

The STOP Light

Volume 7, Number 2

September 1996

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ADULTS SAVING KIDS
 1901 Portland Avenue
 Minneapolis, MN 55404
 612/872-0684
www.adultsayingkids.org

Prostitution harms body, mind, spirit

I have been writing and lecturing about prostitution as a system of violence against women and girls for over ten years—about the same amount of time that I was used in prostitution. When I was asked to write this article telling teens “*everything* they should know about prostitution” in 1,200 words or less, I thought I faced an impossible task.

Should I write about the violence? The drugs? The health risks? Or do teens need to know about the social consequences of prostitution? The missed educational opportunities, isolation from friends and family, getting arrested, court appearances and jail? Maybe I should write about how real life is so different from the movies. How there aren’t any “*Pretty Woman*” stories out there. How women carry broken dreams of “glamorous careers” in their hearts as they stand on Lake Street flagging down cars. After a while however, I realized that everything, the most important thing, the *only thing* young women and girls need to know about prostitution can be summed up in two words: It hurts.

The first harm of prostitution is “agreeing” to do it. Upon entering prostitution a woman or girl typically gets a new name, changes her appearance, and creates a fictitious past. She does this not so much to protect herself from the police (although a string of aliases help) but to rearrange herself to meet the market demand and in an attempt to save something of herself for herself. Prostitutes are caricatures of women fashioned from a collage of pornographic films and magazines that feature prostituted women *acting* like prostitutes. Johns (customers) and pimps use pornography to teach prostitutes how to act. The process of “becoming” a prostitute entails the systematic destruction of an individual woman’s ideas, beliefs, feelings, and desires. These are replaced with a collection of values borrowed from various pornographic paperbacks.

A “good” prostitute is devoid of a unique and personal identity. She is that empty space surrounded by flesh into which johns deposit evidence of their masculinity. She does not exist so that he can. Prostitution done “correctly” begins with the theft and ends with the subsequent abandonment of self. What remains is essential to the “job:” the mouth, the genitals, anus, breasts...and the label.

The second harm of prostitution is the prostitution itself. To be a prostitute is to be unconditionally sexually available to any male who buys the right to use your body in whatever way he chooses. Prostitutes are visited upon by about five men per day, close to two thousand men per year. Since the average age of entry into prostitution is fourteen, a girl who is recruited into prostitution at that age will have submitted to the sexual demands of four thousand men

before she is old enough to drive a car, eight thousand men before she is old enough to vote, and twelve thousand men before she can legally buy a single beer in most states.

In addition to the daily mind-numbing indignity of engaging in “non-violent,” unwanted sex, prostituted women are subjected to a wide range of sexual abuse as part of the job. Women are tied-up, gagged, whipped and paddled, engaged in acts involving urination and defecation, are penetrated by objects and animals, gang raped, and forced to participate in humiliating, circus-like sex shows for the voyeuristic pleasure of men. There is no other “job” which requires a person to endure these indignities and abuses as a condition of employment.

The third harm of prostitution is a woman’s accommodation to it. The repeated act of submitting to the sexual demands of strangers with whom she wouldn’t otherwise engage in even the most superficial of social interactions necessitates that a woman separate her mind from her body. To be a prostitute is to be an object in the marketplace: a three-dimensional blank screen upon which men project and act out their sexual fantasies. To be a prostitute is to experience exploitation and abuse, and to say, “I want it.” It is to withstand the sweating masses of uncaring strangers furiously pounding against your body, and to say, “I want it.” It is to feel the piercing thrusts of violent desire bruising the back of your throat, and to choke out, “I want it.” To be a prostitute is to never forget: to see every man in every john and every john in every man everywhere and always. To be a prostitute is to never be believed—unless you say, “I want it.” At its very worst, prostitution is literal sexual slavery. At the very least, prostitution is an accommodation and an adaptation to one of the most brutal forms of sexual exploitation in our society.

The final harm of prostitution is women’s inability to escape it, even when it stops, if it stops, which on some level it doesn’t. Women have literally described prostitution as rape that is bought and paid for. If a single rape creates trauma, then the first thousand cause a kind of madness, the second thousand soul-numbing resignation, and all that follow resurrect the spirit into bitter acceptance. If a single rape can be conceptualized as a deep cut into the spirit that will eventually scab, heal, and scar, then prostitution can be understood to cause a festering wound which so threatens the torso that the limb must be severed to save the body. Escaping prostitution is less like recovering from an injury and more like living with an amputation that haunts the spirit with inexplicable phantom pain. And it is this pain—this grieving for all that is lost and can never be regained—that is the fundamental harm of prostitution.

