

2010 Frederick Douglass Award Winner

Sina Vann | Cambodia



Frederick Douglass Award

is given to an individual who has survived slavery and is using their life in freedom to help others. The award honors the

tremendous resilience of the human spirit, and emphasizes that many survivors of modern-day slavery go on to help others to freedom. Named after an escaped slave who became an influential author, diplomat and abolitionist, and helped persuade President Lincoln to end American slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation.

Sina Vann tries to forget. But she can't. What she has endured is horrific. She says the memories are a hurt that cannot be healed, locked in a secret chamber of her heart. The fact that she has survived, and turned her pain into a passion to help others, is a miracle.



Sina was tortured in this now-abandoned dungeon.

Trafficked and Tortured

Sina's nightmare began on a trip that she thought would be a vacation. A childhood friend invited Sina to tag along. They were travelling from their home in Vietnam to neighboring Cambodia.

"When I stepped into Cambodia, my childhood ended," Sina says, "and the dark side of my life started." Sina was betrayed, and sold into slavery. She woke up covered in blood in a strange room. She had been drugged, and raped. She was 13 years old, trapped in a brothel.

Sina was raped by 20 to 30 men nearly every day. If she didn't smile and pretend she was happy, she was beaten. If she hesitated to please a customer, she was tortured.

"I was sick and shaking," Sina recalls, "but if I didn't service customers I would be locked in the dungeon. They would tie my hands and tie my feet. And they would splash water over me, and they would shock me. When I was shocked, I felt like my spirit just left me."

Rescued and Reborn

When Sina was rescued during a raid organized by anti-slavery activist Somaly Mam, she wasn't sure if it was for real. She had been rescued once before, but was brought back to the brothels by corrupt police.

But this time it was real. She was brought to a rescue shelter. And a new Sina Vann was born.

"I felt like my life was hopeful again," she says.

Sina has dedicated her life to helping others. She now walks back into her own worst nightmare. She helps sex slaves escape, and provides condoms and health advice for those unable to break free. On the street, she's fearless and confident, defying the memories that still haunt her.



At the shelter, Sina inspires other former sex slaves to build lives of dignity and hope.

“The first step is to show them compassion,” Sina says. “They need warmth and love because they lack love and warmth in their life.”

She knows first-hand how difficult it can be to overcome the trauma of sex slavery, so her discussions with other survivors are especially effective.

“I want to encourage you to persevere in life and to carry on,” Sina tells them. They believe her when she says it’s possible. Sina has shown that it is. Sina counsels women who are learning job skills, such as sewing and hair styling, so they can earn a living and lead productive lives.

An Emerging Leader

Sina is emerging as one of Cambodia’s leading activists combating sex slavery. She has a third-grade education, so she’s studying part-time to complete her schooling. She works for the Somaly Mam Foundation, and as a leader in the “Voices for Change” program, she speaks out on behalf of sex slaves who can’t speak for themselves.

Sina fights back tears, and nightmares, every time she recounts what happened to her inside the brothels. But she tells the story anyway. She endures the pain. She knows her story must be heard -- by people unaware that sex slavery is happening, by those who want to end it, by women still trapped in brothels, and by survivors who are emerging from the darkness and need inspiration to rebuild their lives.

“I’m living with anger against the brothel owners,” Sina says, “The pain really gives me strength to help others.”

Sina hopes that someday she will meet the people who enslaved her. She has a message she wants to deliver. “I want to say thanks to them for helping me to be who I am now.”