

## Harold D'Souza

I want to share with you what happened to me so you can understand how a person like me who is educated can become a victim of human trafficking. I am from India. Our lives there are different. I got married on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1994, but mine was an arranged marriage. We never exchanged photographs, met or saw each other. My wife and I followed our parents' wishes. I just went to her village once, saw her, and we got married. But today I am a happy husband: we have been happily married for more than 25 years. We brought to our marriage trust, faith, commitment, and that's how we succeeded.

In a way, my coming to the U.S. was similar. I was invited to the United States of America in the year 2003 on an H-1B visa. I was promised a salary of \$75,000. In India that is a lot of money. The average Indian with an education may earn \$3,600 per year. A salary like that would be like fast forwarding my life. I thought I could improve my situation and make a huge difference in the life of my kids. So, I accepted the job. And when I accepted, I came to the U.S. on four things: I came on trust, I came on faith, I came on a promise, and I came to live my American dream. Little did I know that I was walking straight into a trap. I didn't understand that I was being tricked and trapped. I found that out later.

I brought my wife and two small children with me to the U.S. thinking we were starting a new and good life. The day I landed in the U.S., in Cincinnati, Ohio, in February of 2003, my trafficker met me at the airport and asked me, "Harold, do you have any cash?" I said yes. I was carrying a thousand dollars in cash from India. It was all the money I had. He said, "Oh it is not safe for you to carry around all that cash, give it to me." I believed him. I didn't know his plans, so I gave him the cash, thinking it would be in safe custody.

Then he drove me to a small apartment over a restaurant and told me that my wife and I would have to work there. I tried to tell him that I came as a business development manager on a \$75,000 salary, everything in black and white on an H-1B visa. He didn't care. We landed at 7 o'clock in the evening and starting the next day both my wife and I were working.

At first, I was thinking that the other job would become available and that we would just do this until it did. The trafficker told me, "Harold, you've got two boys," (my two sons were 4 and 7 years old). He said, "You know you need money to buy a house for your family. He said my wife would make \$2000 a month so we agreed to keep working at the restaurant. We were exhausted. Since we landed in the U.S. we had been working 14-16 hours a day non-stop, 7 days a week.

I still remember the first day, coming back to the apartment from the restaurant. I opened the door on my younger son's head because he was sleeping at the door waiting for us. My older son was six feet away on the floor in his underwear. We had no mattresses, no furniture, no clothes, nothing.

That first week was the way we lived for over a year, and the owner of the restaurant never paid my wife and I that whole time. How does it happen? It happens because of fear. The trafficker

made us frightened that we were criminals and that I would be arrested if I didn't do what he said. I wanted to protect my wife and family so I just kept working for free.

Down the road a couple of months, he told me, "Harold, you need to take a bank loan." I said I didn't want a bank loan because we didn't have anything to secure the loan and I didn't want to find myself deep in debt which is what happens when you take out a loan in India. But he tricked me into going to the bank one day – to this day I still don't know which bank it is - and he forced me to sign some documents. He took the check, which was a 5-figure check in my name.

Most traffickers are multi-millionaires because they find so many ways to profit from their victims. They have so many devious methods for exploiting people. They enjoy it. I can literally see it in my mind's eye right now. After the bank, he took me to his million-dollar house. He said, "Harold, let's celebrate, you are a rich man." So, he got out two shot glasses and poured some scotch in them and said, "Cheers, you're a rich man, lets enjoy." It was late afternoon, so I gulped down the scotch, and before it could reach my stomach, he removed the check from his pocket and told me, "Harold, you owe me this money." In that instant, I lost four things. I lost my voice, I lost my courage, I lost my hope and I lost my freedom. The check was for more than \$40,000 and I realized it was a loan from the bank in my name, and I was thinking, "Where in the world am I going to get \$40,000 to pay this loan?" I don't know how he arranged it with the bank given my immigration status, and I didn't realize it at that moment, but when I look back, I realize now that I was actually in debt bondage.

Before I could digest what was happening to me, he gave me a pat on the back and said, "Harold, this is nothing: you owe me much more." I said, "Oh my God, this was not the final bill, so there is much more. I thought, "We will be working like slaves for him forever."

This continued through the Fall and by December, it got even worse. We had never seen snow in our life. Back in India in our house there was no electricity, no running water, so even having a cube of ice for me was like having ice cream. In December, we got a note from the school my boys were attending. It said that my sons cannot come to school if they don't wear snow jackets. My kids had sweaters from India, which we were dressing them in, but I didn't know what a snow jacket was. We were frightened, but another person working in the restaurant brought me snow jackets. The next day we got another note from the school saying that both my sons cannot come to school if they don't wear snow gloves or mittens. I'm telling you this to say that there were all these red flags about something being wrong in our household, but no one was noticing them or realizing that they were indicators of human trafficking.

If they had, if someone had known the indicators, if someone had been paying attention, the fact that we were trafficked could have been identified at a very early stage at the school. And there were so many other indicators. These were only a couple of signs that were apparent. We were victims of labor trafficking and debt bondage, and no one noticed. After almost a year, my wife could not take it anymore. She was physically, mentally and emotionally breaking down. When I think back on this time, I feel like I failed in four ways: I failed as a person, I failed as a provider, I failed as a protector, and I failed as a parent.

