

Lest the Land fall to whoredom and become full of wickedness:

a Bangkok street preacher came to Macon after his mother's death and discovered her involvement in a sex trafficking ring

by CHRIS HORNE

Despite the circumstances, James Anthony Webb was still characteristically charismatic, friendly and open on the night of the public viewing of his mother's body.

This half-Vietnamese, native-born American came from Bangkok, Thailand, where he is better known as Brother Tony, a street preacher and missionary. He came to Macon because his mother, Mai Thi Ngoc Trinh, had been hit by a truck and killed. Her birth name, Mai, translates "cherry blossom".

On the Monday following his arrival, February 9, he stood in a funeral home with several of her friends and co-workers, thinking about a building across the street—the Asian massage parlor that she owned before her death, VIP Spa.

As the facts of his mother's occupation and passing were settling in, Webb still warmly greeted the Vietnamese women who said they knew him when he

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was a little kid growing up in North Carolina. Then he met a Thai girl who'd come with two women he knew to be his mother's associates. He was almost pleasantly surprised to find someone with whom he could speak Thai.

After some small talk—what's your name, where in Thailand are you from, etc.—he showed her a picture of his mother and in Thai asked, "What was she doing?" But the girl refused, telling him, "I can't answer you on that." Their conversation ended shortly thereafter when two of his mother's Vietnamese colleagues put the Thai girl between them.

"They wouldn't let her talk to me anymore," Webb says. "They'd rather have her away from me because they didn't speak Thai, and they want to have the authority and power to tell her where to sit, who to talk to and who not to talk to."

Trinh was killed on January 31, 2009, as she crossed Newberg Avenue, just a couple blocks from VIP Spa. One witness said Trinh was walking with two women when her dog ran into the street. After calling for him in vain, she went to retrieve him, bent down and stood back up as a 1999 Chevy Tahoe turned left from Pio Nono.

The police report says the 72-year-old driver "made contact to an unknown object" then drove to the end of the block before turning around. It was a scene another witness says has been impossible to forget.

One of women reportedly with Trinh said she didn't see anything, and the other denied ever being there. That was among the first of several things that made Webb suspicious.

"I had had an inkling of what was going on with mom. I knew she was probably into something that was shady, but I didn't know what. Everyone talked about her owning a business, like a nail salon."

The next day, at an IHOP with wi-fi, Webb was able to find the articles about his mother's arrest on July 15, 2008 at Ultimate Spa during the second wave of raids on Asian massage parlors (AMPs).

But he says he wasn't shocked because of the way she and his father raised him.

"When I grew up, our house in North Carolina was a house of prostitution," Webb says. "We lived in a very big house and my dad was just an Army soldier. They paid for it by opening up rooms for people to be coming and going all the time.

"My mom loved money. She put money before me, before her family, before everything. In Vietnam, she bought land, big houses, and when she goes back, people almost worship her because she was paying for lots of people's education, lots of people's houses. But she's always been about money first."

When he converted to Christianity, they stopped talking. It wasn't until a tsunami hit Thailand in 2004 and guilt swept over her that she reached out to him. In early 2005, they finally reconciled.

"It was the first time she'd met my wife and seen her grandkids."

Though he preached to her in the hopes she would change, that change never came. He says the surprise wasn't that his mother was involved with these AMPs, but that, like his adopted country of Thailand, the sex industry had infiltrated and begun to define Macon.

"There's one street in Bangkok where there's said to be over 200,000 women selling their bodies a week. Just on one street alone," Webb explains. "I just couldn't believe how bad it was on Pio Nono. I live where it starts, so I recognize it when I see it."

Mai Trinh was due in court last week, scheduled for her first court appearance since police picked her up with Muoi Thi Huynh Wheless, 65, at Ultimate Spa and charged with Keeping a House of Prostitution.

"In Vietnamese culture, everything is done like family whether it is blood or not. Everyone is an aunt or an uncle," Webb says. "I believe Muoi (Wheless) is the big aunt, the elder of this group. She and my mother were close."

Assistant Solicitor General Rebecca Grist couldn't comment on the specifics of the cases at Ultimate Spa and VIP Spa because they are still open. In fact, most of the cases from the raids last summer have not gone to trial yet and won't for another couple of months. A few have plea-bargained or are in the process of it. A few of the defendants have disappeared completely.

"There's a chance that they will still appear, but I have had some attorneys say they have lost contact with those clients," Grist says, noting that other cases involving immigrants will experience the same thing.

Experts list frequent moving around as a tale-tell sign that women are being trafficked. Though not a definitive portrait, when Trinh was arrested in July 2008, she listed her address as 178 Brockton Dr., Fayetteville, NC—the same used by Muoi Wheless, her co-defendant from Ultimate Spa. At the time of her death, Webb says she was living at 1212 Newberg Avenue and had been in Macon for at least a year, but her address was listed in San Pablo, CA.

