

One Summer in India: The Story of Collat Marketing Student Kyle Baker

It's not every day that you find your calling in Kolkata, India, the third-largest Indian city behind Mumbai and Delhi, but for Collat Business student Kyle Baker, he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

Kyle has been volunteering his summers to work with Freeset Global, a Kolkata-based export business that employs over 200 women who were former sex slave victims with the aim of providing them financial means to secure a better life.

Kyle began his journey to India through a mission trip. "My relationship to my church pushed me there," he says about his first trip in 2015. "I felt like my spirit was being called to go there."

He returned the next summer and plans to go again in 2017.

In India, women trapped in the sex trade are called, "dalits," which Kyle colloquially refers to as "untouchables" -- women who are shunned, ignored and cast away by society.

They are the lowest members of the caste system, a system that regulates behavior and social standing within Indian society. "If you think of it as a pyramid, dalits are the lowest part of the pyramid. They're disconnected from society."

Invisible.

It wasn't until he visited with these women that he understood firsthand the severity of the conditions they live in; he recollects sitting on mud floors in a community of what Kyle considers "humble homes," hearing stories of abuse and endangerment these women face daily. It changed his perspective. "There was a lack of justice in this society. It kept crossing my path."

He began volunteering with Freeset Global. Neither a charity nor a rescue organization, Freeset is an entity that provides real and viable choices for women trapped in the sex trade.

Freeset creates certified fair trade quality jute bags and organic t-shirts. The employed women receive 6500 Indian rupees a month for their work – roughly \$150 dollars, a 3x increase from the \$50 a month minimum wage. They also receive free education and are taught to read and write, privileges not given to the "untouchables" of Indian society.

Sixteen years later, it has added a second branch that employs 35 women with over 500 women now on a waiting list for employment.

During his 2016 summer trip, Kyle and others toured Freeset's facilities, traveled into the brothel communities in which these women work, and collected stories for his future endeavors.

The experience, which lasted over 18 days, was geared towards giving him a taste of the challenges of living and working in these environments in India. "It was a very challenging and eye-opening experience," he says.

For Kyle, he knew he was in the right place.

A junior marketing major with a specialization in sales, Kyle wants to marry his knowledge of business to his dedication to serve. At 27, he's an untraditional student: he took time off from education to work with Freedom Trade, a Birmingham business whose profits aid relief efforts in India.

After his graduation in December of 2017, he plans to move to India permanently.

His goal is to create his own freedom business. A freedom business is dedicated to sustainable and dignified employment for women and their families. By creating a freedom business, he's giving a chance to women overlooked and forgotten. They are given opportunities to free themselves from dangerous and oftentimes life-threatening conditions to live an enriching life.

Until then, he plans to continue dedicating his summers to volunteering with Freeset in India.

He believes it's his responsibility as a human to give back.

"I want my life to mean something," he says. "I want to leave an impact."