

# CHAMPION OF CHOICE

The Life and Legacy of Women's Advocate Nafis Sadik

by

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# Chanti Prattipati

## Berkeley, United States

The universes of a rather unlikely group collided on a Berkeley sidewalk in November of 1999: three teenage girls from a poor village in India, a Berkeley graphic designer, and a multimillionaire real estate tycoon. Designer Marcia Poole was driving west down Bancroft Way in Berkeley, running errands in preparation for Thanksgiving the following day, when she noticed something unusual. The setting looked benign enough on that autumn afternoon: a tree-lined residential street only two blocks from the UC Berkeley campus. She passed a white apartment building, the type of nondescript seventies architecture thrown up hastily to house students. But for some reason Marcia paused when she saw a group of Indian men carrying a rolled-up carpet toward a van marked Reddy Real Estate. As she stared from her car window, much to her amazement, she saw a girl's leg drop from the bundle.

"I realized that something was terribly wrong, and then I saw another group of Indian men and a woman trying to drag a hysterical teenager into the van. But this girl was resisting with all her might." Years later, as I stand here at the scene interviewing the witness, the hair is standing up on her arms as she remembers her shock and feeling of danger on that November day.

As the group pushed and pulled the girl toward the van, Poole jumped out of her car and demanded to know what was happening. "There was a portly, balding man in his sixties, all dressed in white, standing off to one side. He comes over and says to me, very authoritatively, 'Go away! This is a family affair. This is none of your business.'" However, she did not go away; instead she hailed a passing motorist and asked him to call 911. Everyone froze into a type of standoff, with the Indians holding their captive and watching Poole, who blocked their way to the van. No one spoke, but after what seemed an eternity, they all heard sirens; the would-be kidnappers disappeared, leaving only the terrified girl and the Berkeley artist standing at the curb.

When Poole looked into the van she saw the bundle was moving, and instructed the paramedics and police to rescue the body inside. The portly gentleman reappeared and as police tried to question the teenager, Laxmi Patati, who spoke no English, he offered to translate her language, Telugu, for the officers. Lakireddy Bali Reddy, the helpful translator, turned out to be the largest private landowner in Berkeley, the owner of 1,000 rental units. Other members of his previous entourage also reappeared and he introduced the parents of the girl wrapped in the carpet to police, explaining they had been taking the girl to the emergency room when Poole stopped.

Law enforcement took Laxmi into custody, and the ambulance took the unconscious girl, Lalitha Prattipati, to the hospital where she was treated for carbon monoxide poisoning and released on Thanksgiving day with her life to be thankful for. However her sister, Chanti, was not so lucky.

Chanti Prattipati, her sister Lalitha, and Laxmi all grew up on the other side of the planet in Velvadam, a village of 8,000 people in Southern India. They were Dalits, "untouchables," part of the 250 million people on the subcontinent ranked so low that they are beneath the bottom rung of the caste system. As Dalits they are considered subhuman, and undoubtedly this designation, which they inherited on the day they were born, played a part in the convergence of events that ended on Bancroft Way on Thanksgiving eve.

Chanti's father worked as a laborer carrying cement for a construction crew, and the family lived in a mud-walled hut with no electricity or running water. He did not have the funds to educate his daughters, or pay their dowry for marriage. When a local millionaire philanthropist took Chanti to work as a maid in his mansion, the father thought this solution a godsend. She was fourteen and her benefactor, Lakireddy Bali Reddy, began having sex with her shortly after she moved into his home.

This fate would also befall her younger sister, who went to work for Reddy when she was twelve and he immediately began abusing her. Three years later, when he offered to bring the girls to America to work for him, and pay them the princely sum of \$10 an hour, no one questioned his motives. The mogul, who had received a chemical engineering degree from UC Berkeley and then built a business empire in the Bay Area worth \$70 million dollars, returned to Velvadam each year; in his home village he built hospitals, schools, an eponymous engineering university, and provided an endless stream of charity. The villagers called him "our Mother Teresa."

His good deeds extended to helping Venkateswara Vemireddy, a man for whom Reddy had settled debts back in Velvadam. In return Vemireddy agreed to pose as the Prattipati girls' father, and his sister would pose as their mother; the four would emigrate to the U.S. under an H1-B visa, claiming the nearly illiterate Vemireddy was a computer analyst. The conspirators obtained passports for Chanti and Lalitha under fake names, and when they flew into San Francisco International, Reddy was waiting at the airport. He set the imposter parents up in one of the apartment buildings he owned and installed the sisters in another, a one-bedroom pad on Bancroft Way which they would share with one of his other sex slaves, Laxmi Patati. She remembered that he welcomed the sisters to America, the land of the free, by having sex with both teenage girls on the night of their arrival.

This pattern of abuse, which included group sex with Laxmi, would continue for the next three months, along with claims of beatings and being forced to work in Reddy's Pasand Madras Cuisine restaurant, where the boss, Reddy's son, kept the girls' tips, giving new meaning to the term "slave labor." The seventeen- and fifteen-year-old also did maintenance on the landlord's fleet of properties. Residents recalled seeing them atop bamboo scaffolding tied together with twine, painting the millionaire's apartment buildings in their saris. Not coincidentally his name topped the list of frequent tenant complaints brought before the rent board in liberal Berkeley.

However, in spite of the terrible reality of their daily lives, the three teenagers did not see a way out. As is frequently the case with victims of human trafficking,

they were kept with no money, spoke no English, had no education, and in this strange country knew no one other than their captors. Ignorant of U.S. law, they could not imagine that there were legal entities willing to help them.

Another tactic these slavelords use is warning their victims that if they go to authorities *they'll* land in jail for entering the country illegally; and if they're deported, they face retribution back home. Either way, their families, whom the traffickers know, are in danger of being tortured or murdered. This threat alone becomes one of the most successful tools to keep the captives from escaping.

