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ArtWorks for Freedom: Celebrating 5 Years of Raising Human Trafficking Awareness

Courtney,

Early on in my human rights career, I heard people talk about the importance of being, “a voice for the voiceless.” In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that I used it myself, thinking that this represented the heart of advocacy work. It didn’t take me long, however, to realize that I was wrong.

Through my work in combating human trafficking, I began to spend a lot of time with survivors in the United States and overseas. As these women, men and young people shared their stories with me, I recognized the power of their voices while they recounted the horrors they had lived through and their fierce determination as they imagined their futures through the eyes of hope. And soon, I knew that they didn’t need my voice; they had their own. They just needed a microphone.

At ArtWorks for Freedom, we are honored to work with many survivors as artists and advisors. ArtWorks’ founder Kay Chernush spent hours talking to each person whose story she told in the moving photo montages that comprise the exhibit “Bought & Sold: Voices of Human Trafficking,” which is a central feature in all our awareness campaigns. In this newsletter, we’re sharing some of the lessons learned from those experiences and how artists can honor survivor voices when addressing human trafficking in their own work.

ArtWorks for Freedom is honored to participate in amplifying the voices of survivors in the fight against human trafficking, and we will continue to keep their voices at the center of our work. We hope you’ll join us in this effort and keep survivor voices in mind whenever you discuss human trafficking with those around you.

Michele Clark, Executive Director

ARTWORKS FEATURE: How to Honor Survivor Voices in Art

Participants of the Mentari Human Trafficking Survivor Empowerment Program learn about photography with Kay Chernush in New York City in 2015.

ArtWorks for Freedom was founded on the core belief that art can serve as a powerful platform to raise awareness of human trafficking by avoiding stigmatizing imagery and presenting survivor experiences in an authentic way. We pursue this balance by involving trafficked persons in the creation of art that honors their stories while educating others.

We encourage artists, and anyone who wishes to expose human trafficking, to honor survivor voices by following a few key tips:

- 1. Find ways to understand survivor stories.** If you are truly serious about dedicating an artistic work to the fight against human trafficking, it is important to become as informed as possible. Take a survivor-centered approach to your research by reading several memoirs and biographies that are written by survivors. Don't push too hard to speak with survivors right away - remember that interacting directly with survivors is a sensitive matter. It takes time, a non-judgmental attitude, sensitivity and training to build a relationship of trust.
- 2. Offer your art as a way to empower survivors.** Organizations that help empower survivors may have opportunities for artists to lead workshops and classes to give them an outlet for creative expression. The goal of this type of interaction is to teach and support survivors' creative expression, not to pry or get into the personal details of their stories.
- 3. Learn from multiple perspectives.** It's important to remember that human trafficking is multi-layered and complex. Hearing one story may not be enough to understand all of the different types of trafficking and the ways it can occur. Research and share the varied ways survivors have experienced trafficking - from sex trafficking to domestic servitude or agricultural labor exploitation. This helps create a more comprehensive understanding for everyone.

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