Put quite plainly, prostitution hurts— a lot—and that’s really *everything you need to know* about it.

by *Evelina Giobbe, director of WHISPER*

Speaking up makes a difference

“I’ve been thinking about our conversation...and I want you to know that I’ll never go to one of ‘those places’ again.”

That was Jim, a long-time friend, calling to assure me that he wouldn’t frequent topless bars or strip joints anymore. I was surprised. Last we’d talked he was excited about visiting such places, especially Solid Gold. As he described it, the place was clean, comfortable, and tastefully decorated. The “dancers” were young, beautiful, and talented. The customers were polite and respectful. (There was the usual cheering and jeering, but no one grabbed the girls.) He saw it as a harmless way to have fun and to relieve his sexual tensions. As a single parent for nine years,

he dated very little. He told me he wouldn't think of dating just for sex—that would be exploitive.

Prior to my involvement with ADULTS SAVING KIDS, my typical response to Jim would have been a quick, accusatory retort or a silent, condemning retreat. Even though I'd known him as a caring friend and a nurturing parent, I think I would have written him off as a jerk who objectifies women and supports businesses that exploit them. And Jim would have been free to continue enjoying his new *recreation*.

But this conversation took a different turn. With no planning or conscious effort, the knowledge, experience, and awareness I've gained working with ADULTS SAVING KIDS kicked in. I was able to stay in the conversation with Jim without making him bad and wrong. In retrospect, my attention was on sharing myself authentically, not on criticizing or shaming Jim.

I listened first, then shared *my* perspective. I didn't mince words nor did I attack. I simply gave him the facts as I knew them. "I've heard that strippers are often expected to do more than just strip. They're expected to prostitute themselves. Even if that's not true of most strip places, research shows that stripping is a major entry point into the world of prostitution. Since 80% or more of the women in prostitution have been sexually abused as children, getting into prostitution isn't a free choice. It's pre-conditioned. Physical abuse, drug addiction, venereal diseases, and unwanted pregnancies may come with the package."

Then I asked Jim to imagine his twelve-year-old daughter on stage...to picture her moving to the music...removing her clothing one piece at a time...and to put himself in the audience.

Jim looked a bit uncomfortable and perplexed, but said nothing and the conversation moved to another topic.

A week later, Jim called. "I've been thinking about our conversation and I want you to know I'll never go to one of those places again. I'm embarrassed to say this, but I hadn't really given it much thought before. Imagining Jennifer working in one of those places really got to me. Thank you for being so open and direct. I truly value our friendship."

My purpose in sharing this story is first, to encourage you to fully educate yourself on the issues of sexual exploitation. And second, to share your truths, thoughtfully and respectfully, whenever appropriate. Some men in your life may be just as uninformed as my friend Jim. Maybe they've never examined their values about the issue.

Be assured your speaking up is making a difference.

by Loie Meyer, a former member of the ADULTS SAVING KIDS Board of Directors

Editor's note: We've talked a lot about prevention, and how we can educate kids to keep them from being exploited. And we talk a lot about survivors and how to assist them. But what about the men—the customers? If there were no customers, our work would be easier.

Yes, we can make a difference with men also, as evidenced by the author of this article. If we don't speak up, nothing will change. When we do speak up, our words may reach people and affect change in ways we never dreamed of.

Pastor speaks in school for **ADULTS SAVING KIDS**

Four years ago, Bruce Kuenzel, a pastor in Granite Falls, Minnesota, began speaking in the local junior high school about prostitution. So why does he do it?

In 1992, Erica Grothe,* a 14-year-old child in his congregation was murdered after she ran away to Minneapolis. Officiating hers was the most difficult funeral he has ever done. Afterwards, he prayed that God would give him some way to work at keeping this from ever happening again. Within a month, he got a call asking him to serve on the advisory board for ADULTS SAVING KIDS. Al Erickson, founder and director of ADULTS SAVING KIDS, told him of the urgent need to speak about prostitution and sexual exploitation in the schools, which “seemed right up my alley. In a very real sense, I’m trying to live out the prayer I made to God,” Bruce says.

His first major concern was how to keep his information at a kid’s level and how to keep their attention—how to make the topic real for them. His initial calls to two health teachers at the junior high opened the doors. Both agreed to let him speak to eighth graders as part of their personal and family life series. Bruce has one 45-50 minute class period to speak about prostitution. His session comes right after the topic of personal body safety—how to keep yourself safe from date rape, etc.—and “takes the issue one step further.” He emphasizes that running away can be very damaging—ør even fatal, as it was for Erica.

When asked about his presentation, Bruce described his approach to informing while keeping kids’ attention. “First I tell them a little about Erica and her death—and that I don’t want what happened to her to happen to them.

