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Two Wheels and a Mission

To raise awareness about India's human-trafficking crisis, Kari Irwin '09 joined a bicycle trek through places few outsiders have seen.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07

When remembering her bicycle odyssey through India this summer, Kari Irwin '09 admits she is still processing the sights and sounds of what she says became the most memorable month of her life.

It began with a contact from Marsha Guenzler-Stevens '78, who met Irwin through the IWU Women's Council. Knowing of Irwin's interest in India, Guenzler-Stevens connected her with Christina Lagdameo, project coordinator for Odanadi Seva Trust, a non-profit organization that rescues and rehabilitates victims of human trafficking. Odanadi was organizing a 30-day bicycle trip to raise awareness of the problem of human-trafficking in India. Irwin was among 10 female volunteers chosen to accompany 20 young Indian women who had been rescued through the efforts of Odanadi.



Irwin's 30-kilometer bicycle journey began on May 22 in Mysore, India.

Based in Mysore, India, Odanadi rescues, rehabilitates and empowers young women and children who are survivors of sex trafficking. Hundreds of victims have been rescued in the two decades since the program's founding. Those successes, however, represent a fragment of the vast scale of human trafficking.

According to India's Ministry of Women and Child Development, there are three million prostitutes in the country, of whom 40 percent are minors. Nearly 70 percent are lured into the sex trade with the promise of a good job. Many of India's human-trafficking victims come from rural areas. For that reason, Odanadi's bicycle trek was routed through 100 villages in Karnataka, a state in the southern part of India.

Prior to applying as a volunteer, Irwin read the description of what her duties would be. Days would begin at 6 a.m. and end after 8 p.m. The group would bicycle to two villages per day, traveling a daily average of 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) through hilly terrain on single-speed bicycles, many without brakes.

"I knew going in that this would be a difficult journey," Irwin wrote via e-mail from an Internet cafe in Mumbai after the bicycle tour had ended in June. Her first challenge was convincing family and friends that participating was a good idea.

"My news was met with tears and anxiety," wrote Irwin, a religion major from Palatine, Ill., who graduated magna cum laude in May. "I knew I just had to give them as much information as possible and let it sink in."

Although she had lived in India for three months last year, Irwin's experience "was limited to city life in a comfortable Sikh neighborhood in Jaipur," she said. "Traveling by bicycle offered us the opportunity to wander into villages so small that outsiders never visit."

The trek also gave Irwin a chance to get to know the remarkable girls who had been rescued by Odanadi.

"Each girl had her own story," she said. "Many were orphaned because their parents had contracted HIV/AIDS. Others were sold into a brothel by a family member, others were tricked into sex work through promises of work as a nanny or in a restaurant. All of them were rescued by Odanadi, either by one of the many brothel raids the directors have conducted over the years, or were found in the streets and referred to Odanadi. The girls who still have parents or homes cannot go back due to social stigma."

While living at the Odanadi's home, former sex-trafficking victims are given a second chance: a safe home, a bed, clothing, warm meals, counseling, medical care, school supplies and even dance lessons. The organization houses 65 girls ages 2 to 23.

At each village they visited, the Odanadi survivors were able to share their stories, both spreading awareness of the reality of human trafficking and increasing their own and each other's confidence by speaking publicly about their experiences.

The Odanadi girls "are generally rejected by mainstream society, due to the social stigma of being victims of human trafficking," Irwin explained. "Along the way we met others who face social stigma, such as adivasi (tribal) people who are socially ostracized and generally live in poverty-stricken villages separate from other villages, and a Dalit (formerly, Untouchable) community that converted to Buddhism to escape from the discrimination and injustice of the caste system.



Among the stops was a tribal village deep in a protected jungle. Irwin (in back) stands with women and children at the hut where she and others from her group spent the night.

check in on us as necessary."

For the most part, the group was treated with respect. "We rode into and through tiny villages that no foreigner had ever stepped foot in before and were able to experience the boundlessness of Indian hospitality," Irwin said.

Only once did the travelers have to make their own lunch. Usually, a local family or group of families would invite the entire group of 30 into a home for a meal.

"All along the way people looked after us," Irwin said, who added that "the villages, though without much material or monetary wealth, seemed healthy and thriving. Both men and women would welcome us without reservation. Still, we knew that many victims of domestic violence, human trafficking and child labor are from the villages. It is hard to reconcile both of the faces the villages present, but that is the reality."

"We were welcomed and hosted by these communities, and during our stay with them the girls and the villagers were able to share and unify through their common struggles."

The group slept on the floors of garages, shops, schoolhouses and mud huts. They ate rice and vegetable stew for almost every meal. Their journey took them up and down mountains in a variety of weather conditions. The group often had to share a single bathroom, when they were lucky enough to have a bathroom.

The travelers did take plenty of safety precautions.

"Since we were traveling by bike, we were never very far away from a big city or town, and a Jeep followed us with our belongings the whole time," Irwin said. "Further, the police in each town we passed through were notified in advance of our travel plans, and could

As they drew closer to arriving back in Mysore, Irwin noted that the Odanadi girls "didn't want the cycle to end. And honestly, though I had been often desperate to get back to Mysore and sleep in a real bed and eat something besides a plateful of rice and rest my knees, which were in near constant pain, I was sad to see it end, too."

Irwin said the event's benefit to the victims was evident.

"The girls really came out of their shells towards the end of the cycle," she said. "Some of the girls who had hardly said a word at the beginning got the courage to speak in front of entire villages about human trafficking."

Many of the girls returned to school soon after the cycle ended. "I often talked with the girls about their future plans -- quite a few want to become social workers, others want to go into business or into a trade such as hairstyling or cooking," said Irwin. "By the end of the cycle, the change in many of the girls was readily apparent. Many had gained a sense of self-confidence and self-worth; others seemed to have grown stronger and more independent."

The experience has made Irwin consider starting a sister organization in the United States that would raise funds for Odanadi as well as raise awareness about human trafficking.



Irwin, at right, and a fellow volunteer from Belgium pose with an Indian girl (center) who had been rescued by Odanadi.

But for both Irwin and the girls, the cycle's full effect has not yet fully sunk in. "It is too early to tell how this experience will impact their lives, though it undoubtedly will, as it is impacting mine," noted Irwin, who began a fellowship this September to study Hindi at the American Institute for Indian Studies in Jaipur, Rajasthan, a state in northern India. She hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in South Asian anthropology or religions when she returns to the U.S. in May 2010.

No matter what her future holds, Irwin plans to keep in touch with the young women with whom she experienced so much.

"After sharing some of my best and most difficult moments with these girls, I could not imagine losing touch with them," she says. "I have made lifelong friends."