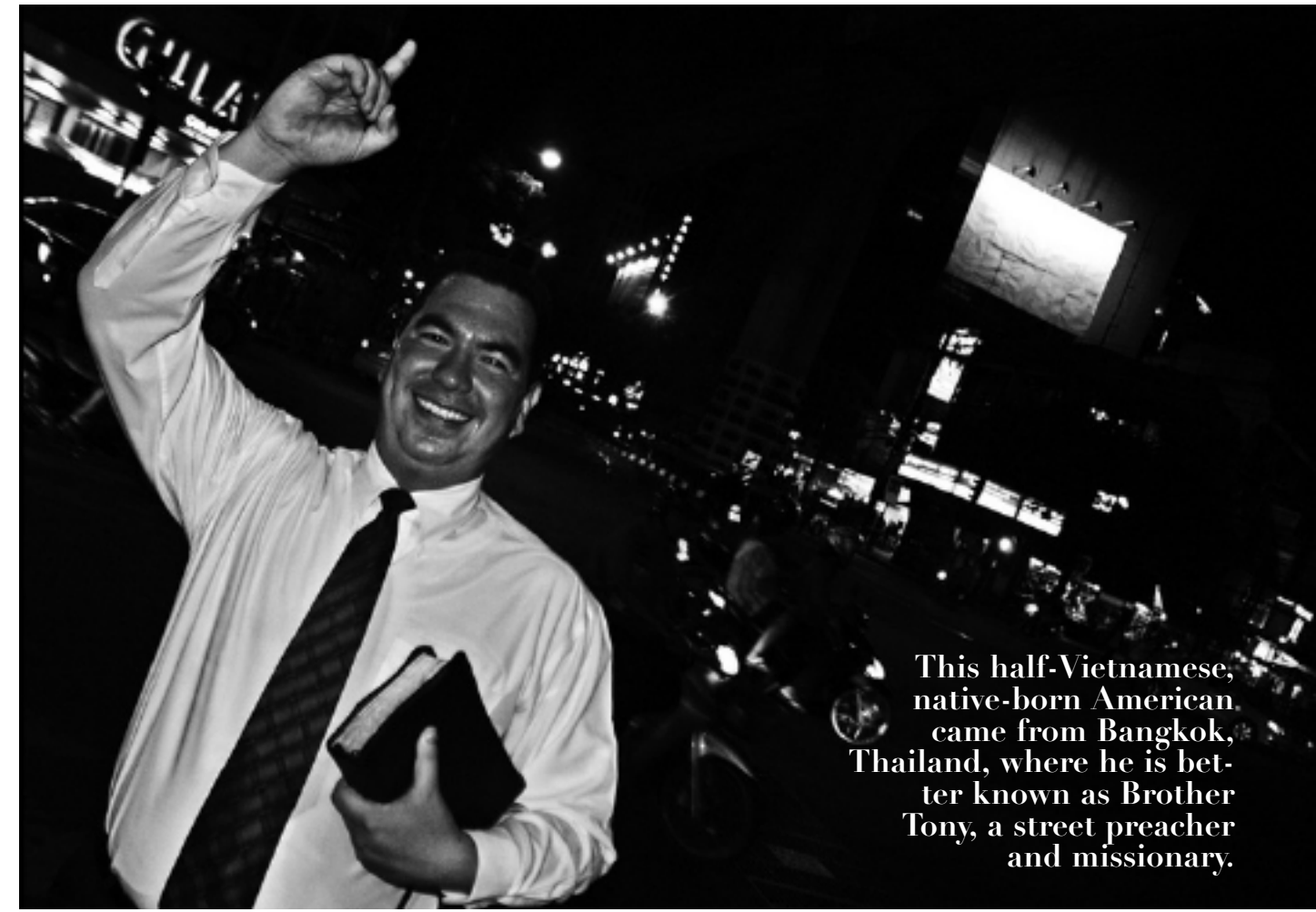
"When I heard she was moving to Georgia, I thought, 'Whoa, what's happened to her?'" Webb recalls, "Maybe she's gotten out of it. Maybe she's gotten tired of this life. Maybe she's trying to settle down." Then I saw Pio Nono Avenue and it's just full of it—full of spas and saunas and those types of places."

Last March, an English language weekly tabloid, *the Pattaya People Paper*, published full-color photos of a bloodied but resolute Brother Tony on their cover. Inside, it told the story of his trip to Pattaya, a city outside of Bangkok that has been a destination for tourists looking for sex since US servicemen made it famous in the 1960s.

According to the publication, as he and five other evangelical missionaries preached their Christian message, one self-professed Buddhist took offense and assaulted Webb, landing 10 punches as he screamed out, "I will kill you in the name of my god!" The assailant then attacked another preacher, 23-year-old Henry Thompson. The article praised them both for literally turning the other cheek.

