



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Ending Child Trafficking Fuels Our 3,000 Mile Quest**

By Brad Ortenzi

**It all began with an invitation.** In 2014, Mike and Carol Hart, founders of ZOE International, invited my wife, Lori, and I to visit Thailand. We expected to see shattered, broken kids, but instead we saw children overflowing with joy, healthy, and healing. Lori and I were stunned, and our expectations were exceeded.

When we saw what was happening, it was a mystery I needed to solve. The constant detective, I wanted to get to the bottom of this. What in the world was going on here?

### **Survivors of child trafficking should not have been doing that well.**

I went to bed that night, my head still spinning (in a good way) from what I had seen. I pulled out my journal and wrote, "It seems like these kids have a joy that I don't have." Reflecting on that breakthrough moment gets me a little choked up even now.

The 60 to 70 children we met on that weekend were living at ZOE's home in Thailand, which focuses on restoring young people through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, accompanied by trauma counseling, community living, learning the Bible, and experiencing the grace of God from the missionaries and 100+ staff at the facility.

That was nine years ago. Before that journey to Thailand to meet Mike and Carol, I had only read about ZOE online and heard about their ministry from my pastor.

**At the time, I was serving as a detective in the Lancaster County District Attorney's Child Pornography Unit in Pennsylvania.**

In my role as a detective with the Ephrata (Pennsylvania) Police Department, I had become the go-to undercover online child exploitation investigator. My expertise led to specialized training with the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force Program. After completing the training, I began working with the district attorney office's child pornography unit.

In this role, I became all too aware of the prevalence of human trafficking, even in the United States. It's estimated that there are **14,000 to 17,000 people trafficked in the U.S. each year, with 25 percent of those being children.** So, we're talking about **3,000 to 4,000 kids.**



While it can be challenging to come up with exact numbers about human trafficking, any time I'm at a speaking engagement, I will research to see where the nearest human trafficking sting has taken place in proximity to my location. It's usually only two to three miles away. In one instance, I was speaking at a church, and across the parking lot from where I stood was a hotel where I had been involved in my most recent sting operation.

While human trafficking is a devastating international problem, it is not just a problem "over there." It's most definitely a tragedy unfolding in communities across the United States.

**This brings me to the Race Across America.**

In addition to my role as ZOE's Regional Director for the Eastern USA, I'm also director of the ZOE Race Across America (RAAM) Team. Eight riders, two teams of four, will begin a 3,000-mile odyssey starting June 17 from the West Coast near San Diego to the East Coast, finishing in Annapolis, Maryland.

Riders will trade off 15-minute shifts in the California deserts, across the Monument Valley in Utah, up the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, beside the windblown plains of Kansas, through the Gateway City of St. Louis, over the mighty Mississippi, past the cornfields and soybean fields of the Midwest, through the Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia, and along the rolling countryside of Maryland until we arrive at our destination on the Chesapeake Bay.

There will be mountains to climb, vast expanses to traverse, hundreds of hydration and nutrition breaks, lost sleep, sore feet, and backsides, memories, and camaraderie. But the reason to ride is ultimately not about memories, accomplishments, or war stories. Child survivors like the ones I met ten years ago, or young people rescued and restored in eastern Pennsylvania—they are the reason we do this.

**Their freedom is our fuel.**

This epic trek is a significant fundraiser for ZOE's prevention, rescue, and restoration efforts. We raised over \$350,000 in 2021 on our way to a first-place victory in the team event. Our goal this year is \$750,000. We will also use this journey to raise awareness about the tragedy of human trafficking and how God is using ZOE to fight for the freedom of these children and to restore them by showing them to Jesus.

He is a fierce warrior who will stop at nothing to rescue His own, but once the fierce warrior rescues, He turns into a tender daddy to restore.

**And now, just one last story.**

On that same life-changing trip nine years ago, Lori and I were part of an hour-long prayer time with the ZOE missionaries, staff, and rescued kids. Everybody in the same room was praying, and **this little 8-year-old girl came up and put her hand on my shoulder and started praying.** She had no idea who I was. And she did not just offer this soft, sweet prayer, but there was **power and confidence coming from this little girl.**

That was the moment. God did not speak to me audibly, but I sensed something in my spirit so strong, something to the effect of, "You've been chasing justice your whole life; this is what my justice looks like." At that point, I knew this is what I was called to do. I said to God right then, "I want in; I want to be a part of this."



And that is what I am asking of all of you reading this right now. If justice matters to you. If the oppression of the weak and exploited shakes you. I pray right now that this mission would begin to find a place in your heart, too. I pray that their freedom would begin to fuel your passion to seek and rescue the lost.

Thank you for your support and prayers for the ZOE RAAM team during our 3,000-mile race in June. And ask God to use ZOE in an increasing way to help set the captives free.

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**Brad Ortenzi** is Eastern USA Regional Director for ZOE International and Director of the ZOE Race Across America Team. To learn more about ZOE, visit [goZOE.org](http://goZOE.org), and to learn about their Race Across America Team, visit [ZOERAAM.com](http://ZOERAAM.com).

To **schedule an interview** with Brad or other members of the ZOE RAAM team, **email Clem Boyd** at [clem@infinityconcepts.com](mailto:clem@infinityconcepts.com) or **text or call him** at 724.930.4003.

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**Caption:** The ZOE RAAM Race Team 2023: (L-R) John Glick, Tom Jordan, Kevin Quinter, Merv Beiler, Nate Eakin, Craig Whiteford, Matt Lapp. Not pictured: Jeff Conaway. To learn more about the team, go to [ZOERAAM.org/media](http://ZOERAAM.org/media).