

*Founder of Organization for Trafficking
Victims Accused of Misusing Funds*

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Last week (October 1, 2009), Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal announced a lawsuit against Ray Bechard, founder and director of Ahava Kids, for misuse of funds intended for victims of human trafficking. (See the AG's press release below.)

According to Blumenthal, "Almost half of the \$250,000 raised through Ahava Kids over recent years in the name of human trafficking and orphaned AIDS children has been misspent and squandered." He allegedly diverted as much as \$100,000 for "personal or inexplicable expenses at restaurants, department stores, grocery stores and sporting goods stores."

Bechard has been involved in Rhode Island anti-trafficking activities and organizations that assist women to escape prostitution. He attended a Rhode Island Coalition Against Human Trafficking (RICAHT) meeting last March. Melanie Shapiro, Co-founder of Citizens Against Trafficking, then co-chair of RICAHT, said he appeared at one meeting wearing an expensive-looking three piece suit. He sat in the back, but when he had the opportunity to speak, boasted about running an active shelter for victims of human trafficking.



Bechard also attended an April 1 organizational meeting at the Greenwood Community Presbyterian Church in Warwick for the anti-trafficking rally at the state capitol. The meeting was hosted by Rev. Donald Anderson, head of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches (RISCC). Bechard is Anderson's brother-in-law. He likely used him to involve himself in activities in Rhode Island.

Bechard attended the anti-trafficking rally on April 21 at the state house. (I personally saw him there.) He also introduced himself to the women at Project RENEW that assists women to escape prostitution in Pawtucket. He attended a graduation celebration for women successfully completing the program. He gave each woman a purse with cosmetics in it. He then tried to use Project RENEW as a reference.

I first met Ray Bechard at an anti-trafficking conference at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia (March 20-21, 2009). He introduced himself and told me he was investigating sex trafficking in the strip-clubs in Rhode Island. He said he was secretly filming prostitutes and pimps in the clubs. He immediately tripped my “creep vibe” radar.

As soon as he walked away from me, a friend in the anti-trafficking movement came over and whispered in my ear that there was something fishy about Bechard and his organization, Ahava Kids.

While at the conference, I learned that he held a fund raiser in Atlanta claiming he was starting a shelter for victims of trafficking in Georgia. No one in the anti-trafficking movement in Georgia had ever heard of him. He would tell no one where the shelter was going to be located because it was going to be “mobile” or in a “secret location.”

He sent this message out during the conference:

Subject: Georgia Safe House
Fri, 20 Mar 2009 14:17:04 -0400
[131.128.1.99]); Fri, 20 Mar 2009 15:35:22
-0400 (EDT)
Good Morning,

So much is happening with [Ahava Kids](#). Our work to rescue young people from human trafficking here in America and around the world is succeeding like never before.

One enormous development is the opening of the [Ahava Kids Georgia Safe House](#). This is a powerful opportunity to rescue more victims while drastically expanding our operations in the Southeastern United States.

Of course, none of this would be possible without you. Thank you so much for your interest in Ahava Kids. If you have any questions, just let me know by sending an e-mail to Ray@AhavaKids.org

All the best,
Raymond Bechard
Founder & Director
AhavaKids.org



When I got home, I started doing some research on Ray Bechard and Ahava Kids. (In the past, I have exposed other frauds or suspected criminals who infiltrated the anti-trafficking movement.) I suspected that Bechard was raising money to line his own pocket with no intention (or capacity) to open a shelter in Georgia. He was taking money from people who sincerely wanted to help victims of trafficking. In addition, the real service providers who assist victims constantly struggle to raise funds for shelters and services.

A quick look at Ahava Kids website revealed exorbitant claims that I knew were not true. Bechard claimed he had assisted in rescuing over 3,000 victims of trafficking, “conducted interventions in more than 50 cases of human trafficking in the United States,” and “assisted local, state and Federal investigators with several human trafficking investigations.”



I checked with Connecticut based and national organizations that assist victims of prostitution and trafficking and with Federal agencies. No one at the national level had ever heard of him and the Connecticut based organizations were convinced he wasn't really helping victims.