At other times in his life, Webb most certainly would've struck back. Trained in Muay Thai, a violent flurry of kicks, punches, elbows and knees, Webb once fought under the name Tony Sasiprapagym.

"I had a lot of hate built up. I was a mean person," he says. "With my mom, there was always some kind of illegal business going on. Then I got into martial arts, into fighting, in Thailand and saw all that stuff, but I was never phased by it. I grew up with it.



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"The same thing is in fighting; there are slaves in boxing gear. They take these kids at a young age and make them fight then they sell them to these different camps. I used to think it was cool—like, 'Wow, look at all this gladiator stuff!' You forget, these are human beings. People need help; they need to be rescued."

Having had enough of that lifestyle, Webb went on a spiritual quest "seeking for the God of Now—is there a god who can answer my prayers now? So I went to the temple to talk to the abbot. Across the street was a mosque, a Muslim mosque." Unsatisfied, he met a Christian preacher with a pamphlet about Mark 11:24 — "It was that last part, 'when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you shall have them.' That's what got me."

The last time Webb saw his mother things did not end on a good note. They had stayed in touch until late in 2007, making semi-regular visits that always ended with a little friction. Eventually, Trinh had grown tired of Webb's efforts to convert her. By his estimate, they hadn't talked in over a year when he received the news of her death.

"She didn't want to hear it," he says.

In a story about the difficulty of locating the owners of massage parlors, on October 5, 2008, Telegraph writer Travis Fain quoted Trinh, as an employee of VIP Spa, who said that the owner Thuy Lawler was on vacation in Vietnam and wouldn't return for months.

"There was one article where my mom actually told who used to own VIP Spa, and that could've gotten her in trouble because they try to keep all that in secret," Webb says.

Driving from Minnesota, brothers Henry Thompson—who was with Webb in Pattaya—and Jack Thompson came to help. The first two nights, they stayed in the house at 1212 Newberg Avenue. Webb believed initially that they were simply

staying with his mother's Vietnamese roommate, who he identified as "Rose" Cochran, and her friends, including a man named James Wheless, the husband of Muoi Thi Huynh Wheless, the woman arrested with Trinh on July 15, 2008.

Webb also claims Cochran tried to give him \$1000. He refused, asking what it was for.

"I knew something was wrong with it. It was all in \$20s, but she tried to tell me a story with it, 'Oh your mother loved you. She wanted you to have it.'

"My mother's former husband, a Vietnamese man named Thai Tran, told me later, 'That money actually belongs to your mother. Don't think they've given you something as a gift.' He said she'd left a bunch of cash over there, and 'they're not giving that cash back to you, Tony. That spa, your mom used to own it. She bought it from the owner and they still got her money.' It wasn't until I heard James Wheless and Thai Tran talking that I started to get really suspicious."

Webb's suspicions carry a conspiratorial tone, but seem to have some weight with those familiar with the neighborhood surrounding the Pio Nono spas.

One man who works in the area says he's seen the same Asian man at three different massage parlors and at 1212 Newberg Avenue, a residence he first noted because of the Mercedes parked in front.

"You don't see that many of them in this neighborhood," he said, noting it wasn't long before he made the connection with the spas. "So, I have a pretty good idea of what is going on in them, but as long as they don't bother me, I don't care."

The aforementioned Asian man may have made an appearance at Trinh's viewing, according to Webb.

"There was one character who was dressed in a long, black trench coat, a Vietnamese man with a mustache. He did not talk to anybody, nor did he talk at all. He was a scary individual; the kind of

person you knew was dangerous. He may have been the one driving the Mercedes-Benz we saw parked at the viewing."

Without missing a beat, he says, "The dark side of human nature, I'm from there. But I did not know it was as bad as it is in Georgia. People are being trafficked and there's bad money being made. There are human beings who are being hurt, who are being slaves, who are damaged, who need our help. I have two daughters myself and if they got kidnapped and trapped in that, I would want someone to set them free. People have been enslaved, tricked and trapped into this kind of job."

He says he plans to come back. When he does, he wants to gather people from all over the city and all walks of life to picket and preach outside the spas. But he's aware that, even in the church, that would be a tall order to fill—almost particularly hard here.

"I asked someone, 'What's the church situation like around here?' And he said, 'There's like 3,500 churches but if you look around, nobody is doing anything.' That's exactly it. Everybody's too busy having a social club in their four walls of the church—it's not just in Georgia, it's all over the world. Christians just aren't doing what the Lord said to do. Christians are to be active."

"People need to know what's going on in those places on Pio Nono Avenue. If they'd just get involved, those places will have to move on or close down. If the truth gets out, people will start asking questions. That darkness will be exposed by the light."

STOP Trafficking: A Call to End 21st Century Slavery will take place from March 19-20 in Willingham Hall at Mercer University. Related events will take place Tuesday and Wednesday free of charge and the organizers urge the public to come. For more details, go to www.Mercer.edu/stop