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## When Human Trafficking Hit Home, This Unlikely Activist Gave What Victims Needed Most—Jobs

How the Apricot Lane founder is fighting modern day slavery in Cambodia by employing former sex slaves  
**Deborah Huso**

There is very little about **Apricot Lane Boutique** Founder and CEO Ken Petersen that strikes one as activist, not on first glance anyway. A former fire captain in Vacaville, California, Petersen launched the women's retail clothing boutique franchise in 2007 and now has 80 stores in 36 states.

"You know, a lot of firefighters go into women's fashion," he quips. His segue into retail was the result of a job-related fall that left him with three fused vertebrae, essentially ending his firefighting career. While Petersen has been a retail franchise business owner since 1993, his attention turned to women's fashion when he realized there was not a single women's fashion boutique franchise in the marketplace.

When the recession hit, Petersen thought his new business model was toast. He was wrong. Thanks to recognition from the International Council of Shopping Centers in 2008, Apricot Lane grew. "We were so unique in the industry," he says. "That really put us on the map. Everybody wants the hot new retailer of the year."

But this story isn't about Petersen's business success. It's about his partnership with an organization devoted to fighting a global problem so big and so complicated that much of the international community has turned a blind eye to it.

## The Modern Slave Trade

You've heard about ISIS. You've heard about Boko Haram.

What you may not know is that while the United States and its allies are fighting a global war on terror, men and women like Petersen are hacking away at its roots, one of which is human trafficking. In places like Iraq and Syria, human trafficking represents a significant funding source for terrorist groups like ISIS while also being a tactic of war—depleting enemy morale, destroying communities, and encouraging those who might resist to flee and abandon territory instead of holding their ground.

In places like Svay Pak, Cambodia, human trafficking is a major economic driver... that some people would rather not see eliminated.

Petersen's adopted daughter, Kunthea, was born in Svay Pak, a village notorious for its child sex slavery and the tourism it generates. When she was 12, her mother sold her into slavery. Along with four other girls, she was sold to an American tourist who kept them locked in a home for six months where they were repeatedly raped and abused by him and others. Thanks to the testimony of Kunthea and the four other victims, the perpetrator stood trial and received conviction under the PROTECT Act in federal court in Los Angeles. The 2003 act makes it illegal for Americans to sexually abuse children in another country.

"The FBI said it was the most horrific case of sex trafficking they'd ever prosecuted in L.A.," Petersen says of the trial that brought Kunthea to the U.S.

According to the U.S. Department of State's 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report, an estimated 9,460 people faced human trafficking prosecution in 2013; 5,776 were convicted. U.S. citizens convicted of human trafficking can face up to 30 years in prison for each victim, amounting to more than life sentences for the likes of Kunthea's captor.

Had Kunthea's abuser been prosecuted in Cambodia, Peterson says, "he would have gotten a slap on the hand." Petersen describes Svay Pak, even today, as one of the most notorious centers for human trafficking in Southeast Asia. "One hundred percent of the girls born in this village are sold for sex," he contends. "It's a dirty village that people only come to to rape little girls."

While most of the world has heard about sex tourism, faces like Kunthea's make it real... and bring it home. Kunthea and the frightening world from which she came are the reasons Petersen launched a whole new business venture three years ago called 3Strands.

## The Seed of an Idea

"In January 2011, I sent out a state of the union address to all Apricot Lane's franchisees, saying I wanted the brand to be about more than making money," Petersen explains. He asked for ideas. A week later, his wife, Kris, called and wanted to know if he would consider hosting a young girl from Cambodia who was testifying in a sex trafficking trial. Petersen, already the father of three boys, had always wanted to be a foster parent, but Kris had resisted... until now.

Hosting Kunthea put the Petersens in touch with Don Brewster of Agape International Missions (AIM), who told them about his personal mission to stop human trafficking in Cambodia. Through Brewster, who resides now in Svay Pak with his wife, Bridget, Petersen found the "more" he was looking for. He went to his franchisees at their annual

meeting in Las Vegas in 2011 and asked them if they would support a mission involved in fighting human trafficking, a \$32 billion illicit global industry that currently holds more than 35 million people in some form of **slavery worldwide**, including in the U.S.

