertakings go, our flight attendants not only perform myriad challenging roles in their day-to-day lives, but they are also the front line of defense against this ghastly underworld syndicate.

The Karaoke Baby flashed Deborah a smile, and Deborah melted. She scooped the child in her arms and took her to the nearby New Hope clinic, run by Australian Kerry Hunter. The baby was given a name: Somnang, which means, appropriately, "new hope." Kerry is Somnang's foster mother now, and the Karaoke Baby is healthy and happy.

Our flight attendants are tasked with a Herculean undertaking. Please show them your appreciation. Please thank them.

Adam Pitluk
Editor