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Gladstone High alum Leif Coorlim fights child exploitation

Leif Coorlim's frustrated attempt to rescue a 12-year-old Cambodian girl from a Cambodian bar brothel was the start of his global campaign to end child exploitation and modern slavery, currently impacting an estimated 20 to 30 million people globally.

An Executive Editor at CNN International, Coorlim uses documentary films to raise awareness and stop modern-day slavery in nations from The Philippines to Mauritania and Egypt to Cambodia.

His work spurred CNN to launch The Freedom Project, a global initiative to end modern-day slavery, including child sex trafficking, child soldiers, child labor, chattel slavery, bonded labor, and adult forced prostitution.

"There are two themes in my work: Justice and opportunity," explained Coorlim. "Human trafficking was an issue nobody was talking about. The idea was to do story after story, to get people to do something about this. We are seeing tons of progress. At least a thousand people have been rescued as the result of our stories."

After a closer look at child labor, corporate policies have been changed. Internationally, leaders took notice, and changed laws. Coorlim was nominated for this year's Sakharov Human Rights Prize for his work, awarded to 16-year-old Pakistani education activist Malala Yousafzai.

How did 34-year-old Coorlim transform a career into a life mission? It all started at Gladstone High School. Coorlim moved to Gladstone as a 9th grader, and quickly saw the advantages of attending a small school.

"Looking back, I got opportunity." Explained Coorlim. "In a large school, everything is competitive so you're narrowly defined: you're either the jock or the future politician or the yearbook guy. Gladstone was big enough to provide options, but small enough that you could try everything."

Following in the footsteps of scholarship-winning senior Chris Wick, Coorlim was driven to become a well-rounded and involved high school student. He played three sports, joined the chess club and the art club, participated in student government, edited the yearbook, and edited The Laureate, the school literary magazine.

Coorlim graduated from Gladstone High in 1997. His hard work paid off with a scholarship from the Ford Foundation to attend Portland State University, where he studied journalism and communications. That led to an internship with KOIN and jobs with KPTV, WTTG (in Washington, D.C.), and finally CNN, in Atlanta.

“I have to give Gladstone teachers a lot of credit for helping me find my way,” he said. “Mr. Carrigg started me in journalism. Mrs. Wilson, who taught AP English and creative writing, she was a big promoter of all the kids. And of course my soccer coach, Mr. Simon. The Gladstone High faculty was very engaging, and encouraged me to try new things.”

Home recently with his new bride, CNN International news anchor Isha Sesay, Coorlim said he looks forward to his visits to Gladstone.

“Aside from time with my family, it’s the idea of returning home to my roots. I appreciate the way that people here deal with each other – with honesty and mutual respect. And, of course, there’s Buster’s Barbecue.”

What advice does he have for today’s students?

“Find out what you want early, and go for it. The most important thing is to identify what you truly love doing and immerse yourself in it,” he said. “Try to find the people who are leaders in that industry and introduce yourself to them. You’ll be surprised how willing people are to share their knowledge with someone who’s interested. That will open the door to a lot of opportunities.”