



TACKLING TRAFFICKING AT THE GRASSROOTS

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Following her teenage interest in the Japanese language unexpectedly led Christey West to a life battling against poverty and human trafficking

Missing pairs of shoes: a stark memory helped change Christey West's life, and in turn led the Christchurch woman to dedicate herself to helping others change theirs.

West was in Italy, job-hunting for work as a Japanese interpreter. She'd been fascinated by Japanese ever since high school. A sixth form trip to Tokyo, where the monorail trains seemed to be "actually flying between buildings" made her want to "experience living in a land and culture vastly different from what I knew". Her pathway was clear: a language degree at CPIT followed, then two years living and working in Osaka on the JET programme.

But it was West's travels around other parts of Asia, where she witnessed extreme poverty for the first time, which resonated more, and caused her to second-guess her chosen career.

She realised her heart wasn't in languages, she says. "I was more interested in global issues, poverty in particular, and how I could use my working hours to contribute to the world rather than simply have a career. I thought back to a trip I'd had in Nepal where my friend and I were chatting with local people on the street when there was a power cut and there were young kids running around wearing only thin t-shirts with bare feet in the freezing cold."

Wanting to help, West and her friend took the kids to a clothing shop the next night, and bought them warm jackets and new shoes. A couple of nights later, the kids were wearing their jackets but were running around in the cold in bare feet again. "A local man explained to us that the kids had sold their shoes to buy glue to sniff in order to suppress their appetites," says West. "This experience taught me that 'solving poverty' was much more complex than a tourist coming in and buying kids a pair of shoes, and I wanted to learn more about it."

West moved to Vietnam to volunteer in an orphanage. "From there I started working in development and doing my Masters. While I was working on an education project for disadvantaged children living in a floating slum on the Red River in Hanoi, two of the girls were abducted on their way to class." One family had underworld connections, and got their daughter back. The other didn't. "The locals said she'd been sold into a brothel in Cambodia. That was my first exposure to human trafficking."

Discovering Japan had a huge underground trafficking issue, West combined her language fluency and interest in development to focus on trafficking for her Masters' thesis. For the next few years West volunteered and worked for a



ABOVE Conducting an interview with a survivor of human trafficking on Samar Island, Philippines.

OPPOSITE A consultation between Christey and Just Peoples' local partner in Batam, Indonesia, working out a new project.

variety of organisations. She lived in a back alley in Hanoi, a squatter slum in Manila, and a poor town on Samara Island.

What West saw was heartbreaking, frustrating, but also inspiring. Eyeless orphans in Vietnam, deformed by Agent Orange. Filipino maids abused and starved by rich employers. Families selling their daughters' virginity to traffickers. "People I met were blocked by poverty, without access to education and healthcare, had no local job opportunities, and had corrupt government, police, and social service officers who they couldn't rely on, so despite working hard there was little room for them to improve their life prospect," says West. "Despite this, there are always local people who create innovative and sustainable solutions to the poverty they face and are dedicated to helping themselves and their communities."

One local woman, Hang, whom West worked with on an education programme, was a great example. A local mother, Mai, would collect and sell rubbish at night, earning \$1 per day to care for two kids. Her dream was to open a small shop, but she could never earn enough.

"So Hang gave her a loan of \$6 out of her own pocket, half her daily salary, to buy a couple of plastic stools, a teapot, and a coal burner," recalls West. "Mai set up a stall on the bridge and sold tea and grilled sweet potato to passersby. When she



LEFT Christey in Hang's village, Son La, Vietnam. ABOVE RIGHT Christey with a teacher whose salary Just Peoples sponsored in Batam, Indonesia. RIGHT Christey at Mai's shop in Hanoi.

earned enough to pay Hang back, Hang reinvested the money into Mai's business and on it continued for a couple of years until Mai was able to open her store. She now earns much more selling snacks and drinks in her village and has created a much needed communal hangout for the locals too."

West saw Hang use her own humble salary to help lots of women like Mai, going above and beyond her role in the NGO. Even when Hang was forced to return to her village to care for an alcoholic father-in-law, she continued to help others. "Instead of being defeated by her heartbreaking change in circumstances, Hang set up afternoon classes for kids in her village who couldn't afford to go to school. Her classes became so popular that she converted her house into a school and teaches around 50 kids per day."

Inspired by Hang and others, West launched Just Peoples with her friend Johanna Peek in 2015. Why? While the organisations West had been working with across Asia helped local people implement grassroots solutions that worked, they often struggled to access funding. "It frustrated me that they spent hours of time writing funding application forms or adapting their projects to meet strict international donors' funding requirements." Just Peoples tells the stories of local people and organisations in Asia making a direct difference,

and allows potential donors to connect and use their own networks to fundraise for specific projects.

"I had initially come to Asia to try and work on the ground but I quickly realised that perhaps the world didn't need a Kiwi travelling the globe and trying to solve poverty in someone else's hometown," says West, who is now based in Singapore. "I saw that the real value that I could add was in creating networks and connecting awesome local people who have solutions to poverty with Kiwis who have the means and desire to help."

The initial goal, West admits, was to get four Asian projects funded through their own network of friends and family back in New Zealand. But the response from fundraisers was so positive that Just Peoples continued to grow. "We have now funded work which has significantly changed the lives of 931 people who were living in poverty worldwide through access to education, healthcare, job training and creation, clean water and technology," she says. "Now our goal is to change the lives of 10,000 people by the year 2020." ■

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If you're interested in helping Christey and her team, go to www.justpeoples.org.