After watching the documentary *The Pink Room*, which chronicles the struggles of victims of sex trafficking in Cambodia, Apricot Lane's franchisees gave Petersen a resounding green light to *do something*. "I told them," says Petersen, "if we're going to do something, it's got to be bigger than Apricot Lane." He adds, "I knew this could not just be a personal passion of mine."

When Petersen went back to Brewster to ask what the victims of sex trafficking in Cambodia needed most, Brewster said "jobs." Without employment, the girls had little hope of being reintegrated back into their communities and would likely fall victim to trafficking again. So Petersen traveled to Cambodia with Brewster to see what skills these girls had. "They were gifted in weaving bracelets," he notes.

### **Retail Offers Renewal**

Using his expertise in networking and franchising, Petersen decided to start a whole new company that would market, sell and distribute bracelets and other fashion accessories made by the Cambodian trafficking victims AIM helped rescue. He named the new company, which became a nonprofit earlier this year, 3Strands.

Petersen helped Brewster rent an empty former brothel in Svay Pak, and AIM turned it into a facility for employing and empowering the victims.

Today Cambodian girls and women work eight hours a day at the factory, though only about six of those hours are actually spent working. They also receive education, including English instruction, daily lunch and free child care. While the average garment factory worker in Cambodia earns \$50 per month, these girls earn \$150 to \$200. Their salaries allow them to contribute to their family's income (if they still reside with family) or to rent apartments of their own, generally with other girls. Currently, the Svay Pak factory employs 80 women and girls. AIM reports a 98 percent success rate in keeping girls from going back into trafficking.

The key to that success has been employment. "These girls are considered 'trash' in their cultures and communities," Petersen remarks. By giving them jobs, income and purpose, they establish their own self-worth and create worth in the eyes of their families.

The signature of every 3Strands product is a red bead or seed from Cambodia's native sandalwood tree. As Petersen describes it, every tree produces colorless pods that dry up and fall to the ground, but inside every one is a glossy red seed. In that seed, 3Strands found the token of its marketing with each one representing a girl who had been perceived as "trash" but who was inside a beautiful, worthy human being.

In 2014, 3Strands joined with California's Break Free, an organization founded in 2010 when a girl was abducted from a grocery store parking lot in Folsom and trafficked for eight days, in order to bring an educational component to the organization's mission.

Earlier this year, 3Strands took on another bracelet line produced by women in Nepal, who are either victims of sex trafficking or mothers of daughters who might be sold into slavery to feed their families. Petersen says he's currently exploring expansion into Haiti and intends to start home parties to serve as both an educational outlet about human trafficking and a sales opportunity for the jewelry survivors produce. He says home party representatives will be called "Red Seed Ambassadors," and it will offer yet another

outlet for women, in particular, to earn income.

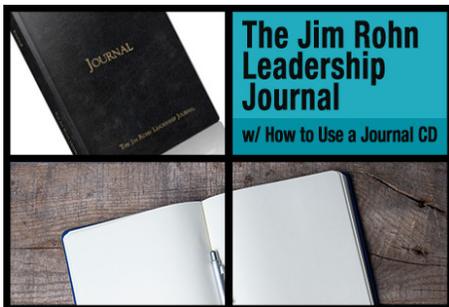
Right now, one can purchase 3Strands' products at Apricot Lane boutiques and at various retailers like Whole Foods and Family Christian Stores, or [online](#). But Petersen's long-term vision is for something even bigger. "Eventually we want a product line that will support a retail store, and then we'll franchise it," he says. "When people learn about it, they want to help. Imagine if a million people came together to fight this thing."

As for Kunthea, who came to the U.S. five years ago speaking broken English, she is now 22 and in her second semester at William Jessup University, where she is studying psychology. She has also been vocal in telling her story. "She was terrified," Peterson says, "But she worked through her fear."

"She wants to keep others from going through what she went through. A lot of people think this is a Third World problem, but it happens all around us and right in our own backyard."

*For more information about 3Strands and how you can help fight human trafficking, visit [www.3StrandsGlobal.com](http://www.3StrandsGlobal.com).*

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