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SEX TRAFFICKING: DORDT ALUMNI CONFRONT THE EPIDEMIC

JOSH LOUWERSE

Alaskan winters are dark and cold. Many who live in the state are itinerant, serving on military bases or working in fishing and tourism industries.

The state is also home to a number of vulnerable people, including a large native population, many of whom face circumstances of displacement and deep economic distress.

Under these conditions, the sex trade flourishes.

“Alaska is the top in the country in all the bad stats,” says Josh Louwerse ('08). “In every category—physical abuse, substance abuse, suicide—we come in at the top of the list.” These social problems lead many young people to a life on the streets, where they are especially vulnerable to being trafficked.

A youth ministry major at Dordt, Louwerse saw his career take surprising shape in Anchorage, where he began reaching out to at-risk youth. He spent a year and a half out on the street.

“I'd spend time in transit stations, in parks—all the places homeless young people meet,” he says.

Louwerse's organization, Covenant House Alaska, is a 60-bed unit near the city center. Covenant House addresses immediate needs like food and shelter, but it also connects homeless young people to resources like housing, education and employment, mental health services, pastoral care, and other networks of social support.

“I was right where they are, experiencing what they experience—seeing the violence, seeing the fear, the drugs, the chaos firsthand,” he says.

“The work begins by building relationships of trust,” says Louwerse. “Many of these kids go a long time without having an adult look them directly in the eyes. We look them in the eyes, we call them by name.”

Louwerse eventually got his master's in global urban ministry and leadership from Bakke Graduate University, and he now helps shape the programming at Covenant House. He also leads trainings across the state, teaching law enforcement officers, medical professionals, and “basically anyone who will show up” how to identify and serve victims of sex trafficking.

“Most of the places I go, people hardly recognize that sex trafficking is even a real thing, and that it’s happening in their

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— Josh Louwerse ('08), youth engagement program coordinator for Covenant House Alaska
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town, or their city,” he says. Yet Alaska—and especially Anchorage—is a global crossroads for trafficking, and Louwerse uses these training events to help communities consider how to build the infrastructure necessary to respond.

Last fall, Louwerse visited Dordt’s campus as a guest speaker in chapel, contributing to the semester-long series on the Book of Acts and the early Church. He began by demonstrating the power of language to shape how we respond to those we’re called to care for and who live on the margins.

According to Louwerse, our names for things matter. Whether we use the label “teen prostitute” or “sexually exploited child” has deep implications for how victims of sex trafficking “are cared for or not cared for, how they are served or excluded, and whether they are invited into our communities of love and hope.”

Dean of Chapel Aaron Baart sees in Louwerse’s story a powerful demonstration of what, as Christians, we’re called to: “In the book of Acts, we encounter passage after passage where the early New Testament church is learning to follow Jesus’s example, and is finding out that the arms of the kingdom are extended so much farther and deeper and wider than we ever imagined.”

Baart says Louwerse’s work with Covenant House is an example of “what it looks like when ambassadors of the kingdom of God don’t run away from the darkness, but instead run into the heart of it.”

ALEISA DORNBIERER-SCHAT

Covenant House identifies and serves youth who are being commercially exploited for sex and coordinates a multidisciplinary response to the problem of sex trafficking in Anchorage.

PHOTO SUBMITTED

ALUMNI NOTES

Please send news of your alumni gatherings, professional accomplishments, civic participation, and volunteer activities. We’d love to include them on our pages!

After more than two decades of work at the San Francisco Symphony, Brent Assink (’77) stepped down as executive director. Mayor Ed Lee of San Francisco declared May 31, 2017, to be Brent Assink Day in San Francisco in honor of Assink’s legacy at Davies Symphony Hall, and a gala dinner was thrown in his honor.

Assink is known as a committed, passionate, and accomplished man of music. A recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle said, “Talk to anyone who has worked with, for, or alongside Assink during his tenure as executive director of the San Francisco Symphony, and you’ll hear the same accolades repeated with minor variations. You’ll hear people cite his rock-ribbed personal integrity, his passionate devotion to music, and his ability to maneuver calmly and clear-sightedly through even the most daunting organizational challenges.”

Assink has been named the new executive director of the Fuller Foundation.

Andrew Wierenga (’89) recently completed his doctorate in business administration with an emphasis in homeland security leadership and policy from Northcentral University in San Diego. Wierenga is a nine-year veteran of the Phoenix Police Department; he is also the board president of the Arizona Christian Retirement Home Society, a Reformed-based organization that owns and operates two low-income retirement homes in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Dr. Bethany Schuttinga (’97) was recently named president of Calvin Christian School in Blaine and Edina, Minn. Schuttinga, who earned a Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy studies from Iowa State University, previously worked for Dordt College as well as for the Sekolah Pelita Harapan school system in Indonesia.