Having said that, after one year my wife couldn't take it anymore, so she confronted our trafficker in the kitchen. She said, "Why don't you pay us our back wages?" He turned on my wife and tried to frighten her. He said, "I'll call the immigration department right now, and tell them you are illegal you are not supposed to be here." You force a person to work for over a year, and then say you are not supposed to be working here – how ironic is that?

My wife said, "Why don't you pay Harold the thousand dollars he gave you." He called me over, looked me in the eye and said, "Harold, what cash? What money? You didn't give any cash." Some of the others in the restaurant heard this fight. They were in the same situation, and they said, "Harold you need to get out of here. If you don't, your wife and your two sons are dead."

He threatened to kill me if I talked. When somebody threatens you and you can see that he means it, it is terrifying. I was so traumatized, and I was telling my wife, "You know, I'm not going to make it, I'm going to die." My younger son was playing on the floor in the corner, and a few seconds later he came and tapped me on the back and said, "Dadu, if you die, who takes care of me? How will I go to school? What will happen to me?" And that is when it hit me that I need to do something. I realized that if I die, he dies; if I die, my wife dies. So, I thought, "I have to live, come what may," and that is what gave me the determination and the willpower to get out of this terrible situation. I had no clue how I was going to do it, but I was going to make it happen.

The restaurant owner had told all the people working for him that if undercover cops come or the immigration department asks questions don't talk – don't tell anything to any Americans. Around that time U.S. authorities had gotten complaints about him and his restaurant and had begun an investigation.

An FBI agent had been assigned to investigate allegations of abuse in the restaurant. I was so scared to talk to her. I was afraid that I would get deported or go to jail. I still thought that I was the one breaking the law. But little by little she won us over. She read our body language and understood that we were afraid. She looked into my eyes and said, "Harold, I am here to help you, I am not here to deport you or get you arrested." She helped me to understand that I was a victim of a terrible crime and that the restaurant owner was the perpetrator. When she said, "I am going to help you," that touched me. I began to trust her and to think that maybe she could help.

And so I told her some of what had happened to us, and things started changing. In a short period of time, we got a Continued Presence certification, and then we got a U visa, and three years later, we got a permanent residency card. During the time the investigation went on, the community of Cincinnati helped us so much. We got temporary shelter, food, and clothing from the community and the local church.

During that time, I learned that there were many others like me who had been trafficked from one country to another. People can be tricked or lured into slavery like I was, or just purchased outright for a price. I realized that this is an industry and it is basically very ruthless. The traffickers are very clever. Why don't they get caught? They're like my trafficker: they move from place to place. When the investigation started, my trafficker closed down the restaurant

and disappeared. That is why most labor trafficking cases are not uncovered. They may exploit people for a year or two, then they move, often with all the money. My perpetrator had tricked me saying that he would hold all our wages for us because we didn't have a bank account. In the case of labor trafficking, whether it is restaurants, gas stations, convenience stores, or motels, the trafficker provides accommodation, conveniently right next door, or right in the place you are working. Then their laborer is available 24 hours 7 days a week, whether it is rain, shine, or snow. You cannot say, "I cannot come to work," because you are at work. And then lodging, boarding is taken from your non-existent salary.

I have heard of cases of people paying to come to the U.S. One person sent 30 lakhs to his agent; 30 lakhs is like \$44,000. One lady paid 53 lakhs, that is \$75,000, in advance for her husband and her kid, and she got deported after working 6 years without having anything to show for it. These are true stories.

How can a person be trapped in forced labor? How can someone like me be so deceived and trapped for over a year? In India where I grew up, in my village if a baby elephant is naughty it is tied with a thick chain. They try to run, and they bruise and bleed shackled as they are. But after 5 years, this same elephant has got so much power that it can topple a car, break a wall, uproot a tree. But they only tie this big elephant with a thin rope. It doesn't try to escape because it thinks it is shackled with a thick chain. In its mind, it is tied to the ground and can't go anywhere. And that's what happens in the case of a victim of labor trafficking. They believe that they are slaves and cannot escape. They think this is their fate and that no one will help them. So, the battle is to show the traffickers that there are very big forces coming for them.

Over the past ten years I have spoken out about what happened to me, and I have become a survivor advocate and public speaker on human trafficking. I have my own NGO, Eyes Open International\*, and I sit on the Board of Justice at Last\*. I am on the Advisory Council for the Ohio Attorney General's Trafficking Commission. In 2015, President Barack Obama appointed me to the United States Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, and I continued my service under President Trump through July 2020. I also serve as an expert consultant to the Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

In 2017, I was awarded the Liberator Award\* and the iCan\* award for my activism and work with other survivors. In 2021 I was recognized with the "Rashtra Perna Award 2021" \* for my service India and Worldwide. I was also awarded the "HEART OF THE FATHER AWARDS 2022" \* in Los Angeles. As of spring 2022, two different films are in production telling my story. The first, **To Be Free\*** is the debut feature documentary film produced and directed by Benjamin Ryan Nathan and executive produced by Martin Sheen. The film shines a light on the pervasiveness of labor trafficking in the United States, how we can spot it in our neighborhoods, and the steps we can take to eradicate this form of modern-day slavery on a systematic level.