

# A light of hope for abused children

**Richard Smart**

takes a look at how the Polaris Project helped police score a rare victory against sexual predators

## ZEIT GIST

In the dock, Katsuyuki Okuno cut a strange figure as he listened baby-faced, chubby, graying, frightened and seemingly unable to understand what he had done.

"I still love him," the 30-something told the judge at Tokyo District Court after he was asked about his feelings toward his 13-year-old victim.

As details emerged over the course of the hearing on June 7, however, it was clear that the suspect's feelings for the boy he is accused of abusing were very different.

"You need to see a specialist," the judge would later tell Okuno.

Catching Okuno would not have been possible without the help of the Polaris Project, which works to combat abuse, trafficking and sexual exploitation.

After a tipoff from the Japan branch of the NGO, Okuno and an accomplice were arrested by police in March on charges of committing indecent acts with a minor and producing child pornography.

"Our source knew Okuno and knew that he had been approached others and asked for help in making real child pornography," Jake Adelstein, the author of "Tokyo Vice"



Walking a fine line: Child pornography is legal to own in Japan and magazines bordering on child porn are sold openly in bookstores. The magazines displayed above are adult magazines but on the cover of one it notes: "Our youngest cover girl ever! 14 years old!"

and a board member at the Polaris Project, told The Japan Times. "He approached me because he was afraid to go to the police and have his name come up in court. He asked me to write about these people because he thought they were horrible. He argued that the pornography crossed the line between fantasy and reality, and that the people making these videos had crossed a line.

"(The source) gave us a detailed description of the people involved and he gave us video evidence against them. Once we knew the videos were made recently — they showed Japanese kids and Japanese men — we put all of the evidence in the shape and the form that the police would write it."

That the police then acted, however, was a rare achievement in Japan, where it is legal to possess child pornography.

"One of the problems we faced was that the police needed to know that Okuno was doing more than possessing pornography," Adelstein says. "But because we were a third-person source, rather than first-person, if he was just possessing child pornography and not sharing it, then a judge would not issue the police a warrant."

The evidence from the Polaris source proved to be enough to open an investigation, however, and the police arrested Okuno along with Mr. O, a special-education teacher at a school in Shizuoka Prefecture to whom he had sold the sexual services of his 13-year-old victim.

Adelstein became involved in Polaris after encountering the group during his time working undercover for an investigation by Shared Hope International (which was sponsored by the U.S. State Department), and was subsequently asked to become a board member. "Last year, Polaris became an official NPO and I was asked to join the board of directors, which is something I was reluctant to do, because I have had such unpleasant experiences in the field."

Eventually, however, he decided that the skills he could offer meant he should join the organization. "I am good at making sure things are not sensationalized and dealing with the cops."

In court, it was alleged that the following occurred: Okuno had first met the boy around May 2009. At initial meetings, the child had cleaned Okuno's house. Okuno then convinced the child to have his photos

taken wearing a swimsuit. He later sold the pictures and the swimsuit online.

After this, the prosecution alleges he started to slowly push the boy deeper into performing sexual acts in exchange for money. On a salary of just ¥100,000 to ¥110,000 a month, however, Okuno soon found he needed more funds to be able to continue paying his victim. He then introduced the child to Mr. O, who paid Okuno ¥40,000 each time he met the victim. The victim was paid ¥10,000 by Okuno for each encounter with Mr. O.

In court on June 7, the prosecutor asked Okuno what he had done with the remaining profit.

"I spent all the money on the boy," Okuno replied.

This way, the victim was tied into a perpetual system of exploitation by the suspect, the prosecution claims. Without the help of Polaris' source, Okuno's alleged exploitation could still be continuing to this day.

"This sort of thing is happening in Japan and not many people know about it. People need to know something this bad is happening in Japan," Polaris' source told The Japan Times on condition of anonymity. He added, however, that the arrest of Okuno was a small victory.

"The case of Okuno is really the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot more people involved in child pornography, and we want to expose them, but they will not be caught until we have much stronger evidence. There have probably been around 50 kids harmed because of this group, some as young as elementary school age. It is impossible to say how many offenders there were, but Okuno was probably nowhere near the top of the group."

