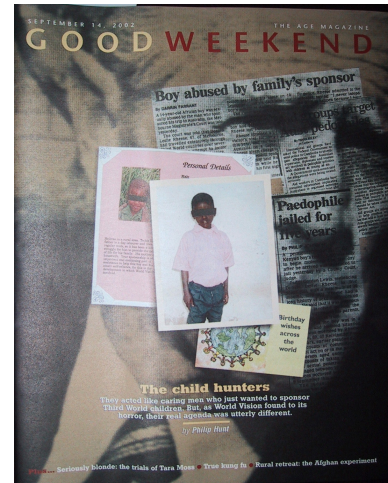


# DEVILS IN DISGUISE

By Philip Hunt

*They seemed like caring, grandfatherly types, men who just wanted to help a Third World child through sponsorship. It turned out their real aim was something far more sinister. Here, former World Vision CEO, Philip Hunt tells how the organisation confronted an evil within its midst.*



There were 12 people in the room. It was August 1993. Los Angeles.

The senior leaders of World Vision were assembled from around the globe. I wanted to tell them a story about a child abuser.

“I first met Jack in Asia about 12 years ago.

“I was walking through a tourist area when I spotted him walking towards us. On his hip was a girl, aged about six. He recognised me and came straight over.

“Looking at the girl in his arms he said, ‘Anyone want to buy a kid?’

“Of course, I thought he was joking. He merely wanted to make the point that prostitution was rife in this town, even among young children. And this was one waif, Jack told us, he was attempting to rescue.

“I didn’t think much about this incident until some years later. Then I discovered that a dozen or more people had similar and more worrying stories about Jack.

“Jack had come to World Vision in the early 1970s. He was assistant director of a live-in home for orphaned boys. The country director had concerns about Jack’s behaviour with the boys at the home. He just felt uneasy, but made no specific accusation, nor did he have any evidence.

“Before World Vision, Jack had served in the military in the same country. He was single then, and remains so still. He was married briefly. Few people remember Jack having any girl friends.

“After a year or two Jack was transferred to a new role. The people who had concerns about him in the past left and their worries left with them. The corporate memory was lost. Or almost lost.

“One of Jack’s new responsibilities was for a program that enabled children to have surgery overseas. Jack would accompany the child.

“One child, let’s call him Irfan, was about ten years old and required heart surgery. Jack took him to America and Irfan stayed with Jack while awaiting treatment. A married couple were helping with finance and support. The couple were social workers and they worried about the way Jack and Irfan behaved towards one another. They felt the relationship was very abnormal and believed Jack was sexually abusing Irfan.

“Eventually the couple adopted the child.

“While Irfan was still young, the couple wrote to World Vision about their concerns. World Vision investigated, found nothing it could prove. Jack was appalled at the allegation and strenuously defended his innocence and he remained on staff.”

I went on to tell how a dozen or more people had expressed concerns about Jack’s behaviour. Each concern slightly different. Each worry disconnected from anyone else’s worry—body language with children, unaccounted-for disappearances, travel itineraries routing him through European cities for no good reason, a solitary lifestyle with no close adult friends, suspicions that houseboys, or children Jack knew in the neighbourhood, might have been sexually abused by him.

The connecting thread was the thread of disconnection. No-one knew the whole story. For almost everyone involved, each worry was a one-off. No-one saw a pattern of behaviour. Jack was careful. Very careful.

I concluded my little story with a question: “If this story were true, what action should we take with Jack?”

The discussion followed a path that had started to become familiar to me. By this time, World Vision had become a leading activist on issues of child protection. Police checks on staff and field visitors had become routine. No staff member had a record for child abuse. But the organisation also knew that the vast majority of abusers never get caught. Could there be abusers on staff? If so, how could we recognise them? And what should we do?

Some felt that the pattern of evidence against Jack was sufficiently damning and he should be confronted and terminated.

“If we knew this about Jack, why is he still with us?” one colleague asked.

“But did we know this?” I replied. “Some people knew some things. Perhaps Jack was careful. If he created a bad impression on someone, he made sure he never did it twice. If one boss got suspicious, he behaved himself until he got transferred.”

Others felt it was wrong to convict without clear evidence. One should always give the benefit of the doubt.

“All we have is hearsay,” one colleague pointed out. “I agree that so many people reporting the same thing must be taken seriously, but this story could

apply to any child worker who was good at their job and really cared for kids for all the right reasons.”

Others felt he should be terminated for some other cause, lest the organisation get itself into a messy wrongful dismissal battle.

