

BY MATT JUDGE

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THE MOMENT I MOST REGRET

Conferences and events are easy places for human trafficking to thrive, so it is incumbent upon those of us in the business to always be alert and react without hesitation.

I CAN STILL SEE THEIR FACES. I think I always will.

It was a sunny afternoon in 2014, on an interstate in Missouri. I had made a series of sales calls through Illinois, Iowa and the Missouri Valley, and was headed home. I had been on the road for several days and was doing the calculations on whether I could make it back to Indianapolis, still seven hours out, or should stop somewhere ahead for the night.

That's when I noticed the white van in my mirror.

I was on the phone with an elusive prospect that was suddenly interested and had time to talk, I had a solid cell phone signal, my Bluetooth earpiece was fully charged and I had a good feeling the trip might end with an exclamation point.

The white van changed lanes again and was getting closer.

I may be a risk-taker in many areas of life, and have the scars and fake teeth to prove it, but behind the wheel I always set cruise control and drive the speed limit. Things go wrong when you can't stop in time. Plus, I travel too much and I don't want to pay higher insurance premiums because of speeding tickets. So, I was doing 70 miles per hour and I was sure the van was doing over 80.

I'm not certain why I noticed this vehicle among the thousands of others that day. I now think it was because older, 15-passenger vans typically do not race down the interstate. They are usually loaded with people and suitcases and are grinding away



in the slow lane. But this all came to me in retrospect. At that moment, it was just normal life playing out, with no hint of anything momentous, and I was focused on my hot prospect on the phone.

The van pulled up alongside on my left. I noticed the driver. He was thin, probably in his 20s. He was wearing sunglasses and had a cigarette clenched between his teeth, the smoke zipping out the driver's window. Even though he was driving past and I couldn't see his eyes, there was something hard and dangerous about his face.

Then I saw the girls.

As the van pulled by, I saw about 12 Asian girls, young teens, sitting silently and facing forward. No talk, no turning around, no bent-neck magnetic pull to their cell phones, no laughter, nothing. They were all wearing identical light-colored sweat suits.

My first thoughts were that this was some kind of religious group on an outing. Church van. No, it must be a team going to a competition. I work with a lot of sporting events and this is the kind of van the teams arrive in.

"We think we want to start with you next month," said my prospect. "When can we set up a training call?"

"Great," I said. "I'm on the road but will check the schedule as soon as I get a chance."

But if this was a religious group, why were they under the charge of this threatening-looking driver weaving through traffic at high speed? A voice in my mind said, "Call the police. Now."

"Help me understand how the billing works," said the prospect. "Is it per event, or how do you do that?"

But this doesn't make sense. A team of teenage girls going to a sporting event would be chatting and laughing and snacking and napping and showing each other things on their phones. There should be pillows and gym bags. These girls were all staring straight ahead, blank-faced, silent.

The moment I most regret, which I will never escape, is that I didn't say these words: "Let me call you back.

There's an emergency here and I need to hang up." Followed by a call to 911.

All of this played out in seconds, with no warning and no time to prepare a response, but it will haunt me for the rest of my life. I am not aware that I had seen human trafficking before, so I did not have a reference point. But a bright sign flashed in my brain: SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG. THESE GIRLS ARE TERRIFIED. DO SOMETHING.

I made a quick decision: I could do both. I could answer my prospect's questions and speed up to 80 or 85, keeping the van in sight, then call the state police when we were done.

"There's a couple of ways we can approach the billing," I said as the van pulled ahead. I signaled to switch from the center lane to the left lane and glanced in the mirror, but a truck was coming up fast and I couldn't change lanes yet. In seconds, the van was far ahead of me in traffic.

I moved into the fast lane at my first

chance and zigzagged through traffic for perhaps 10 minutes as we addressed the prospect's final questions. But by the time we ended the call and I was ready to contact highway patrol, the van was nowhere to be seen. If I called the Missouri State Police, I wouldn't even know what to tell them.

The girls, and the brute who had them sitting in petrified silence, were gone.

I told myself I gave it a shot and there was nothing I could do now, and I got back to the routine of travel. I started listening to a history book I had on CD, checked the gas gauge and returned to my decision on whether I should drive back to Indy. But the vision of that van percolated through my thoughts and I could not concentrate.

Things changed for me that day. I have thought about these girls hundreds of times, thought about the hopeless hell their handlers are putting them through, thought about what might have been if I had ended my prospect's call and called the police.

At times, I fan a small flame of hope that someone else called it in, that the pimp was arrested and these girls ended up getting sponsored by churches, that they all wound up with families are all in high school in the U.S. But that fantasy would only be possible if someone acted instead of delaying.

As a longtime member, I greatly admire MPI's commitment to fighting human trafficking. Conferences and events are easy places for this evil to thrive, so it is incumbent upon those of us in the business to always be alert, to recognize what we are seeing, to react without hesitation. That is why I put these words on paper.

I can't change what happened. I can only live with it. When you see something, whether on the interstate or at the conference hotel, and that voice in your head sounds the alarm, do something. Fast. You may only have a few seconds.

You don't want to go through life with those faces in your mind. Trust me. ■



JOINING THE FIGHT

The meeting and event industry is uniquely situated to be the eyes and ears of identifying human trafficking and child exploitation. Attendees of the 2018 MPI World Education Congress (WEC), June 2-5 in Indianapolis, will learn more about becoming part of the solution during "ECPAT: The Meeting and Event Industry's Role in Combatting Sex Trafficking." The session will be presented by Michelle Guelbart, director of private sector engagement for ECPAT-USA, a nonprofit organization that helps companies fight human trafficking.

Learn more about WEC and register at www.mpiweb.org/wec, and visit www.mpiweb.org/blog to read more of our ongoing coverage about the fight against human trafficking.