



Mark Crawford '89 joins the outreach team for their twice-weekly visits to the red-light area. Here, Mark and a local volunteer counsel a teen at extreme risk of being sexually exploited. Mark says building relationships of trust is the foundation of prevention and rehabilitation.



Christa Crawford '91 instructs a Just Desserts employee in how to make, according to Mark, "outrageously delicious" brownies.

*He's a Ritz-Carlton training executive turned pastor.  
She's a graduate of Harvard Law School.  
Together, Mark and Christa Crawford are battling Thailand's  
multibillion-dollar sexual exploitation industry through their  
foundation, The Garden of Hope.*

BY ALISSA SANDFORD

# SEARCH AND RESCUE

After overcoming the challenge of 80 rejection letters right out of college, Mark Crawford '89 was finally on the brink of financial prosperity. Amid discouraging odds, he had seized an entry-level job with The Ritz-Carlton Company, and shot through the hospitality giant's ranks to become an award-winning training manager tasked with supervising 50 other departmental trainers. Half of those trainers would ascend into management within two years, an upshot that confirmed his vigorous leadership.

Shoring up his bank account in preparation for a life of civic engagement, Crawford was living Benjamin Franklin's blueprint on wisdom and prosperity—just as he'd planned while studying international management at CMC. "I liked the idea of establishing financial security," Crawford recalls, "because I didn't want whatever decision I made later, in terms of public service, to have a negative financial impact on my children."

But ultimately, Crawford skipped right past that part, he says. "There were other plans for me."

Trading his foreseeable future as a five-star hotel executive, Crawford and his wife, Christa Foster Crawford '91, a Harvard-educated attorney, instead packed their bags for Chiang Mai, the largest city in Northern Thailand. What drove them was a united spiritual calling: They were there to rescue victims of trafficking and prostitution.

**C**hrista Crawford says she would have laughed if told during her hard-charging undergraduate years that her interests would shift from reforming the U.S. criminal justice system to ministering to girls and women in Thailand's red light areas.

Now she jokes with CMC classmates that she's the only one actually practicing her major. In Thailand, she confronts the big-policy issues of prostitution with her philosophy and public affairs education.

"How do you affect change, getting rid of something bad without creating more bad?" she asks. "How do you create the most good?"

She and Mark soon had an answer.



**Christa is warmly received in a rural village in one of Thailand's poorer neighboring countries. The women pictured, now with families of their own, were once tricked, trafficked, and coerced into Thailand's sex industry until being rescued through the Crawfords' intervention.**

In 2001, as the Crawfords settled into Chiang Mai, their immediate task was to direct the International Justice Mission's Thailand Justice Center, working with victims of trafficking and prostitution at the grass-roots, policy, and advocacy levels. They focused on getting underage girls out of brothels and sexual slavery: investigating cases, turning them over to the proper authorities, and placing victims in after-care.

It was a learning experience and the results were encouraging. But the couple noticed that while multiple organizations worked with underage victims of prostitution, few assisted girls 18 and older.

In 2003, the Crawfords branched off,

founding Just Food, Inc., a vocational training program for women and men in prostitution. Mark's hospitality experience, paired with a tenable regional demand for high-quality Western food, beverages, and desserts, created feasible job options for victims of exploitation. "We purposely picked an industry that was very easy for the girls to get into," Christa says. "We wanted to redeem their skills with viable, income-generating, sustainable alternatives to prostitution."

Emerging from this initiative was Just Coffee, a small café with beverages, pizza, and sandwiches made and served by former girls at risk. The Crawfords sold the business shortly thereafter to focus on fundraising for a culinary arts academy, but continue to provide vocational training through Just Desserts, a modest dessert catering business.

In 2004, the couple established The

Garden of Hope, a holistic, three-pronged prevention, intervention, and rehabilitation program that marries the vocational and marketing side of Just Food with spiritual, psychological, and emotional care and counseling, as well as transitional housing.

"Prostitution is not a clear-cut issue," says Christa. "Many economic and social factors act as a net to entangle these women. To free them, we have to address each piece of the net."

**D**uring the couple's first trip to the United States in three years, their schedule is crammed. A family vacation in Lake Tahoe is a month away, but on this evening they have just wrapped a three-hour class at nearby Fuller Theological Seminary, Mark's graduate alma mater and one of North America's largest seminaries. As adjunct professors, they teach a class on ministering to sexually exploited and trafficked children.

The Crawfords, who arrived in a minivan loaned to them by a church, discuss the gradual development of their work over dinner at a Thai restaurant in South Pasadena: a favorite from Mark's

seminary days. With them are Ahm, a bouncy 7-year-old they are adopting, and Moon, a 19-year-old girl they rescued from a brothel five years ago (*see page 29*).

