PORTRAIT OF EXPLOITATION

The real face of prostitution
Kathleen Mitchell still wonders what happened to Carrie.

Carrie (not her real name) was only 18 years old when she appeared at the shelter where Mitchell worked. Her two children, fathered by the pimp who had put her on the street when she was only 12, had been taken by the pimp’s sister. While other girls her age were attending their senior proms and planning for college, Carrie was just trying to survive.

When the other women at the shelter learned of Carrie’s history—that her pimp targeted 12- and 13-year-old girls, dropping them when they got “too old” at 16 or 17—they began to withdraw from her. Concerned that Carrie might attempt to draw their own daughters into prostitution, the women tried to keep their children from coming into contact with her.

One night Kathleen Mitchell arrived at work to discover that Carrie was gone. The girl had, however, left a note for Mitchell, one of the few who had shown her kindness. She wrote about her reasons for leaving and then concluded, “I don’t think anyone here understands what it feels like to be a disposable person.”

A former prostitute herself, Mitchell has been working in Arizona with women and girls victimized by prostitution since 1989. While in jail in the late 1980s, she began to organize a support group for women looking for a way out of prostitution, because, she says, she needed that support. After her release, she was able to make a complete break with her past and ultimately went back to school to earn certificates in chemical dependency studies.

The product of her labors, a ministry called DIGNITY that operates under the auspices of Catholic Charities, offers long-term and transitional housing to formerly prostituted women, providing them with the support, education, and tools they need to move out of the miasma of their life in prostitution. DIGNITY touches the lives of more than 900 women and children each year.

Like Mitchell, women from all over the world who were once caught up in the commercial sex industry are reaching out to give a hand up to people most of society views as worthless—victimized pawns in a global web of servitude. Armed only with the weapons of hope and love as they fight an enemy of legionary magnitude, these women on the front lines are offering a new future to those whose lives have been shattered by prostitution.

By Laura Coulter

The real face of prostitution

Stereotypes about prostitutes and the world of prostitution are both abundant and contradictory—prostitutes are human trash, and they deserve what happens to them, for example, or prostitutes are canny businesswomen who bring in good money by providing a service that men are all too willing to pay for. Each of these distinct portrayals serves to accomplish the same purpose: They hold prostituted persons at arm’s length, proving primarily that they are “not us.” Movies like Pretty Women show the proverbial prostitute “with a heart of gold,” a lovely outsider with a pure heart who can be saved by Richard Gere or some other knight in shining armor.

The reality, however, is much more complex—and ugly. The vast majority of prostituted women (and men) have serious problems with substance abuse, mental illness, or both. A growing number of prostituted persons are recruited at increasingly younger ages, brainwashed and psychologically broken down in order to coerce them to conform to the will of a pimp.

According to Joe Parker at the Lola Greene Baldwin Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to working with survivors of prostitution, war, and domestic violence, “The sex industry is ultimately about power. This is best demonstrated by the care which the industry takes to ensure that those it
uses are powerless. The predators are neither irrational nor stupid. They watch carefully for a kind of ‘victim profile,’ and avoid anyone who may be uncontrollable or dangerous. They focus on young people coming out of families that are abusive, disorganized, or non-existent” (as quoted on the Prostitution Research and Education website at prostitutionresearch.com).

Linda Burkle, who works with Wellspring, a Salvation Army ministry targeted toward women and girls coming out of prostitution in Omaha, Neb., estimates that 99 percent of the women she works with have a substance abuse issue which then fuels the continuation of prostitution in order to buy drugs. It’s a self-perpetuating cycle, says Burkle. “Often women get involved in prostitution because of being seduced or enticed into it by a smooth-talking pimp who gets them hooked on drugs. Once they’re addicted, they have to keep prostituting to feed the addiction. We also see a very high occurrence of serious and persistent mental health issues. The mental health and substance abuse issues together—these are a recipe for disaster.”

Moreover, DIGNITY’s Mitchell insists that the average age of prostitutes is lowering each year. The average age is now around 15, and Mitchell says she’s seen prostituted children as young as 10. In their 1996 report *Prostitution of Children*, the U.S. Department of Labor estimated that over 100,000 children are currently involved in prostitution in the United States.