On other Internet sites and in the media, Bechard bragged about his rescue operations and shelters. He told WTNH that proceeds from a theatre production of "A Christmas Carol" at the Park Road Playhouse in West Hartford, Connecticut, would support an Ahava Kids Safe House, a "beautiful, 16-bed facility uniquely designed for at-risk, young adult victims of trafficking."¹

He told WPBF in West Palm Beach that Ahava Kids "has two safe houses in New England. A third one is set to open in South Florida in a few weeks."²

Bechard was featured in an article about local sex trafficking entitled "Innocence Lost" in *Hartford Magazine* (September 2008). In that interview he claimed to have rescued "3,000 young women and men—in roughly equal numbers—from child trafficking, forced labor and service as child soldiers." He claimed to have worked closely with local and state police and the FBI to rescue "about 50 teens, mostly females, from child trafficking in Connecticut."

¹"Christmas Laughs to Benefit Ahava Kids, December 9, 2008

http://www.wtnh.com/dpp/on_air/gmc_weekend/newhaven_wtnh_christmasLaughs_to_benefit_ahava_kids_2008120700910

² "Sex Slaves Being Bought, Sold In South Fla, November 19, 2008,

<http://www.wpbf.com/news/18017237/detail.html>

On another web site, Bechard claimed to have "transported children out of dangerous areas in Mexico, Eastern Europe, India, Malaysia and Africa." He planned to establish a "permanent organization in South Africa," "a safe house for rescued children in Eastern Europe and Malaysia," and to "initiate an ongoing rescue mission for victimized young people in Middle Eastern Countries."³

At a meeting of the Soroptimist International of Farmington Valley, Connecticut, he claimed he had "traveled the world to save children: From the United States to Israel, Russia, Europe, Haiti, Latin America and beyond."⁴

He also claimed he had traveled to Iraq to investigate child trafficking, and was able to produce a picture of himself outside the gateway to Baghdad.⁵



Bechard claimed to have a worldwide rescue organization, yet there was no evidence of an office or staff on his web site. There was a Rescue Hotline number for "international and domestic victim intervention and relocation" on the Ahava Kids web site. I called it. No one answered. There was no personalized greeting, just an automated computer voice instructing me to leave my name and phone number. I hung up. About a half hour later, I received an email from Bechard saying that he knew I had called. Apparently, he used caller ID.

I gathered this information together and sent it to the anti-trafficking organizations in Georgia. They called the FBI. I forwarded the information I had to the FBI. According to Attorney General Blumethal, his office was tipped off by an Ahava Kids website volunteer.

In addition to collecting money for projects that don't exist, Bechard appears to be a fabulist, someone who makes up stories. He starts with basic facts or the bare outline of an event and writes himself into the story. For example, on his blog he describes going on a ride along with the police in Hunts Point in the Bronx. While he rides in the backseat, he spots a likely victim of trafficking that the police miss. He instructs the police to turn around. And when they can't spot the girl, he tells them where she can be found. The police intervene and find a teen girl in a truck. For some unexplained reason, the police don't assist the girl and Bechard writes that he will keep looking for her. A member of another anti-trafficking organization told me he checked

³ http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:4_z0oGbzSWoJ:www.guidestar.org/pgShowGsR

⁴ <http://www.cpbm.org/events/cultureconnect/child-trafficking-founder-ahava-kids-speak>

⁵ <http://wwwmyjesustalk.wordpress.com/2008/04/15/ray-berchard-in-iraq-what-is-ahava-kids-leader-searching-for/>

Bechard's story. The police verified that Bechard went on a ride along with them, but no victim of trafficking was spotted that night.



On the Ahava Kids website, Bechard advertises a book, *Unspeakable: The Hidden Truth about the World's Fastest Growing Crime*, he wrote about child trafficking. There is a link to download the book, but whatever was there has been deleted.

Bechard heavily used social and professional networking sites on the Internet. He used them and all his speaking engagements to raise money.

He was tuned-in to new activities in the anti-trafficking movement, which is one of the ways he was able to present himself as so knowledgeable. He knew and used the basic facts of how and where trafficking occurs. For example, within days of an announcement about a conference on trafficking and the Internet, he had purchased two Web domains names on that topic.

Citizens Against Trafficking hopes that Attorney General Blumenthal will recover some of the funds that Bechard collected. Assisting victims of trafficking is expensive and there's not nearly enough money available publicly or privately to create the services that are needed.

Many people and organizations gave Bechard money in good faith that he was helping to rescue victims. Some people still believe Bechard is authentic. After I sent out a list of questions for people to ask Bechard if they were thinking of hosting him or giving him money, I received a lot of inquiries, including from people who continue to support him, although they often admit he lied about a few things. For example, a University of Connecticut professor set up a service learning project for students with Ahava Kids. Bechard complained to him that I was making "allegations" about him. The professor told me that "there are some aspects of his website that may be ambiguous or misleading" and Bechard had erroneously listed him as a member of the Board of Directors, but he still wanted to meet with me to advocate for Bechard.