The Crawfords began dating in 1987, when Christa Foster was an incoming freshman and Mark a junior transfer student. While Christa went on to Harvard, Mark joined Ritz-Carlton. They married in 1995, a year after she graduated from law school. Christa says she then worked as a corporate lawyer for six and a half years—a stepping stone, she thought, to the U.S. Attorney's office. But as intellectually robust as the experience was, Christa sensed another calling.

"I had good training with good attorneys," she says, "but it didn't satisfy my heart or my soul. I was miserable, looking for something more."

Although headed for the financial security he sought, Mark, too, sensed a

greater purpose. In the late 1990s, the couple began researching issues of human trafficking and prostitution in Southeast Asia. They learned, Mark says, that Thailand, the wealthiest of its neighbors, draws young people who cross over illegally from bordering countries. Because of unexpected challenges, many end up in the sex trade.

"I have always been interested in how you rehabilitate people," Mark says. "After someone has been severely damaged, how do you bring that person back? There has to be hope."

Mark enrolled at Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies, focusing on leadership, organizational development, and holistic ministry to women in prostitution, including spiritual, psychological, and economic development. While in school, he pastored an international church in inner-city Los Angeles.

Christa's interests were secondary in comparison, but her legal education would be a powerful addition to their ministry. After leaving corporate law, she held a volunteer role at the Union Rescue

Mark teaches a course on ministering to sexually exploited youth to seminary students at Fuller, his alma mater. “I joke that if I wasn’t leading The Garden of Hope, then my dream jobs are college professor, game show host, or NFL commentator,” he says. “I loved the opportunity to teach at the graduate level.”



## Moon’s Journey with the Garden of Hope

It was five years ago that Mark Crawford '89 and a friend shared a taxi in Northern Thailand, seeking to identify child prostitutes who could be rescued through the investigative efforts of International Justice Mission’s Thailand Justice Center, where Mark and Christa served as directors. As they hoped, the driver let them out in front of a brothel where 14-year-old “Moon” had been sold into sexual trafficking a month before and had been praying for freedom from a life of beatings, rape, drugs, and armed guards.

Moon was among the first rescued from prostitution during the Crawfords’ leadership at the Justice Center. That was five years ago. Today, she calls the couple “Mom” and “Dad” and is a frequent family companion and surrogate older sister to 7-year-old Ahm, whom the Crawfords are adopting.

Her story reveals the Crawfords’ multifaceted work. Sold by her biological mother in infancy, by age 3 she was washing dishes in a restaurant eight hours a day. Ten years later, the same woman who purchased her as a baby would sell Moon’s virginity for 30,000 baht (\$800).

In the handful of years since her rescue, Moon has become a visible leader in the couple’s ministry, using her experience to reach out to those still trapped by sexual exploitation.

“Her story,” Mark says, “is just incredible.”



Mission in downtown Los Angeles, assisting homeless men and women who—transitioning out of addictions and facilities—faced criminal and civil offenses.

“I was using my law degree to help people find justice,” she says. “And I knew that prostituted women and girls in Thailand were in need of justice.”

As the couple prepared for their work in Asia, Mark traveled and studied different models used to treat trafficking and prostitution. He learned quickly that, even in the worst cases of human rights violations, many victims ultimately felt trapped by a lack of educational and financial alternatives.

“Sometimes it is easier to be in prostitution,” Christa says. “It is difficult to go out on a limb—to overcome messages that you’re perceived as worthless.”

Through the efforts of IJM, the Thai government, and other local organizations, alternatives have greatly improved, Mark says, but the sex trade continues to flourish. “It just surfaces in another geographic area.”

Inking long-term strategic plans for an industry that mutates so rapidly is inefficient, Mark says. The surrounding countries of Burma, Laos, and Cambodia, for example, are closed to the work of Christians and outsiders, “so in those areas our response is tailored to supporting and training nationals to deal with trafficking and prostitution issues,” Mark says.

“Just like other CMC alumni, we respond to the needs of the market.”

Crusading against the massive trafficking problems and producing sustainable rehabilitation for victims of the billion-dollar business has been both exhausting and exhilarating. By the Crawford’s figures, an estimated 200,000 women and girls are in prostitution in Thailand, with children as young as 3 selling trinkets and flowers in the red-light district.

Continually pondering new directions, they see the next phase of their expanding ministry as being “Just Jobs,” a broader vocational training and placement program. A New York fashion designer has been flown in to teach handbag sewing, says Christa, and computer classes are in development. Hospitality, too, continues to be a growth industry in Thailand, and the Crawfords want to meet the demand for skilled employees.

Having noticed a small movement of business leaders bringing their decades of experience to assist Asian nonprofits, “because they want more out of life, and to help people,” the couple is recruiting a full-time CEO: someone with the financial and business prowess to steer the foundation toward a bigger and better operation.

“I’d love to see CMC students and alumni be part of that vision,” Christa says, “Even coming for a ‘vacation with a purpose,’ is a help.”

For more information, visit [gardenofhopeasia.org](http://gardenofhopeasia.org).