Although nationwide statistics indicate that 85 percent of those involved in prostitution were sexually abused as children, in Mitchell’s experience the numbers are even higher: around 96 percent. The abuse they suffered as children makes them exceedingly vulnerable to predatory pimps, who feed on the abuse victim’s sense of guilt and worthlessness in order to coerce and manipulate her.

Social norms are an unwitting aid in subjugating those trapped in prostitution. Joe Parker writes, “The larger society provides pimps with a very powerful weapon. It makes prostitution an identity, not an occupation. Once you have taken money for sex, you are a prostitute. Society does not allow an expiration date on that identity, nor a way to be publicly accepted as something else…Many people prefer to view prostitution as a ‘lifestyle choice’ or even an ‘addiction’ to a lifestyle. They think most people in the sex industry are there to support their drug habits, when actually the drugs are used to cope with what is happening to their lives. Society assumes that nothing can be done to help them, so there is no need to try. The pimps count on it.”

As for prostitution’s harvest, Parker says, “The health effects of prostitution are devastating. Prostitution, especially in childhood, is at least as effective as war in producing post-traumatic stress disorder. Survivors usually have some combination of depression, anxiety, and dissociative disorders. Brain damage, psychosis, and suicide are common. Long-term psychiatric disability, serious medical illness, and the effects of accumulating injuries shorten lives.”

**Loving the whole person: A comprehensive approach**

Because there are so many ways in which prostitution conspires to ensnare people and consume lives, no single approach will succeed in combating its existence or minimizing its toll. Certainly laws which strengthen the penalties against sex traffickers, pimps, and those who solicit prostitutes are a necessary part of the equation—but just a small part.

Incarcerating prostituted children in juvenile detention centers and jails in many cases prevents them from getting the therapy, drug treatment, or education they need in order to have a viable alternative to prostitution.

Wellspring’s Linda Burkle emphasizes the need for an approach that takes into account the entire story and circumstance of each person who is a survivor of sexual exploitation. Wellspring has taken this necessity to heart and, instead of waiting for potential clients to come to them, their staff assertively go in search of those who have been involved in prostitution and who need their help. Jails are a primary target.

“...We do a lot of outreach in the jails,” Burkle says, “including...
classes in the jails on life coping. We have mental health therapists and dual diagnosis people. We also do case management; we coordinate services for them; we go with them to appointments. We do whatever it takes. It’s very difficult to leave the lifestyle, because it’s a culture. They’re not accustomed to keeping appointments, don’t have a social security card, any of the things that you need to function in society. They haven’t developed a legitimate entrée into regular societal institutions. That’s why Wellspring is a comprehensive program involving advocacy, education, therapy, drug treatment, and whatever else it takes.”

Because those emerging from prostitution often have attendant challenges, such as drug addiction, mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other health problems, trying to help the whole person can be a daunting task. Relapse is likely, Burkle notes, but she’s careful to add, “‘We never say, ‘That’s it,’ you’ve had your three chances, we’re done with you’”

Kathleen Mitchell says that upon release from jail a prostituted person’s first instinct is to throw herself into involvement with friends and family, to try and “make up”
for what she’s done. This approach is disastrous. Without laying a solid foundation of identity first, failure is almost a foregone conclusion. DIGNITY deals with this by preventing the women and girls who stay at either of their two transitional houses from having any contact with anyone outside the program for the first 30 days. In this way, they are able to concentrate on getting themselves in order, working on their self-image and on the life skills that will prove critical to preventing recidivism.

Children who have been victimized by prostitution may need additional services. Because their sexual victimization occurred during such a key developmental stage, prostituted youths often need to rediscover what it means to be a child. Angela’s House, a metro Atlanta haven for young girls who were prostituted, has embraced this premise in their approach to the girls they serve. A group home at a secret location in rural Fulton County, Ga., Angela’s House offers not only comfortable housing to these young people for up to six months, but provides education, therapy, and medical care as well.

Additional family services may also be necessary. According to Linda Burkle, prostitution can be an intergenerational problem. She says, “One family with whom we worked had the grandmother, the mother, and the daughter all involved in prostitution.”

Service providers also agree that failure to address the demand side of the prostitution equation means long-term failure in the battle against prostitution. DIGNITY provides an 8-hour program for johns (men who pay for sex). The cost of the program is $788 per participant, and it delves into the reality of prostitution: how it destroys families (including their own), communities, and individuals (including themselves); and the ways in which it objectifies and damages women.

