

COCOA TRUTH

Peter's Story

My name is Peter, I am 29 years old and this is my story.

Life has been good to me. I wasn't born into a wealthy family, but I suppose you could now describe me as a 'successful business person'. I am the owner of several businesses: an award-winning chocolate company, a number of cafes and an exclusive catering company - working mostly with high-end clients.

I started with practically nothing. I work extremely hard and I love what I do.

But two years ago something happened and my world turned upside down. I learned something so shocking and so upsetting that my life changed forever.

It was 2 am. I was finally back home and it had been a long, but very good day. My company had provided the catering services for a spectacular wedding. Everything had been absolutely perfect - a fairy tale wedding. It had been an outdoors event, with a huge white tent in a beautiful garden. The weather had been fantastic, the newly married couple looked lovely and, of course, our magnificent wedding cake was amazing. The bride had insisted on a cake of dark chocolate covered with flowers made from white chocolate. The guests loved it, the staff were brilliant, and the company was well paid.

Now back home, I was exhausted. I turned on the TV and I happened to hear the word *chocolate* - which, of course, got my attention. But as I watched, my heart froze. On the screen were pictures of children and teenagers like I'd never seen before. Their bodies were covered in cuts and scars. One little boy, tears running down his cheeks, was saying how much he missed his mother. An older boy showed the camera his back - it was covered in marks where he'd been beaten. Another showed an injury on his leg, a deep cut through to the bone. It was horrific.

I was confused - what did these children have to do with chocolate? And then it became clear. These children had been rescued from a cocoa plantation. They had been bought and sold by human traffickers and forced to work on the cocoa plantation. Their parents had been told they were going to get an education. This was a lie. They were going to be treated like slaves.

I could not move. I could not think.

The TV voice kept using the word 'slaves', 'slavery', 'human trafficking victims'. I sat there watching. More teenagers were describing how they were beaten when they tried to escape. They were starved, given nothing to eat for hours. They were forced to work day after day, and to carry up to 20 kilos on their backs. Then I saw the machete, the

knife the boys had to use. Their small hands were not even strong enough to control it. And how much were they paid? Nothing. Nobody had been paid, ever. Did they know what chocolate was? No, they had never heard of it.

My head was spinning. I had spent months researching all the different kinds of cocoa we use in our chocolate. It is top quality, and of course I asked the suppliers, 'Where does this cocoa come from?' But I had never thought to ask, 'Is there slavery in this cocoa?' Why would I ask that? Slavery doesn't exist anymore - does it? I'd never asked, 'Are the farmers treated well? Are they paid fairly? Are children forced to work on the cocoa plantations?'

Shocked and silent, I thought about other products we use. Sugar, nuts, vanilla - and what about tea and coffee? If slavery was in the backstory of all these products, then things had to change.

And that was the beginning. I did my research. I talked to my team, my employees. Together we examined the supply chain of every item we produced. Where did it come from? Who was involved? Was everyone paid fairly? Were people forced to work for no pay? We changed suppliers. We learned about the source of all the products we use, and whether they were ethical or not. It took time and I made mistakes, but now I know the backstory of everything we use.

This may surprise you, but I refused to increase the costs of our products. Even if that means lower profits, I accept that. But what I do not accept is making a profit from the sadness, pain and exploitation of another human.

My next step is to examine the supply chain of other items we use. Now, our tablecloths and the uniforms the staff wear are all made from ethically sourced cotton - not cotton from countries where schools are shut while teachers and students are forced to work in fields.

This is the 21st Century - nothing, but *nothing* can justify slavery. You cannot own another human being.

How you choose to spend your money says a lot about who you are, so the question is - who are you?