“If you confront Jack with this story, you can bet he’ll deny it,” said another colleague. “He’ll deny it if he’s guilty, and he’ll deny it if he’s innocent. The only way to be sure is to get victims to speak out. And you don’t have that.”

At the end of the discussion, we took a break. As happens at international conferences, some of the most important meetings take place during comfort breaks. As I walked into the toilet one of the vice-presidents grabbed my arm.

“Is that a true story you told in there?” he asked quietly.

“Pretty much,” I replied.

“Is Jack really...” and he named one of the people on his staff.

“Yes,” I replied. He was thoughtful.

We returned to the meeting and the President summarised our conversation: “We are saying that on the basis of this information we could not dismiss Jack. Nor would confrontation be likely to resolve anything. So, in a real case, we would actively observe Jack, involving our Human Resources professionals, looking for the opportunity to identify victims. If and when we had victims prepared to accuse Jack, we would be able to act.”

And so the chase began. World Vision alerted key staff of the suspicions. Questions began to be asked. A search for victims began. But the chase did not go for long because a few months later, Jack left World Vision. Perhaps he got wind that the posse was closing in.

It was not the last we would hear of him.

**T**he story about Jack had its beginnings a decade earlier when World Vision Australia got its first wake-up call about child abusers, so-called paedophiles.

One day the police telephoned World Vision.

“We are about to charge a paedophile,” the detective declared. “We think you should know that he is also a child sponsor.”

This was in the mid-80s. Like most organisations confronted with a new and shocking reality, it took a little while for the bad news to sink in.

And the news was seriously bad. William Allen was not only a convicted, repeatedly offending child abuser, he was also a sponsor who had visited his sponsored children in the Philippines.

The police revealed that they had records from a paedophile ring in which ring members had discussed how World Vision sponsorship could provide cover. World Vision sponsors were visiting their sponsored children all the time. Every day, on average, at least one World Vision Australia sponsor would be meeting his or her sponsored child in some Third World country. Attaching oneself to this entourage offered a cloak of respectability.

Worse, Allen had been visiting areas in the Philippines notorious for the child sex trade. Naturally, these were exactly the places where World Vision was most needed, and most active.

More than a million children in Asia are involved in the sex trade. The roots of their involvement lie in poverty and exploitation. World Vision was committed to doing something about it. Allen had visited there, met his sponsored child and family and taken the child on outings. As sponsors do.

Much later, the police revealed that Allen had admitted abusing his sponsored child.

Reeling with shock, World Vision took three important actions.

First, it went public. This was bad news, but the kind of news that could only be made worse by trying to keep it quiet. Generally, the media coverage was even-handed.

Second, World Vision began to police check sponsor requests to visit children in the Philippines. It began to look for known paedophiles and to politely but firmly refuse their visits. And their money.

Third, new rules for sponsor visits to the Philippines were developed. With regret, the organisation abandoned the longstanding practice of taking sponsors to their sponsored child’s home. Instead, the child was brought to the sponsors and a World Vision staff chaperone accompanied the child and sponsor at all times.

World Vision thought this would be enough. The changes seemed to control the problem. Nothing more was heard for almost 10 years.

Then things got seriously worse once more.

When the William Allen case came to light I was working for World Vision in Hong Kong. A decade later, I was chief executive of World Vision Australia. That’s when I got my personal wake-up call about child abusers. That’s when I learnt about paedophiles.

In 1992, Judge Gordon Lewis sentenced Donald Leslie Rheese to five year’s jail. *The Age* reported that “a pensioner who paid for a Kenyan boy’s trip to Australia only to begin molesting him the day after he arrived was sentenced to jail yesterday.”

World Vision’s internal investigations soon revealed that Rheese had indeed sponsored two children in Kenya and had visited them. World Vision had never had a single case, in Africa, of problems with sponsor visits and there had been no reports of inappropriate behaviour towards children. In every World Vision program internationally, chaperoning of sponsor visits had by then become standard practice. Only in a few countries was it felt necessary to keep sponsors away from the homes and villages in which their sponsored children lived. After all, sponsors were paying for a project in their child’s community. It seemed reasonable to let them see the actual work. No-one in Africa thought child abusers would infiltrate the work there.

Almost 10 years had passed since the Philippines experience. Most people in World Vision thought all the bases were covered. But the organisation was about to learn something about the patient, methodical planning of the experienced child abuser.

Knowing that World Vision was checking sponsors heading for known child-abuse areas, Rheese switched his attention completely. Over a period of four years he sponsored children in Kenya. He became familiar to some World Vision donor

services staff as a grandfatherly if sometimes demanding sponsor. He spoke warmly about “his children”—but then, lots of sponsors speak this way.