As a fabulist Bechard was good at convincing people that his fictitious world was real. He was able to embellish and write himself into the story.

Maybe Bechard even believed his fantasy world would turn into reality. There are reports that he did have a location for a shelter in Connecticut and his lawyer claims that three victims were given shelter at one time. Attorney General Blumenthal said, "We believe that about \$150,000 was used on purposes that seemed to be legal, insofar as they served the purposes of the charity. Some of those records leave questions, but we believe that ... the monies were used on Web sites, on the safehouse, on personnel services and certain type of equipment that served either women

prostitutes seeking to escape the streets or orphans suffering from AIDS.”⁶ Maybe he spent enough money on legitimate things that he can't be charged with criminal fraud.

Word is spreading throughout the anti-trafficking movement that Bechard has been caught. Citizens Against Trafficking thanks everyone who was willing to share information and take action to stop Bechard from victimizing the anti-trafficking movement.

Citizens Against Trafficking wants to make it clear that no individual or group mentioned in this bulletin who gave Bechard money or invited him to give a presentation or hosted a fundraiser is implicated in his misuse of funds. Nurez Madhany of Sutra Lounge in Atlanta where Bechard held a fund-raiser last March wrote immediately after questions were raised: “Due to some concerns that have been raised about Ahava Kids, myself and as an extension, Sutra Lounge, will no longer have any affiliation with Ahava Kids.”

⁶ “Lawsuit: Head of Children’s Charity Mismanaged Funds,” *The Day*, October 4, 2009, <http://www.theday.com/re.aspx?re=c6244ad0-3812-4738-9d5c-def5da4239ec>

Connecticut Attorney General's Office

Press Release

Attorney General Alleges Charity Operator Diverted Money Intended For Victims Of Human Trafficking And Orphaned Aids Victims

October 1, 2009

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal today announced a lawsuit against a man who allegedly misused thousands of dollars raised through Ahava Kids, Inc. -- a charity that claims to serve victims of human trafficking and orphaned children with AIDS.

Defendant Raymond Bechard -- the sole operator of Ahava Kids and several LLCs -- allegedly diverted as much as \$100,000 in charitable and corporate funds for personal or inexplicable expenses at restaurants, department stores, grocery stores and sporting goods stores.

Blumenthal's investigation also revealed questionable expenses on gasoline, unexplained ATM cash withdrawals and money transferred from Ahava Kids to four Old Saybrook companies solely owned by Bechard.

The lawsuit was filed in coordination with Department of Consumer Protection Commissioner Jerry Farrell, Jr.

"We seek repayment and penalties for this alleged deceitful diversion that deprived the most vulnerable victims of vital help -- including victims of human trafficking, and children born with AIDS," Blumenthal said. "Almost half of the \$250,000 raised through Ahava Kids over recent years in the name of human trafficking and orphaned AIDS children has been misspent and squandered.

"Claiming to help human trafficking victims and orphaned AIDS children, Raymond Bechard allegedly did more to help himself. Through Ahava Kids, he promises protection from human trafficking victims, opportunities for prostitutes seeking escape, and relief for orphans.

"Exploiting profoundly important causes, Ahava Kids received grants and donations -- much of it misspent at department and sports stores, and through untraceable cash transactions. My office will fight for restitution and penalties, as well as a court order prohibiting this alleged pilfering in the future."

Bechard's companies -- Disciple Makers Workshop, Son Celebration, Gift Catalog Online and Compel Communications -- are also named as defendants in the lawsuit, which Blumenthal filed in coordination with Department of Consumer Protection (DCP) Commissioner Jerry Farrell, Jr.

Blumenthal alleged that the companies merely functioned as instrumentalities of Bechard for his financial gain -- and that personal and corporate funds were intermingled.

Ahava Kids claims to help victims of human trafficking by operating hotline and safe houses (one in Connecticut and one in Georgia), and by reportedly working in the streets to reach

out to prostitutes. Bechard also claims that donations to Ahava Kids have been used to distribute AIDS medication to orphaned children in third-world countries.

Through an investigation, Blumenthal's office concluded that a legitimate safe house does exist, though it is rarely used.

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