“I discuss why someone might get involved in the first place by showing a short video on a young woman from a small town in Minnesota who got into prostitution. She talks about growing up poor, about kids laughing at her, looking down at her, about all kinds of abuse and assault she lived with while growing up. Her story hits home because kids connect with that and because she is from a small town like theirs. They hear what she went through, why she ran away, and how she wound up on the streets. It helps kids realize that prostitution is not something a person chooses.

“Then I talk about what it’s really like to be in prostitution. I use a WHISPER brochure , *Tricks Aren’t for Kids*, which has a lot of facts and figures. I also read *Help Wanted*, a prostitute’s job description written by a survivor of juvenile prostitution. I tell kids it’s ugly and gross, but that they need to know the truth.

“This leads to talking about pimps—how they work, how to recognize the lines they use, and some of their recruitment method. If a kid gets tricked into prostitution, it doesn’t lead to where pimps promise it will. You don’t get rich or famous or glamorous. And if you don’t get out, it could be fatal.

“I wrap up by saying ‘if you or anyone you know is in a terrible situation at home, the solution is not to run, but to tell.’”

In order to keep his presentation moving, Bruce shifts topics or focus every five to seven minutes. Using visual aids like the video and brochure helps keep the kids’ interest. He also uses some

WHISPER posters, which show girls on the street who are telling kids to beware. Information written or produced by people who've been there has more credibility with the kids, Bruce feels.

Sometime during the class, he tells the kids that even though girls are shown on the posters and in the video, boys also are recruited into prostitution; that one third of kids in prostitution are boys. He very explicitly and forthrightly asks boys not to become customers of the sex industry.

At the end of his presentation, Bruce opens the floor for questions. Common things the kids ask are why people do it and why they don't just leave. This gives him another opportunity to talk about how people are tricked or coerced into it and the dangers they face if they try to leave.

Bruce's suggestion for those interested in speaking in schools is to let teachers and the principal know exactly what you are going to say to the kids and get their approval up front. If the topic is presented to administrators as a personal safety issue, they can understand it better.

Besides his work in the junior high, Bruce has spoken to several hundred kids at a national youth conference in Georgia. For that presentation, he wrote and asked if they would be interested in a workshop on the topic. Since then, his speaking opportunities have come by word of mouth. He has addressed adult groups like health care professionals, women's groups and pastors, usually at their request.

When he began speaking to adults, Bruce's concern was that he'd get a negative response or resistance once people heard the word prostitution. So far, he hasn't had to deal with any negative reactions. On the contrary, the most common question he is asked by adult audiences is "What can we do in our community so this doesn't happen, or so we can reduce the likelihood of it happening."

Bruce's response: "If it's true that the vast majority of kids on the street have been abused in some way, then we need to do whatever we can to put an end to sexual abuse in our communities. This is a very real issue. Prostitution in Minneapolis is distant and easy to ignore. Sexual abuse is very close to home; its incidence is as high in small towns as anywhere else."

The second point Bruce makes when speaking to adults is that "we need to provide a safe place for kids." He suggests one way to prevent running away is to have several homes in town where kids could stay for 24 to 48 hours until a crisis passes, emotions have calmed down, and something has been worked out. The adults living in the home could be trained to handle situations where kids find it intolerable or too painful to remain in their own homes.

Since he began speaking about prostitution, Bruce says he has become "much more aware of and sympathetic towards those teenagers who are really on the edge; the ones who are in and out of school, in and out of court, in and out of their homes. I have more empathy and some real apprehension about what may happen to them. I can't look past these kids as much as I used to."

In summing up, Bruce says, "It has become more and more clear to me that the most important thing we can do is to love our kids. This is the most powerful tool for prevention. We would see a lot of pain diminish almost immediately."•

written from a taped interview with Bruce Kuenzel, pastor at Granite Falls Lutheran Church

**Missing Children Minnesota has published a book about Erica Grothe called Erica's Choices. It helps kids see the situations that Erica faced and the choices she had to make. Call (612) 521-1188 for information on the book.*

***See page six for an article about recruitment methods used by pimps.*

Kids: Beware of pimps! Be aware!

Teachers and speakers may wish to copy this article and use it as a starting point for group discussion.

Pimps have many ways to trick you, trap you, or force you into prostitution. Here are some of the tricks they use. Don't fall for their lines!

Scenario

A stranger comes up to you in a shopping mall, video arcade, at a concert, the state fair, or any place else you hang out. The person—usually a male—tries to get you to talk to him. Sometimes there are one or two guys along with a woman. Often, the person may be from another culture than you, may wear cool clothes, drive a hot car, maybe talk with a foreign accent—just seem really exotic and exciting—way more mature and cool than other guys you know.