Rheese called World Vision Australia one day to say he was going to Kenya for a holiday. He would like to visit his sponsored child, if that was all right. Of course it was all right. The donor services person let Rheese know that he would be accompanied the whole time by a World Vision Kenya staff person and that Rheese would be responsible for all the costs involved. Rheese was very understanding and generous in his agreement.

Rheese stayed at the Serena Hotel in Nairobi. The Kenyan staff met him and found him easy-going and friendly. Rheese seemed genuinely interested in everyone he met. He talked easily and had a natural way with children. The children liked him too. The visit seemed a smashing success all round. The Kenyan office hosts said, “He was like a grandfather.”

A week later, the project manager in the child’s village called the World Vision office in Nairobi with a concern. Rheese had turned up in the village two days after the official visit, all by himself. He had been visiting a game reserve nearby and had decided to take a hotel room near the village. He was warm in his appreciation of the previous visit. “It had a profound impact on me,” he explained to the project manager.

None of this would have surprised any World Vision worker. Sponsor visits often are life-changing and paradigm-shifting experiences for supporters.

Rheese explained that he wanted to learn more about the community and about World Vision’s work there. He wanted to see how he could help. Again, not an uncommon response and the project manager was pleased, as there was still plenty of work to do and not enough money to do it all. Rheese gave some money to the family of the sponsored child to repair their house. He seemed interested in doing more.

The project manager’s concern was not about the sponsored child, however. His concern was about a proposal that Rheese had just put to the family of another boy, Moses, aged 14. Rheese had befriended Moses from his first visit. Rheese had offered Moses a small fee to act as his guide. And Moses was good at it, showing Rheese everything about the village and accompanying him into the nearby town where they enjoyed an afternoon shopping and sightseeing.

After a week or so, Rheese mentioned casually to Moses’ father that it was a shame that a young man with all the potential of Moses could not get an adequate education. Moses’ father was a poor man who made a bare living doing odd jobs for others.

After a number of late night chats around the family table, Rheese offered to sponsor Moses to Australia for further education.

It was this suggestion that worried the project manager and caused him to call the Nairobi office to ask for advice. The advice he got was clear. It was a bad idea. Taking a child out of his culture and community at this age was highly risky to the young man’s development, not to mention the possible

moral dangers he might face. But Moses was not in the World Vision program. Advice could be offered, but the decision remained with Moses’ parents.

Over the next few months, Rheese wrote a number of times to the parents and to Moses thanking them for their hospitality and repeating his offer to educate Moses in Australia.

The parents decided they should give their son this chance. Rheese arranged for his travel and he left for Australia.

Now Rheese faced a small danger. As he was, unbeknownst to everyone, already a convicted paedophile, it was possible that police at the airport might recognise him. If he met a teenager, it might arouse suspicion. But Rheese had a plan for this possibility too.

In a shopping centre he befriended a Somali man now living in Australia. After they had known each other for about two months, Rheese asked him for a favour. The conversation went something like this:

“I’m sponsoring a Kenyan lad on a student-exchange program and I’m supposed to meet him at the airport, but I’m worried about him arriving to a sea of white faces. I was wondering if you would mind coming along to meet him. I’m sure he’d like to see at least one African face.”

The Somali agreed. He went to the airport, met the boy and drove him to Rheese’s house. And this is where the carefully crafted plan unravelled.

Some things about the episode unsettled the Somali man. In the car, Moses seemed unfamiliar with the student-exchange program that Rheese had talked about. And Moses called Rheese “Grandfather” all the time. The Somali knew well that either of these could be explained simply in cross-cultural terms, but he was unsettled. He told the story to friends over lunch and they urged him to tell the police. He did.

The police quickly identified Rheese as a man with a record for child sexual offences dating back to 1955. He had been in jail three times and was a known repeat offender. One policeman said he was so well known that schoolyards had become too risky for him to operate in. He had been picked up too many times. Evidently, he had been forced to prey on a wider landscape.

The police went to Rheese’s house and found Moses, frightened and in shock. He had been sexually abused within 30 minutes of his arrival and at least 10 times in the five days since.

Moses spent a few months in Australia in a safe house and received counselling before returning home to his family.

Rheese was convicted in December 1992, aged 69 and sentenced to five years jail with a minimum of 20 months.