But one day Chanti's suffering was over. On the day before Thanksgiving Laxmi left the apartment and when she returned she found the Prattipati sisters unconscious, having passed out from carbon monoxide fumes produced by a blocked heating vent. On a bedside table was Reddy's prescription medication—a bottle of Viagra.

Laxmi called Pasand's restaurant, which was only a half block from the apartment; Reddy and some of his co-conspirators, including the imposter parents, rushed to the scene. From the second floor they lugged the unconscious Lalitha down to the van, but when police arrived at 2020 Bancroft Way they also found "a slim girl with wavy black hair gathered in an eighteen-inch braid, and she wore cheap yellow earrings and bracelets on each wrist." She was lying in a heap at the foot of a flight of concrete stairs. Chanti was pronounced dead on arrival at Alta Bates Medical Center. An autopsy later revealed she had been pregnant.

Thanks to the fabricated information Reddy initially gave officers on the scene, while pretending to translate for Laxmi, it took several weeks for the real story to unravel. He kept up the subterfuge, identifying the deceased as "Seetha Vemireddy," opining that she was "not at all lazy" and remembered her as "very pretty, tall, about five feet, six inches, and very charming." Her parents also spoke to police and the press, but Marcia Poole, the only eye witness, told authorities it seemed odd to her that the family of a dead girl displayed no emotion. However Chanti's father explained his feelings on her loss to a reporter: "It is karma. What else can I say? We have to accept it." And then he sighed.

But while Bay Area papers were still treating news of the death as no more than an unfortunate accident, two local student journalists, Megan Greenwell and Iliana Montauk, wrote a piece for their high school paper which led off with a profound observation: "The recent death of a young Indian girl in a Berkeley apartment has brought up deep issues about the exploitation of young workers." They also questioned why the two teenagers were not enrolled in school. Around this time law enforcement agencies from Delhi to Berkeley began to receive anonymous letters tipping them to the ongoing criminal activity and the feds pressed charges against Reddy and his sons.

When they were arrested, all violently proclaimed their innocence, and the Indian community both in the Bay Area and back in Velvadam rallied to their defense. But as the date for the trial approached, the five defendants—Reddy, his two sons Vijay and Prasad, and the imposter parents—all plead guilty to various parts in the smuggling, abuse, forced labor, and fraud involved in bringing the girls to the States.

Lakireddy Bali Reddy confessed to fourteen years of such crimes, involving the illegal importation of at least twenty-five individuals. But back in Velvadam locals had a much higher estimate of the number of folks their benefactor had helped by taking them to America. As George Iype reported from Andhra Pradesh, "rough estimates say at least 500—nearly half of them young girls—have gone over from Krishna district, thanks to Bali Reddy."

Today, however, following Reddy's guilty plea, the scandal has created a reputation for his hometown that makes Velvadam on equal footing with Bhopal. But no one will ever know the truth of how many nameless girls came here searching for the American dream and then disappeared.

Reddy stood to serve a maximum thirty-eight year sentence, but after negotiations between the defense and prosecution, they struck a plea bargain deal which sent him to prison for eight years. His son, Vijay, in 1991 had had a previous brush with the law when he pleaded guilty to felony possession of crack cocaine and received a suspended prison sentence. During the Prattipati trial, this married father of twins also confessed to having sex with other teenage girls smuggled into Berkeley for this very purpose. In the end, Vijay served two years in prison. None of the other defendants involved in the case served any jail time whatsoever.

Later, though, ten victims brought a class-action civil suit against the Reddys and ironically the Prattipati sisters' impoverished parents—the people who had given their daughters away because they couldn't afford to feed them—were awarded \$8.9 million dollars.





Across the bay in San Francisco another scandal broke when two Korean sex slaves escaped from a brothel and blew the whistle on a massive trafficking ring. They informed authorities they had been lured to the U.S. and promised jobs, but when the women arrived they were put to work in massage parlors, where they were forced to have sex with twelve to fifteen men a day. This case, referred to as Operation Gilded Cage, ended with federal authorities arresting forty-five people in a California cartel that ranged from the Mexican border to the Bay Area, putting the perpetrators in handcuffs and confiscating \$2 million in cash.

In the aftermath of the investigation into these crimes, San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom and Supervisor Carmen Chu promoted legislation in an attempt to put an end to their city's connection to sexual slavery. Newsom remarked, "Girls are being forced to come to this country, their families back home are threatened, and they are being raped repeatedly, over and over."

Unfortunately the politicians have their work cut out for them. The CIA reports that as many as 50,000 women and children are brought into the United States under false pretenses each year and forced to work as prostitutes, abused laborers or servants. The global nature of the offense makes it nearly impossible for municipal governments to cope alone, and the spread of this trafficking is growing at epidemic proportions, threatening to overtake the drug trade as the top illegal activity of organized crime—and for good reason. Thanks to the brutal intimidation tactics of

the traffickers, the victims are usually too terrified to take the witness stand, and without their testimony there's no evidence to convict the criminals.

Worldwide the U.N. Population Fund estimates as many as four million people are trafficked each year. UNFPA is one of several United Nations' agencies working on the problem by training governments and facilitating cooperation between countries who are receivers and senders of trafficked individuals. They understand the international nature of the dilemma and how it's related to poverty and migration—the exact components which allowed Reddy to lure the Prattipati sisters to the U.S. In reality, when women and children leave the protection of their communities they're particularly vulnerable for abuse. California—a place built by immigrants—becomes the natural locus of such dangers, here in a land where nameless people come and go in their search for a better life and too frequently their history is washed away by the tide.

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