What happens next

The stranger may...

- Bump into you, apologize and start to talk with you
- Compliment you, whistle at you, flatter you; if you act like you like it, he will start a conversation
- Ask if you like excitement
- Say he can get you drugs or alcohol
- Say that with your looks and body he can get you into modeling or dancing; help you earn big money
- Say he can get you a fake ID
- Accuse you of being stuck up or prejudiced if you won't talk to him

What's really going on

The pimp is trying to find out how he can hook you. He is scoping you out to learn where you feel insecure, what you like, what your dreams are, if you use drugs. The more he can get you to talk about yourself, your family life and your friends, the more things he has to manipulate you with—more ways to hook you.

If you are ever in this situation, here's what you can do

- Tell him you don't want to talk to him, and don't be concerned about hurting his feelings. You have the right to not talk to someone.
- Tell him you are waiting for your parents.
- Tell the friends you are with that you want to go—and don't leave one of your friends alone with the man
- Refuse to respond to anything he says. Again, you have the right not to talk to someone.
- Tell him if he doesn't leave you alone, you will get a security guard
- If you do talk with him and feel scared that he may follow you when you leave, don't leave alone! Call your parents to come and get you and stay in a public place where other people are around.

We want you to be safe. Chances are, no one has told you about pimps and how they work. We have seen how devastating prostitution is to people who are caught in it, and we don't want that to happen to you! Listen closely when the little voice deep inside of you says, "Beware!"

For discussion

- Can you think of other ways pimps could try to trick you?
- What other things could you do or say to get the pimp to leave you alone?
- Can you plan ahead with your parents or someone you trust what to do if you get into a situation that makes you uncomfortable?

Warning signs

Calgary police say parents and educators should watch for the following warning signs which may indicate children are involved in juvenile prostitution:

- A change in the style of clothing and jewelry
- Hanging out in malls over the lunch hour and missed afternoons at school
- An influx of telephone calls - usually argumentative
- Circle of friend begins to narrow.
- They stay out late or don't come home at all at night
- They develop an "unreasonable nervousness" around people
- Signs of physical and sexual abuse •

Source: Staff Sgt. Ross Macinnes, Police Vice Unit, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

We don't have that in our town!

Building our house a little higher on the bank could save us all the time and money of digging our flooded house out of the mud. This foresight is possible only when we recognize the potential for a flood. In the same way, if we seek to prevent people from being exploited through prostitution, we must recognize that every community has members who are involved in some way. Then we can be realistic about the possibility that someone we love may get hurt—and work to keep it from happening.

Following are eleven ways that a community may be involved in prostitution—and many people are unaware that it exists—or don't recognize it in all its forms.

1. Parents, teachers and leaders set examples, directly and indirectly, that encourage youth to become customers of the sex industry without even considering the harm that is caused by their actions—or non-actions.
2. Child sexual, physical or emotional abuse is kept secret, making kids vulnerable to exploitation by predators.
3. Children grow up physically and emotionally neglected or feeling unloved. This makes them vulnerable to people who offer them attention, validation and love in order to exploit their bodies.
4. Children are brought up with the assumption that they are safe if they stay in the right areas. When they are shielded from reality, they don't develop the survival skills they need to protect themselves in the real world.
5. Children are taught to be nice to everyone, to trust that every adult they meet has their best interests at heart. They respond openly to articulate, fast-talking, humorous, friendly men and women without suspecting they are being set up. They have no defense against "nice" people.
6. Some adults in the community are actively engaged in using the services of the sex industry:
 - Men use people in prostitution, whether on the street, through escort services, saunas or massage parlors, or at parties.
 - Men view pornography through magazines, films, videos, cable TV, on the Internet.
 - Some use pornography to seduce or molest young children.
 - Some frequent strip clubs.
 - Some seek anonymous sex on the Internet or phone.
 - Some businesses hire prostitutes to provide sexual favors for their customers.
7. Local adults are silent on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation—which can easily be interpreted to mean that it doesn't exist, isn't harmful, or that it's okay for adults to like it.
8. Community members regard the sex industry as an "it" over there and stigmatize "it," leaving themselves positioned as "we" who have nothing to do with "it;" not responsible for "it," and unable to really talk about the ways "it" is actually affecting "us."
9. When young people leave the community, pressures may be put on them to work in the sex industry or be customers of it, and some yield to these pressures.
10. If not for money, there are some members of the community who are giving or

demanding sexual favors in exchange for food, shelter, drugs, rides or jobs.

11. Family members of those trapped in the sex industry agonize helplessly in silence.

Do you still think that you don't have prostitution in your town? It's closer to home than you realize. •

by Al Erickson, founder and director of ADULTS SAVING KIDS