Mitchell explains that the cost of the program is high so that the johns take it seriously. “It is a highly concentrated program that hopefully gives them insight into making better choices for themselves. We have mandatory sentencing in Phoenix for prostitution and solicitation, so the alternative to the program could be two weeks flat time in jail for the first offense and 60 days for the second, so $788 is a deal compared to the loss of wages and time away from work.”

Mitchell adds that completing the class expunges the solicitation charge from the men’s record. “The men who have completed the class say it was worth the cost, and they believe this class should be given to young men in schools.”

Wellspring also used to offer counseling services to johns, but the program was downsized several years ago due to funding shortfalls. In fact, each of these service providers, from Angela’s House to DIGNITY to Wellspring, is fighting an uphill battle. While clients are plentiful, funds and support are sparse. According to the report on Angela’s House published on March 11 of this year in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, on any given day at least a dozen girls are on the waiting list to get into the program. Although DIGNITY’s diversion program, which educates women and girls convicted of prostitution, has a 74-percent success rate in helping their clients stay out of prostitution, thousands of women and girls will never benefit from this program simply because it’s not available to them.

Part of the funding pinch, acknowledges Linda Burkle, has to do with the sort of nonprofit work in which they’re involved. “This work is so important,” she says, “but people don’t want to give money to help prostitutes. They’d rather give money to help poor children. What they don’t understand is that when they help prostitutes, they are helping poor children, because the children are deeply impacted by this.”

**WWJD? The church’s role**

In his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Zondervan, 1997), Philip Yancey recounts the story of a young woman seeking help from a counselor as she tries to extract herself from a life of prostitution. The counselor gently asks her if she’s considered going to a local church for help. The young woman looks at the counselor in amazement. “Church?” she
asked incredulously. “Why would I go there? They’d only make me feel worse about myself.”

Yancey’s anecdote should act as a cautionary tale to churches in all of their dealings with those on the margins of society, but an even greater impetus to reach out to the sexually exploited is found in the life of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus consistently associated with society’s most “visible” and reviled sinners, and prostitutes were among those outcasts with whom he surrounded himself. In fact, the actions of one woman of ill repute in anointing Christ’s feet with her tears and costly ointment led Jesus to defend her against the condemnation of Simon the Pharisee, who observed the scene with disgust. God incorporated two prostituted women in the mortal lineage of Christ: Tamar and Rahab, whose faith is praised as being comparable to Abraham’s (Hebrews 11).

Condemnation and denigration characterize the lives of those who are trapped in a life of sexual exploitation—condemnation from society, from the pimps who coerce and abuse them, and from their own wounded hearts. To engage in further marginalization of prostituted persons only worsens their situation—as well as our own, as we ignore Christ’s admonition to reach out to “the least of these.”

If God’s attitude toward prostituted persons is one of love, grace, and acceptance, how can the church offer any less?

Laura Coulter’s dual passion for justice and research makes her an invaluable regular contributor to PRISM magazine, for which she has written on the issues of Guantanamo Bay detainees, gender equality in the church, the juvenile justice system, water rights, the hazards of the Christian workplace, and the death penalty. She also wrote the May/June 2007 cover story that encouraged us to engage our faith at the movies.

Brenda Myers-Powell had been out of prostitution for two months when Edwina Gateley invited her to a retreat for former prostitutes at a convent in Erie, Pa. “We were told we were going to be with the nuns!” she recalls. “I didn’t know what to think. But what happened was that we found out they were women just like us. They gave us hope for ourselves. We understood how worthy we were.”

Myers-Powell has been attending Gateley’s retreats ever since, and while they’re not always held in convents, she says the core message is always the same. “Every time I go, my spirit grows,” she says. “They’re teaching us more about what it means to be a woman. It’s not the force-fed religion of my childhood, where the men who were supposed to be my heroes were the ones who molested me. Now I realize God can be Mother God—a part of me!”

For 20 years, Edwina Gateley, a British-born Catholic laywoman, has been offering retreats for formerly prostituted women in recovery, a work that grew out of her experience working with prostituted women on Chicago’s North Side. In 1983 she established Genesis House, a place of support for women leaving prostitution. Often, the program’s graduates stayed in contact with Gateley, sharing both their triumphs and their struggles. Gateley realized the need for
ongoing, holistic recovery. “There are lots of programs for detox, job training, and life skills,” she explains, “but the issue of inner healing isn’t really being addressed. Women get into this because of very deep violence in their past, like molestation and incest. That kind of damage isn’t healed through a typical recovery program.”