**I**nside World Vision, the reactions ranged from mouth-gaping disbelief to vocal outrage.

On the one hand, the procedures instituted a decade earlier had worked to prevent further child abuse in the Philippines. On the other hand, the organisation had badly under-estimated the persistence and imagination of paedophiles. Not only were they sharing information in their jail cells, but also they had worked out that Africa was a softer touch.

The first priority was to support Moses. Some may have thought that World Vision did not have responsibility for someone who was not part of its program, and whose family had disregarded its advice. If anyone in World Vision did think that, no-one argued it. A longstanding and genuine concern for the welfare of children turned everyone's attention to ensuring Moses got what he needed.

As it turned out, Victorian police and welfare services were diligent. Moses was cared for. World Vision turned to its own problems.

One problem was that the organisation turned to me, its CEO, to help them understand what had happened. And I was ignorant. I had more questions than answers. I knew nothing about paedophiles.

Within a week we arranged for the police psychologist who worked at Pentridge with child sex offenders to come and talk to us. The Detective Inspector responsible for the Rheese case also came. All staff were invited, but attendance was compulsory for staff who dealt with donors. Almost everyone came. The talk was taped, transcribed and made freely available on the office intranet.

What we learned turned most of our ideas and prejudices on their heads. The image of the rain-coated park-dwelling sleaze was off target. People who sexually abuse children don't stand out. That is, of course, intentional.

The detective inspector told us that most child sex abusers wear suits. And they work in respectable jobs. Maybe even in places like World Vision.

But such people live with a dark, hidden secret: their desire for sexual gratification from children. They live in a reality different from the rest of us. They come to convince themselves that they really do have a genuine concern for the children they abuse. They convince themselves that there is genuine love. And that it is reciprocated.

"They will try to make the courts believe that they can have a relationship with the child like couples in a marriage," the detective inspector said. "And sometimes it works. The courts say 'Oh well, they didn't really mean to hurt the child.' These guys can be pretty persuasive. They're good communicators usually.

"But it's all a façade. When they are arrested and confronted with their crime, the façade crumbles. The first person to get wiped is the child. It becomes clear as day that the child is only there for the abuser's personal gratification."

"The thing that distinguishes many of these abusers is the amount of effort they put into the chase. For many it is like a lifetime's work. An obsessive, sick hobby. They will take a fantastic amount of time and effort to create a cover, infiltrate an organisation like your own, or a scouting organisation, or swimming club with the long-term ambition to identify a child, make them vulnerable, isolate them, make them reliant on the abuser and then, maybe a long way down the track, finally make their seductive move.

It was clear that Moses and World Vision had encountered someone like this. But then, the Detective Inspector planted the seed that resulted in the uncovering of Jack.

"When these people come through organisations where children become vulnerable, they've done a

lot of work to get there. A lot of planning. A lot of talking. A lot of setting up. A lot of creating networks to get the kind of authority that will allow them to be recognised for something other than what they are there for—to get access to their fantasy."

The Detective Inspector then suggested four ways we might identify such people. General rules. Not true in every case. But common enough.

First, there would probably be a long-term pattern of behaviour. Often it begins with being sexually abused themselves, although most people who are sexually abused do not turn into abusers. There also tends to be a pattern of relocating. Usually this is because they went too far, got caught, or almost caught. And they jump about. Unfortunately, instead of dealing with the person, many organisations just move them on.

Second, generally they are much better at relating to children than adults. It is likely their group of friends will be considerably younger.

Third, they often consciously move into environments where they can gain access to numerous children. Maybe a job, or a religious organisation, or a charity. And they'll often provide entertainment for children. They go to pinball parlours, or have lots of video games at home. Some will have a whole room fitted out for teenage boys.

Fourth, photography. They are besotted with getting hold of photographs of children. The first thing they want to do is see the child. They want to see if they get a response—a sexual response.

My colleagues and I were shaken up after all this. World Vision needed to react. All that had been done in the past may have been worthy, but clearly it was not enough.

The organisation started a campaign of education. The transcripts of the expert's talks were made available. I addressed the staff on the issue, encouraging them to find out. We made copies of Ron O'Grady's powerful book, *The Child and the Tourist*, available to everyone. Frontline staff were trained and counselled. They developed the necessary skills. The paedophile's best protection is ignorance of how they operate. By showing how Rheese had behaved, World Vision staff had a powerful tool to stop it happening again.

World Vision also belatedly joined the community fighting child sexual abuse. The organisation had always had a concern for children at its heart, but it tended to go it alone. World Vision became an active supporter of ECPAT, the organisation dedicated to ending child prostitution in Asia. A senior staff member was invited to join its national committee. Over the next few years the campaign saw more and more stories. The issue of child abuse emerged out of the darkness and into the stern light of the mass media. Journalists visited Asia and wrote about child sex tourism.

