



Survivor Stories

Richard Mensa: child slave Deprived of Education Dreams of Being a Teacher

Story by Anna Bengel | Photos by Emily Teague

Poverty and ignorance forced Richard's grandmother to traffic him into slavery. He spent seven years as a child slave on Lake Volta. At her funeral he saw a chance to be free—and was courageous enough to take it.

Richard's father died when he was little. He was given to his grandmother, but she could not provide for him. In a heartbreakingly common practice in Ghana, she turned him over to a trafficker.

"I think if my grandmother was not in poverty, she would not have sold me into slavery," Richard says. "Poverty and ignorance [are] what make people in this community give their children out."



The Sad, Familiar Story of Poverty and Ignorance

Poverty often forces vulnerable families to sell their children into slavery. Ignorance of laws outlawing slavery, as well as laws to punish, prosecute, and imprison perpetrators of child trafficking, exacerbates the crisis.

The ignorance that leads to modern slavery also keeps it hidden. Today's slavery is a hidden crime—making it harder for the public to see and for vulnerable villagers to understand, and for those in slavery to call out for help.

The trafficker who preyed on his grandmother's desperate situation continued to make grand promises to Richard. He swore to build a house for the young boy when Richard came of age. Richard knew that was a lie; he knew it was a cruel trick to keep him enslaved for a long time.

But he was trapped—forced to work, under threat of violence, unable to walk away.



Slavery Hurts the Innocent

Like many vulnerable Ghanaian children, Richard was trafficked to a fishing village on Lake Volta, the biggest man-made reservoir in the world. He was forced to work day and night on dangerous, deadly fishing boats.

In this huge expanse of water, storms can easily capsize small vessels and kill all those aboard. Children are forced to dive into perilous waters to retrieve tangled nets. Many never resurface. Many never go home.

As boys his own age and in his own class grew up and earned an education, Richard remained a child slave. "I have delayed my education because my grandmother sold me to a trafficker," he says. Richard was a child slave for seven years.

Freeing Richard

FTS's partner organization International Needs Ghana works on the front lines to educate communities on child trafficking, child protection violations, and the slavery that devastates Ghanaian children.

One of Richard's aunts participated in a community learning group, where she discovered that what happened to Richard constituted illegal trafficking and was punishable by law. Many Ghanaian villagers do not realize traffickers can be arrested. Armed with this new knowledge, she called for her nephew's return.

Upon the death of the grandmother who had trafficked him, Richard was allowed to return to his community to attend the funeral. He knew the slave holder would order him back to brutal life on Lake Volta after the burial. He resisted.



Richard asked his aunt to report his enslaver; she honored his request by alerting the village's community child protection committee. The CCPC asked the trafficker to an informational meeting; instead of honoring the invitation, he fled.

Dreams Become Reality

Richard was given psychological and social support services focused on relieving trauma and fostering reintegration; educational materials; and access to health care. Now 17, he dreams of becoming a teacher.

"My dream to become a professional teacher seems to be a reality for me now," he says. "And [I] hope other children who have been trafficked could get this same opportunity given to me."



The Growing Up Free Initiative

In June 2015 the Ghana government signed a Child Protection Compact Partnership with the United States. This partnership facilitates an investment of up to \$5 million in U.S. foreign assistance to aid the government and Ghanaian civil society in reducing child trafficking and slavery, and improving child protection throughout the country.

The initiative supports the formation and implementation of a comprehensive, integrated plan for prevention, rescue, prosecution, rehabilitation, reintegration, education, wrap-around social services, the development of market-based livelihoods for vulnerable families, and the formation of communities united in the determination to drive slavery from their midst.

Growing Up Free embodies FTS' proven Community-based Model for Fighting Slavery. Our model's core principle is to create local assets that offset the most salient vulnerabilities that lead to modern slavery: lack of awareness, the absence of strong protective community organizations, household insecurity such as poverty or illness, inadequate legal protections, and survivor vulnerability to re-enslavement.

Growing Up Free pledges to build capacity, educate and mobilize, meet basic needs, and change attitudes and practices in Ghana.

To learn more, visit www.freetheslaves.net or email Ghana@freetheslaves.net.