

Street children, trafficking spotlighted in free talks

Sisters resident David Purviance is offering area groups a series of free talks that present an engaging insider's look into significant issues affecting children and women across the globe.

Purviance's talks draw from his work in India and his experience as executive director for the local nonprofit World's Children. Issues addressed include forced marriage, children living on the streets, and human trafficking.

Though the characters in his talks live far away, their true stories also speak to topics currently making headlines much closer to home. Those topics include how we approach poverty and how we best ensure the safety and rights of vulnerable girls and women.

In 2003, after 16 years in public relations, Purviance switched gears. He and his wife, Jean, moved to India. For the next five years, he would work to improve living conditions for "the poorest of the poor." He would contribute to relief efforts after the catastrophic Dec. 26, 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed more than 225,000 people and displaced millions more. And he would teach and find schooling for orphans and street children.

His experiences included a risky intervention in a child marriage, which became the focus of his free talk, "Runaway Bride." It recounts his complicated dealings with a family of beggars in Puttapparthi who had arranged a marriage for their 12-year-old daughter—a former street child Purviance had helped get into school. Young Lakshmi was to wed a much older male relative of hers.

"Now she was standing before me," Purviance recalls, "begging me to do something to prevent this marriage she did not want." Though it was

dangerous to intervene, he says, "I had invested too much of my time and cared too much about Lakshmi's future to just shrug this off."

Every year 15 million girls are married as children, Purviance notes. His talk explains why child marriage is common in India and how the practice destroys girls' futures and exposes them to health problems, gender-based violence and trafficking. Even Western countries are facing this issue. Britain recently reported an uptick in forced marriages. And more than a dozen U.S. states have worked on their minimum-age laws during the past two years; though 21 states still lack minimum-age statutes.

In addition to the story of Lakshmi and her family, Purviance offers the complementary talk, "Toys, Tricks & Trust: Working with Street Children in India." It tells the story of how these clever children survive and how—using a little cleverness of his own—Purviance was able to help get several of them off the street.

Purviance first encountered street children in the late 1970s, when he lived in the slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh. "I have always had a soft spot for street children," he says. "I think for all of us the idea of a child without home, food, security, medical care or education is heart-breaking."

He would never give money to street kids. "But I always carried a few small toys in my pocket; and I came to be known as 'Toy Man' in our town," Purviance says. The toys would disrupt the kids' scams and begging routines just long enough to allow him to engage them in real conversations. As Toy Man, Purviance was able to build trust and nudge the kids' thoughts toward school.

They would quickly become voracious readers and

were especially fond of Harry Potter, he says.

"The books provided the gift of imagination and that was the door to a new intellectual curiosity for them. They found a world their parents would never know. And having found it they could never go back to the streets."

Purviance also is currently preparing a talk about child trafficking in India. That talk will include updates on a pilot anti-trafficking project World's Children began last year.

Poverty and its devastating impacts on children, women and families is a common thread that ties together all his talks. Another common theme, Purviance says, is "how small efforts can, little by little, lead to big changes; so it's important to try."

He enjoys talking about his rewarding—though sometimes frightening—experiences in India.

ences in India.

"It puts real, human faces on poverty," he says. "And that's important."

Area organizations or church groups interested in hearing one or more of Purviance's talks can call World's Children at 541-904-0789 or email david@worldschildren.org to find out more or schedule an event. Area residents also are welcome to stop by the World's Children office, located above La Magie Bakery, 473 E. Hood Ave. The entrance is at the back of the building, off Cedar Street.

World's Children, which relocated from Corvallis to



PHOTO PROVIDED

World's Children Director David Purviance who became known as "Toy Man" in the town where he lived in India, teaches boys how to use a yo-yo.

Sisters last year, currently supports 29 orphanages and two nursing schools in India, as well as orphanages in Ethiopia and Guatemala.

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