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By Kevin DeValk

Free at Last





Above: Three children work in a slate mine, where harsh conditions are part of daily life. Photo provided by Set Free Alliance.

Facing Page: In 2025, Set Free prevented 728 children from entering slavery and rescued 5,584 from rock quarries. Photo by Colland Creatives. Used with permission.

You're a child. It's late at night. You're sleeping, or trying to, in the pit of a disgusting rock quarry; the same one you work in under oppressive bosses. If you're a girl, you have probably been sexually abused by those masters. Suddenly, unexpectedly, a ladder is lowered into your quarry.

Voices beckon you to climb up! Someone is here to help you, but you're hesitant to trust them. Do they really want to help or are they only here to do further harm? You wrestle with indecision before stepping on the first rung of the ladder.

In the morning, your supervisors will be angry to learn you are gone, but by then you will be free!

In partnership with local churches, Set Free Alliance, based in Greenville, South Carolina, frees children as young as six years old, exploited, often under dishonest pretenses, and sold into slave labor in India. They live in squalor for little money, often to pay medical bill loans the family accepted from unscrupulous, predatory lenders.

So far, through these heroics in the night, they've rescued over 100,000 children in India. When possible, Set Free also prevents children from becoming enslaved by paying off those loans before the enslavement starts. Families then pay back the charity under much more favorable terms, often by providing rice, firewood or other commodities the organization can use. Since 2020, when the program began, over 16,000 children have been prevented from going into slavery, 13,000 girls have been saved from sex trafficking, and \$1 million in predatory loans have been paid off. Set Free Alliance finds the average loan issued to set a child free is just over \$72.

No Small Task

Rescuing the children from abhorrent working conditions requires considerable planning and working closely with local partnering organizations. "A circle of buses is staged in the area," said Sarah Kelley, Set Free's CEO. "The children are then bused to safe houses. It must happen quickly," Kelley said. "When the children are discovered missing, supervisors will launch a manhunt."

"India is a challenging country to work in. Entrenched in its caste system and Hindu faith, there are strong anti-Christian sentiments," said Andrew Hendricks, Set Free's program director.

The lowest class, the Dalits or "Untouchables," live in misery and have few rights. Slave labor exists even though it is illegal.

Set Free Alliance partners with local churches and pastors. Once freed and settled in these safe houses, children are fed, given a place to stay, and have their other needs met, as they wait to be reunited with their families. Because of anti-Christian persecution, Set Free focuses on partnering with local pastors instead of sponsoring missions trips, Hendricks pointed out. "There's a lot of persecution that goes on [against Christians in India]."

Two of the key leaders who launched the rescues were Phil Holtje, a businessman who founded his own graphics design business, and his wife, Jamie, who founded the Child Slavery Prevention Program. She put \$100,000 into the program to fund loans and help secure paid-in-full documentation from the lenders. A new, interest-free loan is written, with reasonable terms that don't put children up as collateral. Good-in-kind, such as firewood and rice, which are used by a local orphanage, are accepted as payments.



Above: Rescued children receive food, medical care, pastoral care and educational opportunities. Photo provided by Set Free Alliance.

"There have been cases where the bread winner was injured or ill, so there was no money coming in. These loans are not taken out for cars or TVs or cell phones. And the interest is unbearable — upwards of 25%," Phil said.

How Set Free Alliance Began

Child rescue is only part of the work Set Free Alliance and partnering churches are doing. In Sierra Leone, where the ministry began, neighboring Liberia and in India, workers are drilling wells, providing many communities with nearby, clean water for the first time.

Around the world, over 800 million people lack fresh water; it was this fact that led a custom home builder, Roland Bergeron, to get involved. His first mission trip was to Central America in 2002. Soon he and his new organization, then called "Water of Life," began serving areas other organizations and ministries sometimes overlook.

Operating in India, Liberia and Sierra Leone, Set Free sends drilling teams into villages. They show up with heavy machinery and finish the well in about two weeks. At the end of the project, the pump and the hole are coated in concrete. A local resident is trained how to complete repairs, to ensure the well doesn't fall into disrepair, prompting people to once again walk long distances to seek unclean water.

Hendrix explained that, in the course of their over 20 years, nearly 600 wells have been dug in Sierra Leone; nearly 1,000 in Liberia, and over 1,000 in India. What's more, drilling wells leads to churches being planted. The gospel is shared. "We love any chance to spread the gospel," Hendricks said.

Serving the Poorest of the Poor

"Sierra Leone consistently makes the top ten list for the poorest countries on Earth," Kelley said. Founded in 1971, mining and subsistence agriculture make up the bulk of the country's economy in this small, presidential republic. That economy was severely damaged by civil war from 1991 to 2002. Rebuilding the nation's infrastructure has happened very slowly over the past quarter century, according to Britannica.com

Although there are hospitals in major cities, access to quality health care is virtually unavailable, Hendricks explained. So, in Sierra Leone, Set Free, with help from partnering supporters, sets up tent medical facilities in the villages they operate in, he said.

"It's one of the most underdeveloped countries in the world," Hendricks said.

Neighboring Liberia, with 4.8 million people, is also impoverished, with 3.5 million classified as poor, according to a 2024 report by the World Bank — including one million in "extreme poverty."

Drilling Wells Leads to More

It was through well-drilling in India that the problem of labor trafficking was discovered.

Being freed from those horrible medical loans can lift enormous burdens off families. Kelley and Hendricks said the families don't always understand the loan terms. Despite making payments, the balance never seems to go down, and it's unclear to them why.

The children taken to safe houses face a brighter future. First, they are checked by a doctor. "From there, the long work of healing can begin," Kelley said. It's determined if reunification with their families is possible or if another living situation needs to be arranged.

One person rescued was a young man named Raju. Instead of attending school, Set Free leaders say he was enslaved in a slate mine. His hands were used to carry sharp tools and stones instead of books and school supplies. He dreamed of school, but in the mines, dreams felt impossible.

Everything changed the day he was rescued.

Placed in a loving church home, Raju received food, care, and — finally — a chance at an education. He faced cruel insults, poverty, and doubt from those who said he could never become a doctor. He didn't give up. He is now in his first year of medical school. His dream is to work as a doctor on teams rescuing other children like him.

If you'd like to learn more about the situations in these countries, and how you can help, please visit www.setfreealliance.org. †



Kevin DeVal is a freelance writer. Based in Greenville, S.C., with his wife and kids, Kevin enjoys writing about the great causes in life, including Set Free Alliance, also based in Greenville. Kevin's goal is to glorify God and encourage others through informative, thought-provoking journalism.