It dawned on Gateley that these women never really had vacations—a chance to get away from everything and rest—so she started inviting small groups of women on retreats to the country. Gateley left Genesis House in 2000, and new women are now being brought to the retreats by current members, those who either are employed through official recovery and social service programs or who volunteer as advocates and mentors.

Typically 12-18 women gather on a retreat—some in long-term recovery, some who have been out for five or more years, and a few new recruits who’ve only recently left prostitution. “Those in long-term recovery become mentors for the new girls,” Gateley explains.

Each three-day retreat includes group activities as well as plenty of opportunity for attendees to rest and receive individual counseling. It’s a mix of instruction, playtime, pampering, support, and spiritual renewal.

“It’s the one place where I can be completely me,” explains member Heidi Carlson. “A lot of us are professional women. We have to shoulder a lot of responsibility. This is the place where we can have our needs met, the one time of the year that’s just ours.”

Myers-Powell says, “At the retreats, we get suggestions and support from each other. We can say to the new sisters, ‘You can make it!’”

Gateley says it’s difficult for most of us to understand how hard it is for an internally wounded woman with very little self-esteem to handle daily life. The ongoing support helps them stay sober and out of prostitution. Carlson agrees, explaining, “This pain is always with you. It dulls over time, but it gets pricked again throughout the year.”

In addition to the retreats, Gateley and her colleague Carolyn Vogt Groves offer ongoing support—through email, letters, phone calls, and face-to-face meetings—for women in recovery. “What we offer is not a client/staff or clinical relationship, but an older sister/younger sister or mother/daughter relationship.”

Carlson says all the women in the network have serious family-of-origin issues, and Groves and Gateley help fill that gap. “They give us the unconditional love we didn’t get.”

Gateley seems reluctant to call the retreats and year-round support a “program.” In fact, the group doesn’t even have an official name. Some call it Sophia’s Circle, a name which actually refers to the small foundation established by the group of middle-class Christian women who finance the retreats. Gateley refers to the work in which she’s involved as a sisterhood network—a group of hundreds of women around the country who support each other throughout the year. Carlson says, “It’s like we’re family.”

This past fall marked a significant step for the sisterhood,
Approximately 10 miles to the northeast of Philadelphia’s city center is Riverside Correctional Facility. The compound of buildings surrounded by high fences topped with barbed wire is the temporary residence of Philadelphia’s arrested and detained females. Here women are incarcerated while they wait to have their cases brought to trial or for sentencing proceedings. Riverside opened in 2004 and was originally designed to accommodate 768 inmates. Today, more than 900 women are behind its walls.

The fact that Riverside is overpopulated just three years after its opening is indicative of a troubling trend in America’s criminal justice system: A record high 103,000 females are incarcerated in the nation’s state and federal prisons. Studies show that female incarceration is growing at more than twice the rate of men (3.4 percent as opposed to 1.3 percent). Moreover, from 1995 to 2005, the number of women behind bars jumped approximately 50 percent.

Researchers attribute much of this increase to the “war on drugs,” known also as the “war on women.” According to researchers, “In the past decade, arrests of women for drug offenses and other assaults have replaced fraud and disorderly conduct as the most common offenses for which adult women are arrested.” Other factors contributing to the rise of female incarceration are mandatory sentencing for specific offenses, life-term sentences for drug offenses, and mandatory minimum sentences.

“I don’t know whether these women would have made it without these retreats. A three- to six-month day program is not enough. Prostitution demands a lifetime of recovery. Women who’ve been out for 20 years still have flashbacks, acute distress, and grief. They’ve lost so much. Their wounds continue.”

The retreats have helped hundreds of women stay in touch with each other. Because so many of the women have no other functional family, the network becomes family for them. Carlson says this experience of being loved and validated helps the women in the network to help others. “Everybody in the network reaches back,” she says.

(Learn more about Sophia’s Circle at edwinagateley.com.)

Amy Durkee is a freelance writer in Rochester, N.Y.

PROSTITUTION:
PATHWAY TO INCARCERATION FOR AMERICAN FEMALES

BY LISA L. THOMPSON