

Why I Free Slaves: Photographer Lisa Kristine

Pretend you've never heard of modern slavery, of the 40 million men, women and children oppressed and abused as slaves around the world. Now imagine you're an internationally celebrated humanitarian documentary photographer. What would you do when you found out slavery still exists? How would that feel? Lisa Kristine felt like she'd been hit by a train.

"I stand for freedom because it's every person's birthright. We all have something to give. Look in yourself and find that one thing that you can give toward ending slavery."



Kristine's standing in the philanthropic world is superlative. Over a 30-year career, she has documented native cultures and causes in more than 100 countries. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote the forward to her groundbreaking book, [Slavery](#). Today she is a global voice of anti-slavery activism, courted by museums, media, business, NGOs and schools. Her [2012 TED Talk](#) has been viewed by millions.

And yet, even for this legendary human rights advocate, it wasn't always so.



Lisa Kristine on location | Image: Erica Jordan

Seeing Slavery at Last

In 2009 Kristine was honored as the sole exhibitor at the [World Peace Summit](#), attended by the dalai lama and other Nobel laureates. Surrounded by the most influential humanitarians on the planet, she met a supporter of Free the Slaves.

“It completely gutted me,” Kristine remembers. “My entire life is based on observing others, and yet I hadn’t seen it.” Three decades of traveling the world making images, and she had missed slavery. She worried, “If I don’t know, how many other people don’t?” She had trouble sleeping. Within two weeks Kristine had called FTS co-founder Peggy Callahan to offer her help.

“I felt heartbroken,” she says. “That’s what set me on my journey.”

In the forward of *Slavery*, Desmond Tutu writes, “We can stand with those enslaved today and let them know they are seen.” By joining forces with Free the Slaves, that’s exactly what Kristine did. Today her support powers concrete anti-slavery work on the ground: with local leaders, within the most vulnerable villages, for real people.

“We all have something to offer when it comes to eradicating slavery,” Kristine says. She went into the field and captured both the suffering and inner strength of slaves. Kristine makes palpable images of human dignity against the soul-sucking backdrop of forced hardship. Viewers feel a visceral connection to the people in her photographs.

We stand before an image of a slave, struck by the pain but also the power. Her work evokes a lingering disquiet over the state of modern slavery but is also a motivator to do something about it.



Brick kiln slavery in Asia | Copyright Lisa Kristine

Face to Face with Slaves

The first time Kristine saw slavery in person was in the brick kilns of India. The day was scorching, up to 130 degrees. Slaves old and young were stacking bricks on their heads, one at a time, up to 18 in all, each weighing almost 4 pounds—70 pounds of dusty, hot blocks pressing down on top of each human. The slaves worked mechanically, blanketed in scarlet powder, for up to 18 hours a day.

“Their eyelashes were pure dust,” Kristine says. “I started to choke up, and I really wanted to cry, and the abolitionist standing beside me said, ‘Lisa, don’t do it here. You cannot do it. It’s not safe for them; it’s not safe for you.’ It was a very moving experience. It’s no small thing being privy to the underbelly of society, to really see what slavery is in its harshest form.”

Kristine’s work with Free the Slaves has also shown her firsthand how people are rescued, and entire communities are freed. What still strikes her most is the light in the eyes of both slaves and survivors.



Gold mining slavery in Africa | Copyright Lisa Kristine

The Faces of Slavery

Kristine's work is achingly, vividly beautiful—images that bear witness to modern slavery in all its ugly malice. They solemnize sorrow yet also mark a steadfast sense of pride and self, even on the faces of slaves.



Lisa Kristine Exhibition | Image: Erica Jordan

"The wonderful thing about photography is that it transcends language," Kristine says. "Seeing is believing." In 2010 Kristine and Free the Slaves co-published [Slavery](#), a collection of horror and anguish, astonishment and wonder. Her camera alights on slaves trapped in kilns, mines and brothels.

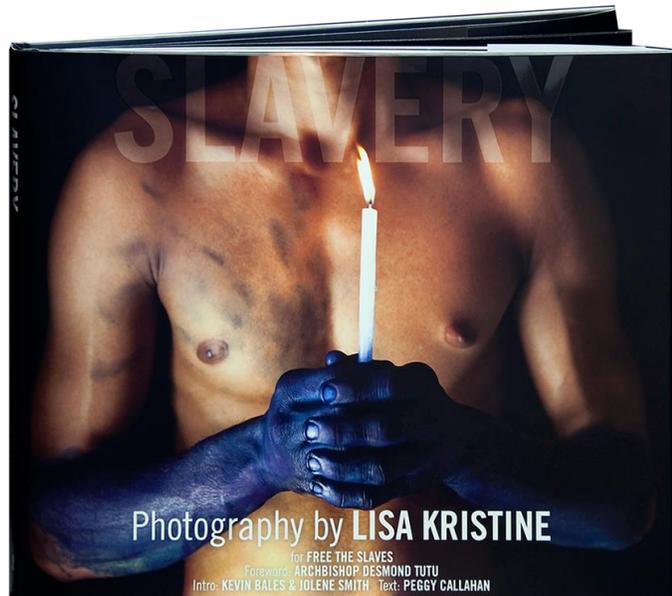
Every sale of [Slavery](#) contributes funds directly to FTS. In 2013 Kristine received the [Lucie Humanitarian Award](#), in part because of her work on the book with Free the Slaves.

A Communal Effort

Kristine's connection to Free the Slaves is organic and harmonious. She uses her talent to make images that circle the globe raising awareness of modern slavery, enlightening people who then join the freedom fight—making our shared efforts even stronger.

Committed patrons like Kristine help vital front-line partners carry out our innovative Community-based Model for Freedom, a proven grassroots approach to liberating slaves, confronting conditions that allow slavery to persist, and creating sustainable systems of freedom. FTS alliances with anti-slavery groups all over the world mean donations have global impact.

Kristine once did a project on centenarians, people who live more than 100 years. She asked what advice they would offer the world. "They almost [all] had the same answer, all of them. It was: Help one another."



Sales of the book [Slavery](#) benefit Free the Slaves

Eradicating slavery is an ongoing, evolving effort—each enslaved person and slavery survivor is a unique human with distinct needs. Committed FTS donors fuel the journey to viable freedom for millions suffering in slavery and struggling as survivors.

"If you take one step toward the gods, the gods take 10 toward you," Kristine says. "Look in yourself and find the one thing you can give toward ending slavery."



**Free the Slaves needs your help.
Learn more. Take Action. Donate Today.
We Don't Free Slaves, You Do!**