

On Feb. 13, a former RCMP forensic scientist came to UBC to speak about human trafficking in Cambodia.

Brian McConaghy began with a brief overview of Cambodian history. According to McConaghy, Cambodia has a graphic history of child abuse and domestic violence.

"No country exists in a vacuum — there's always a reason for why it is the way it is," said McConaghy. "The psychology of this country is unique in terms of what it's been exposed to."

In the early 1990s, McConaghy said, Cambodia was AIDS-free as a result of the country being sealed from in-or-out migration for three years. According to McConaghy, the arrival of UN troops to reconstruct the nation resulted in the proliferation of the AIDS epidemic in the country as the troops sought after the young girls, offering them higher pay than their poverty-stricken families were making at the time.

McConaghy, who said he broke the UN embargo to smuggle in two suitcases of medical supplies to Cambodia, said kids as young as five can be forced to work in brothels.

"If you're going to execute warrants to rescue such children, you need the participation of [the police] ... but [the police] are part owners of and frequent the brothels," said McConaghy. "So when you're sitting across the table engaging in negotiations with these people, you're really sitting across the enemy."

McConaghy founded the NeeSong Rehabilitation Centre, which he said offers medical intervention and intensive therapy.

"When you rescue a girl from the brothels, you have stolen product, and the traffickers will be coming after you to retrieve it. It's not pretty," said McConaghy.

The centre partners with numerous organizations to provide job skills programs. McConaghy said job skills give them a sense of value so that they don't relapse when they leave.

"It's also therapeutic — the girls see that they can make something beautiful and desirable, so there's beauty and value within them," said McConaghy.

He also said he took over a brothel from the Vietnamese mafia and redeveloped it into a community centre called "the Sanctuary" right under their noses. According to McConaghy, by also serving traffickers, the clinic serves as a way of leveraging relationships with the mafia to excuse children from being sold or abused.

McConaghy said over 500 kids engage in the educational programs, church services, counselling and youth programs the centre offers daily. He said several changes have resulted from the work being done — a decline from 98 per cent to 60 per cent of the centre attendees being abused, mothers coming up to the centre staff asking for help to stop selling their children. He also said four of the girls went on to university.

According to McConaghy, spirituality makes a huge impact in trafficking. He said when the girls internalize the idea that they are so valuable and loved that someone died for them, it makes for successful rehabilitation. McConaghy said the new trend in Cambodia is recruiting girls aged 17 to 22 into the KTV bars — brothels masquerading as karaoke bars.

"I was in Phnom Penh recently and it's crazy — it's really well hidden, so unless you're looking for it, you'll miss it," said Allison Yang, a first-year UBC student.

Diane Buermans is part of the University Christian Ministry, which helped organize the talk. "I think what's most inspiring about Brian's work is that he's bringing dignity back to the girls. It might be a drop in the bucket rescuing one girl, but that one life counts. So it's important to not despair, and to know that there's hope."

"It's not about breaking down a door and rescuing a kid, although that's important too, it's about changing the community so that they aren't selling children anymore," McConaghy said. "That's how you stop human trafficking." ☺