

TassaTags: Reclaim Children's Lives While Claiming Your Luggage

By Sophie Braccini



Brenda Hepler with a TassaTag on her bag Photo Sophie Braccini

Brenda Hepler is not someone who gets distressed learning about a global issue but then forgets about it and continues to live unchanged. When the Lamorinda resident learned about the sexual exploitation of children around the world, she was shocked by the magnitude of the issue and decided she would do something to help.

Hepler had no special connections or access to unlimited resources, just her good heart and ingenuity. She created TassaTags – large, handmade luggage identification labels that people attach to their luggage proclaiming their opposition to such abuse.

So far, she has sold 8,500 of them and all proceeds have gone to the non-profit ECPAT-USA (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes). For her, this is just the beginning of the fight.

"It all started in Vienna in 1993 when a friend invited me to attend a United Nation's conference about human rights and I joined the children's right group," remembers Hepler, "it was the first time I realized the magnitude of the problem."

She learned that an estimated one to two million children are enslaved in the sex trade around the world, thousands of children are trafficked into the United States each year, and 25% of 'child sex tourists' around the world are from the US and Canada. "This 'business' is growing more rapidly than

drug trafficking," says Hepler.

Hepler believes that if tourists were more aware of what is happening it could make a difference. "I was in an airport seeing all of these black suitcases, and I wanted to see flowers representing the children," she said. "I started to talk about it with all my friends and anyone I encountered. The idea of a luggage tag came up during these conversations – a symbol against child slavery, a visible voice, with the added benefit that you can spot your luggage more easily."

She created the simple drawing herself, "it represents a flower, for all children, with a fallen petal for those who suffer, and the fallen petal also looks like a tear." The tags come in many colors.

Hepler says she didn't have a clue how to produce the tags. "I found The Regina Self-Help Center in Nongkhai, Thailand, where women do weaving and pottery for a living," she explains, "all the tags are made there and the women are paid a decent wage so the tags are part of the fair trade movement."

She also needed to learn about accounting, legal issues, importing and distributing. "I found great local resources with the Small Business Administration," she said, "I went to all the classes I could."

She then contacted non-profits that are working against the exploitation of children, seeking a group to benefit from sales of the tags. When she queried ECPAT-

USA, she says, they replied, "Can you start yesterday?"

"I decided to work with ECPAT because they have a long history of action against children's sex exploitation in the world," she said. For example, in touristy areas, they convince hotels to sign 'the code', and not turn a blind eye to what is going on in their premises. They also work in the United States so minors who are prostituted are considered victims, not criminals.

She gave ECPAT-USA the trademark on the TassaTags. "I work pro-bono," she says, "this is a mission for me. They help with the distribution and I trust their work in the field."

Hepler continues to spread the word about TassaTags using her knowledge in social media marketing. "I believe that anyone traveling internationally should have such tags on their luggage," she says, "they also make great, thoughtful gifts."

For more information, go to www.tassatag.org or www.ecpatusa.org.

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