The difficulties of catching the criminals, due in large part to the fact that possession of child pornography is legal in Japan, have been noted by the United States.

"Child pornography investigations inevitably involve more than one country. Law enforcement officials from the United States and around the world enjoy tremendous cooperation from Japanese police on a wide variety of issues, but international investigations of child pornography are significantly hampered by the inability of Japanese investigators to participate or contribute their expertise," wrote former U.S.

Ambassador to Japan J. Thomas Schieffer in a 2008 article in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

For Polaris, the work of helping to catch abusers of children will continue, along with its battle against human trafficking. The organization sees the two crimes as linked.

"Child abuse can be physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect, it happens anywhere," Polaris Japan Director Shihoko Fujiwara tells The Japan Times. "The kids (that are abused) are especially vulnerable though, because they don't have anybody to protect them. I meet a lot of kids who survive by selling their body because that is how they have to survive. Those kids who are abused are easy targets for traffickers, whose aim is huge profit from sexual exploitation."

Fujiwara says that the Japan branch of the organization, which is run by two

the NGO's crisis hotline for a month and ¥100,000 can provide long-term support to five victims.

The Okuno case offers a clear example of the type of role NGOs can play in helping bridge the gap between law enforcement and those who may feel unable to approach the authorities, particularly considering the privacy concerns in such delicate cases.

"I wasn't afraid to approach Polaris. I knew they would protect my privacy, I don't think the police would have," the source in the case said.

In extreme cases, privacy can even mean the difference between life and death. Besides the close-knit groups that practice child abuse, the movies and images also act as an income stream for the yakuza, even if many in the mob do not appreciate their counterparts' involvement in the trade.

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POLARIS JAPAN DIRECTOR SHIHOKO FUJIWARA

full-time staff, a part-time worker and around 22 volunteers, helped around 35 to 40 victims escape sexual exploitation at the hands of traffickers last year. In addition to this, the organization helps to train employees in fields such as teaching, social work and law enforcement on the dangers and signs of trafficking.

"We trained about 3,000 of those people last year, and now they invite us to talk, because they don't know what's happening on the street," Fujiwara says.

In order to continue this work, however, the NGO needs donations. A leaflet produced to spread awareness of the organization says that a ¥5,000 donation can be used to train 10 people about trafficking, while ¥10,000 can fund

and degradation of schoolchildren and the links between abuse in the worlds of fantasy and reality have become ever more urgent to address.

Speaking of the connection between manga and *anime* culture and abuse earlier this year, Adelstein said, "(Pedophiles) use manga to convince the kids that (sexual abuse) is a normal way of expressing affection."

People in the manga industry, however, sees things very differently.

"If you believe that manga is a form of child pornography," said one person in the industry, "then you must think Japan is a capital for it. But if you look at such crimes as rape, Japan's levels seem to be lower than some other countries, even though some manga feature this. I don't think the connection between manga and the crimes pedophiles commit is so strong."

The industry says that the indulgence in fantasy can keep people from practicing their desires in reality, in effect preventing the harm of others.

However, working constantly on the frontline with women who are abused, Fujiwara questions the popular concept that there are no victims when sexual abuse is portrayed in manga.

"There was a person, a survivor of sexual exploitation, who said that if they saw this sort of manga all their bad memories came flooding back. I think this is a good point. There are victims from this sort of manga."

She adds that this hurt can also be felt with real child pornography, which can be impossible to erase from the Internet.

The trial of an alleged pedophile marks a significant victory for those campaigning to see the exploitation of the vulnerable end in Japan. But it does not mark the end.

The case also casts a harsh light on the links between abuse in manga and the real world in a way few have before, and asks uncomfortable questions about Japan's role in the distribution of pornography involving minors and global efforts to combat the abuse of children.

*Okuno's trial continues on June 22. Polaris Project Japan: <http://polarisproject.jp/engsite>. Send comments on this issue and story ideas to [community@japantimes.co.jp](mailto:community@japantimes.co.jp)*