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Pretty Woman world not so pretty

By Jim Nowlan

Prostitution is too often imprinted in our minds as Julia Roberts in “Pretty Woman” or the elegant Sydney Biddle Barrows, the Mayflower Madam, and her escort service for the rich and powerful. Pull the velvet curtain back, however, and peer into the dark back rooms of life. The reality there is more typically a 14-year-old girl named Alicia who runs away from an abusive home and finds an older “boyfriend” who ultimately forces her to sell sex and beats her if she doesn’t.

This is the brief story of the latter world and of a small but plucky Illinois organization that has taken on the daunting challenge, among others, of refocusing our attention on the “johns” (those who solicit sex) and the pimps and traffickers who victimize and brutalize the prostituted.

Sex is big business. Research done at Chicago’s DePaul Law School estimates that between 16,000 and 24,000 mostly girls and women are sexually exploited daily in metropolitan Chicago alone. Between 150,000 and 300,000 young people nationally are at risk of being exploited sexually. And, according to the FBI, the average life expectancy for a child once she enters prostitution is 7 years!

Most girls and boys in prostitution come from abusive, dysfunctional home lives, and sex trafficking thrives in poverty neighborhoods where choices are few.

Enter the Chicago Alliance against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE). Located in a low-rent second floor office above a restaurant on North Lincoln Avenue, CAASE was founded in 2006 by Rachel Durchslag, who came back home from fighting sex trafficking in Thailand to do the same in Chicago and Illinois.

The problem of sex trafficking is too often seen as a big city problem, when the strip clubs, massage parlors, even truck stops downstate can also be facilitators of the sex trade.

CAASE goes into communities and schools to disabuse people about prostitution being a victimless crime. And the group provides free legal services to survivors of sexual violence.

“The misunderstandings of prostitution are so pervasive,” laments Lynne Johnson, director of policy and advocacy for CAASE. “They’re all lies—that women make the choice; that they make a lot of money; that they’re victimless.” Most young girls are trapped and cannot escape; the pimps take the money, and physical and psychological abuse are endemic, says Johnson.

An attorney, Johnson is professional, attractive, tenacious. Over lunch downstairs from the office, she vents: “Society makes excuses that the trade is not about trafficking, yet we know that well over half of prostituted girls and women must meet dollar quotas and bring the money to their pimps every day or face physical harm.”

Johnson’s mission has been three-fold: shift the onus from the prostituted to the pimps and johns; give law enforcement new tools to go after them, and increase options for survivors of the commercial sex trade.

In 2010, Johnson, CAASE and organizations like the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless and the Cook County State's Attorney's Office achieved enactment of Illinois' Safe Children Act. The act made children under 18 immune from prosecution for prostitution and increased penalties for johns and pimps, generally from misdemeanors to felonies.

“There is evidence that johns can be deterred from prostitution,” says Johnson, “if they fear arrest, fines, jail time, family notification.”

In 2011, Illinois became the third state in the nation to enable victims of sex trafficking to clear their records of prostitution convictions incident to their trafficking. This act, in effect, sees sex trafficked persons as victims rather than criminals. The legislation will hopefully make it easier for the survivors of sex exploitation to get jobs.

The recently passed 2012 legislation tightens the definition of sex trafficking to include “any scheme, plan or pattern intended to cause the person to believe that, if the person did not perform such labor or services, that person or another person would suffer serious harm or physical restraint.” Johnson and her colleagues want to stop predators from going out to the mall to mislead 13-year-olds into a hideous life of unspeakable abuse.

As for Alicia, mentioned at the top, Johnson and her colleagues see a world in which street outreach workers would tell the girl about a special drop-in center for people impacted by the sex trade. At the center Alicia would be greeted with, “You're safe here.”

That is the next project on CAASE's docket.