



Photo courtesy of National Geographic by Jodi Cobb

Families of captive laborers work at a southeast India kiln in this photo from Jodi Cobb's "21st Century Slaves" photo essay. Mothers and daughters haul handmade bricks while fathers and sons stoke the fires. About two-thirds of the world's captive laborers are debt slaves in India.

SLAVERY UNDER A SCOPE

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER TO DISCUSS
'21ST CENTURY SLAVERY' PROJECT AT VOICINGS 2009

IF YOU GO ...

What: Voicings 2009 featuring National Geographic photographer Jodi Cobb.
When: 7 p.m. Wednesday.
Where: Paramount Theatre.
Cost: free.
Details: www.slcloudstate.edu/voicings

By Adam Hammer
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In the modern age of digital photography and computer-enhanced images, truth can still be captured through the lens of a camera.

Sometimes you just have to carry a film camera and look in the right places, even when the right places are hotbeds for evil.

That's what National Geographic photographer Jodi Cobb encountered when working on her 2003 project "21st Century Slavery."

"I needed evidence. I had to have it happening in front of my camera," Cobb said. "Unlike a writer who can describe what's going on, I have to see it. I need the proof."

Cobb, an award-winning photojour-

nalist, comes to the Paramount Theatre on Wednesday to talk about her National Geographic photo essay "21st Century Slavery" for Voicings 2009.

This will be the fifth and final annual Voicings event, said organizer Mark Eden, a mass communications professor at St. Cloud State University.

Slavery today

As the opening page of Cobb's photo essay states, "21st Century Slaves" is not a metaphor. The story is about 27 million people worldwide who are bought and sold, held captive, brutalized and exploited for profit.

It's happening in the United States, and it's happening in India, Israel, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, Denmark,



Photo courtesy of Mark Thieszen

National Geographic photographer Jodi Cobb will talk about her 2003 photo essay "21st Century Slavery" for Voicings 2009 at Paramount Theatre.

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Spain ...

According to Free the Slaves, a Washington, D.C., organization, slavery is illegal in every country but is practiced at some level almost everywhere.

Cobb proposed doing a piece on modern slavery after reading a brief mention of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act that was passed by the U.S. Congress in 2000.

"I really wasn't sure what it was all about and started asking around and nobody I knew really knew anything about the trafficking issue," Cobb said.

"I started looking into it further and realized that while it had been reported on in bits and pieces, it had never really been done in a big comprehensive package that showed the globalization of it."

She pitched the idea with very few expectations that it would be accepted because an issues-based story about the modern-day antislavery movement isn't the type of thing National Geographic normally publishes.

However, it went through with little objection from editors.

"Then, of course, I panicked because I had no idea how I was going to be able to do it," she said.

Narrative search

She teamed up with writer Andrew Cockburn and began research with advocacy groups and government agencies.

"I knew that National Geographic couldn't focus on one form of it like sex slavery. They wanted more of an overview of what kinds there were in what parts of the world and how they were all connected," Cobb said.

Cobb went to 10 countries in one year, gaining access to slave enterprises where women were sold and traded for sexual exploitation, children were sold by their parents to factories for an average of \$35 per child, and where families in debt were forced to become captive laborers.

"The pictures go right to your heart," Cobb said. "Words can also, but I think the photographs are just a really direct human connection that gets people involved."

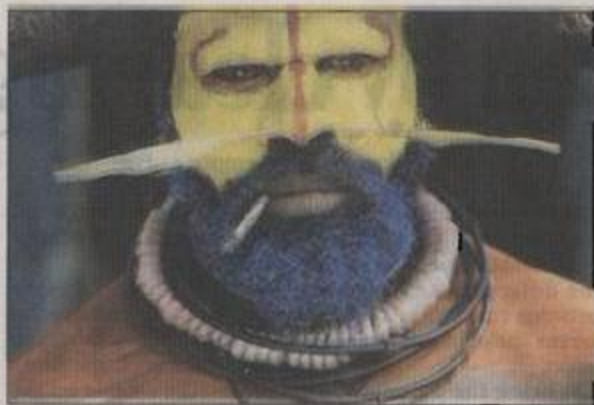


Photo courtesy of National Geographic by Jodi Cobb

A Huli warrior glowers during a festival in the highlands of Papua New Guinea in this photo from Jodi Cobb's "Enigma of Beauty" project for National Geographic.

Before she was a photographer, Cobb was a writer for House and Garden magazine in New York. But she returned to the University of Missouri to build on her journalism degree. She received her master's in photography arts and started making a name for herself as a photojournalist.

She still returns to her writer's roots to tell a story through photos.

"It's sort of the search for narrative that writers start out with and I use that in my pictures because I know I want to tell a story. Each picture in each situation needs to advance the storyline somehow," Cobb said.

Subjects

The search for narrative isn't always safe.

"The whole story was hard

from beginning to end emotionally," Cobb said. "I cried almost every day on that story one way or the other — in tears or in fear."

She was most afraid when showing up at Bosnian slave trafficker Milorad Milakovic's Sherwood Castle and asking to photograph him.

"I could not believe that he agreed and it just got more and more and more surreal," Cobb recalled. "My interpreter was just as scared or more scared than I was."

"Then he invited us to sit down to lunch with him and we sort of had to. We were scared to death. We were terrified not to."

Cobb said she struggled to not get too emotionally attached to the "victims, perps and angels" she photographed.

"I couldn't understand how

VOICINGS TO END

Since 2005, Voicings has explored social issues through art and language.

Wednesday's symposium with National Geographic photographer Jodi Cobb marks the fifth and final Voicings.

The annual event, organized by St. Cloud State University mass communications professor Mark Eden, has featured documentary filmmakers, radio personalities, renowned photographers and composers.

people could be so evil on a daily basis — so unfeeling and uncaring," she said. "It did take me a while to feel normal again after going out and searching for evil every day."

She knew that she couldn't help everyone she encountered, but she hoped that by telling her story to 50 million people, something would change.

And it worked.

After the story and photos were published, people responded with money and support for nongovernmental organizations, and FBI agents asked to be trained in trafficking issues. The package drew more feedback than any National Geographic article since the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1987.

"It was the most gratifying story that I've ever done," Cobb said. "I'm wanting to continue it in book form."

"It's not over. It hasn't