Another important step was for World Vision to develop new procedures for sponsors visiting their children. Anyone involved with World Vision was subject to a police check. Sponsors wanting overseas visits, whether they were going to known sex tourism areas or not. The organisation's own staff. People volunteering to work for World Vision

overseas. All checked. The good news at this stage was that no convicted child abusers were found.

**E**levating the issue of child sexual abuse to the top of our agenda had one consequence I was not prepared for.

I found one of my women colleagues in tears in the corner of her office a few minutes after one of our staff “education” meetings had finished. She was embarrassed but responded to my question about what was troubling her.

“We are not all child abusers, you know,” she sobbed.

I didn’t understand.

“They said in there that paedophiles often are abused as children themselves. They made it sound like, if you are abused you turn into an abuser,” she explained.

“I don’t think that’s what they meant,” I suggested.

“I know,” she replied, eyes red and running, “but it’s bad enough that we have to live with the memory of being abused. We also have to live with the worry that somehow it will turn us into the thing we hate.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was all I could think of saying.

“No,” she said with an attempt at an encouraging smile. “You are doing the right thing to raise this subject. I guess you should know that for some of us it will be painful. But keep at it.”

She was not the last person to encourage me and confide their own pain. I discovered that 9% of men, and 25% of women in the general population were sexually abused as children. Since I had not been abused as a child, this was a surprising statistic. Many people living around us are carrying painful memories of child sexual abuse. A few courageously shared their stories with me. More made comments to me personally that hinted at something dark and private. Something they clearly felt I would understand.

I felt very supported and encouraged, yet I was surprised how difficult it was to get some other people moving. I wondered why this inertia existed. History has shown it to be all too common, but that doesn’t explain it.

I found that many males confronted with the facts of child sexual abuse would express genuine concern, promise to encourage others to become aware, but then go soft on the idea. It seemed like a form of unconscious denial. Men would avoid doing anything. Was it because child sexual abuse is a crime almost entirely by men? Do we feel ashamed as a whole gender? Or is it that most men haven’t come to terms with their own history of sexual development? After all, we had a childish sexual interest when we were growing up. Do we now feel ashamed of what was normal?

**A**fter I told Jack’s story, I thought we would be able to get the evidence to satisfy ourselves that Jack had a real case to answer. But then Jack did it for us.

Almost a year after the Rheese case had awakened World Vision Australia, Jack was fired from his job as administration officer of a childcare foundation in

Asia. His new employer had what World Vision had needed—written testimony from a number of children that alleged improper sexual conduct with boys. Jack’s behaviour was reported to the police and he fled the country. Who Jack was, and what he had done, was now clear to everyone.

Around the world, World Vision childcare workers, not to mention those responsible for media relations, urged the organisation to strengthen its protocols on child protection.

Fortunately, over the next few years, the Child Protection Protocols were strengthened, and implemented worldwide. These protocols set standards for sponsor visits, police checks of workers, guidelines for how to write about or photograph children, rules about appropriate behaviour with children. One person is assigned full-time in the international office to train staff and monitor compliance with these standards.

World Vision today sits on the coordinating committee of the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child and is a member of its various sub-groups including education, child labour, children in armed conflict, and sexual exploitation. It is actively engaged in the Global Forum (NGO Committee for UNICEF), the Global Movement for Children, the Global Campaign for Education, the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and the Child Rights Caucus for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children.

World Vision began working among the street kids of cities like Phnom Penh in Cambodia. We instituted programs that raised community awareness and children’s understanding and awareness. Children were empowered to stand up for themselves, to protect themselves in vulnerable situations. And for children who have been sexually abused, World Vision has worked to ensure their emotional, psychological and physical recovery on an ongoing basis.

There were many success stories, but many failures as well. As with most things that really matter, there is never enough funding to do what is needed. Much more money for military aid for Cambodia, than for street kids programs. Journalists would come to such places and write stories. Every few years there would be a big spread. World Vision joined the campaign to get laws making it a crime to have child sex anywhere in the world. They were written. Rumours abounded about a paedophile ring in the diplomatic service. One diplomat was charged and found to have no case to answer.

One night a year later, I was watching a TV story on child prostitutes. The cameras tracked along the streets of an Asian city. It showed boys working as prostitutes. It showed European men meeting with them. One of the men turned and looked directly at the camera as it tracked by.

It was Jack. He was still at it.