

The Story of Our Founder, Huyền Nguyen

Huyền Nguyen's journey is a harrowing tale of resilience, survival, and transformation. In 2019, Huyền was 28-years-old and pregnant, supporting herself, her husband and 2 young children. In the face of the slowing economy, Huyền was laid off from her restaurant job, at which time her husband deserted her. Unemployed and abandoned, Huyền moved in with her mother. Taking what jobs she could, Huyền supported her family and was getting back on her feet when in 2021 her mother became ill. Needing more money, and following the advice of a former colleague, Huyền applied for an employment opportunity in Dubai. What Huyền did not know was that her colleague had sold Huyền into slavery.

The Dubai employer promised Huyền a position as a customer service representative with a salary of approximately \$1,050 per month, a large salary in that part of the world. Trusting her friend and desperate to provide for her children and mother, she left her 9-month-old daughter behind in the care of her ailing mother and traveled to Dubai for an interview. Yet, upon arrival, Huyền's hopes were crushed. Instead of a legitimate job, she found herself sold into forced labor, and made to work in an online scam operation for 20 hours a day.

Huyền's experience is not unique. According to the Global Slavery Index, approximately 71% of the roughly 25 million modern slavery victims are women and girls, and many are lured into exploitation by people they know and trust. Huyền was taken from the airport in Dubai directly to a facility fenced with razor wire and guarded by armed guards. She was not permitted to leave the compound, her movements were restricted, and her phone and passport confiscated. She was told she owed a debt for her purchase and other fees and she would be required to work for 2 years to pay off the debt. She was forced, through threats of physical harm, to sign a contract to work off the debt. "I felt totally helpless," she recalls, "my life was no longer mine. It belonged to those who deceived me."

The conditions were brutal—long working hours, inadequate living arrangements, and constant surveillance. Huyền witnessed the brutalization of others for minor infractions, and sometimes for no reason whatsoever. "The guards used electric batons and would sometimes shock workers for no reason as they walked by. If you dared to speak out of place, they would beat you in front of all the others, often drawing blood or knocking a worker unconscious." Huyền had no way to escape. She was sold and re-sold, adding additional fees to her "debt," and eventually found herself in a labor camp in Myanmar, where she faced mounting debts and further exploitation. "There was no way back." Eventually a restaurant owner purchased Huyền, and although she remained captive, her situation improved while working under his control.

Although still a prisoner, Huyền was permitted to call home and have contact with her family. Her spirit remained unbroken and she used her public-facing position to warn others, hoping to prevent them from falling into similar traps. "At the restaurant I had contact with people, and I told my story to anybody who would listen." After two years, the restaurant owner allowed her

to return home, but not without strings attached—she continued to work remotely for him. She began to feel a misguided sense of trust in the man who seemed to give her freedom.

Then, in 2024, Huyền's "employer" sent her to Thailand under the guise of her job, only to be sold into forced labor in a "Chinese Free Enterprise Zone" in Cambodia. "My nightmare was repeating itself," she recalls. This time, before her phone could be confiscated, Huyền sent her live location and a description of her plight to a friend, an American named Andrew Befumo. "Stay safe, and try not to sign anything," Andrew advised. He immediately contacted Huyền's family and the Vietnamese Embassy in Cambodia and coordinated Huyền's rescue.

This time, Huyền's captivity lasted only four weeks, but it was four weeks too long. "They didn't like that I refused to sign a contract to work off my debt. They put me in isolation in a small room with no windows and they would come unexpectedly and make me stand outside while they pressured me to sign and threatened to sell me into worse conditions." While her captors continued their attempts to get her to sign an 18-month labor contract, Huyền had no way of knowing that her release was being arranged. "When they came to get me that morning, I thought they were going to punish me again for my refusal to sign. They simply handed me my phone and passport and set me free."

"When I began researching and trying to figure out how to help Huyền, I was amazed at just how commonplace kidnapping and forced labor is," said Befumo. "I discovered how certain governments sanction trafficking by turning a blind eye, and how corrupt police officials and others actively participate in abductions. I also learned that forced labor is not limited to Asian countries, but goes on here in the United States and other first-world countries as well."

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in 2022 alone, there were over 10,000 reported cases of human trafficking in the United States, and these are just the reported cases; the true numbers are likely much higher, especially considering the vulnerabilities of undocumented individuals and the ongoing border crises, which significantly increases the risk of trafficking among these populations.

Drawing on their experiences, Huyền and Andrew joined forces to establish EndingSlavery.org, an organization formed specifically to combat human trafficking. "We discovered wonderful organizations: some try to help rescue victims and some try to influence policies to crack down trafficking, but we have a different approach. We intend to provide education and resources to help prevent abductions in the first place, and also to help those who have been victimized to deal with the trauma and re-adjust to normal life" says Huyền, as she bounces her now 5 year-old daughter on her knee. "Nobody should be forced away from their family." At the heart of their new venture is a program to help individuals vet opportunities and travel arrangements in order to spot potential dangers and red flags. "Often people presented with an opportunity, especially poor people, do not see or understand the very real dangers involved. This is where we can make a difference."

Today, millions of victims worldwide remain trapped in the same types of forced labor camps from which Huyền escaped, and over 25 million people remain enslaved worldwide.