



The Boston Globe

Leaving "the life"

Now seen as victims of abuse, teen prostitutes get help to break free

By Bella English, Globe Staff | June 21, 2006

She's wearing a gray pants suit with black heels, her long wavy hair pulled back to reveal silver hoop earrings. Angel has just come from an interview for an entry-level position with a large company in Boston. Even though the job pays a little above minimum wage, she'll get vacation days and health insurance. Just a couple of years ago, the 21-year-old was walking the streets in hot pants and belly shirts, turning tricks for money. Though her pimp kept most of the earnings, he'd provide food, clothing, and shelter. She'd get some shopping money, and her nails done regularly. Today, Angel lives with her husband in a rented room in Dorchester, surrounded by daily reminders of her old life: hookers and pimps. The temptation is still there, but Angel tries to ignore it.

"There have been times when you are so broke, with nothing in the refrigerator . . . I have a guy's number, and I know he'll give me \$300 for half an hour," says Angel, who spoke to the Globe on the condition that her last name not be published and her face not be photographed. But she's a married woman, to a guy who did time in his teens for dealing drugs. "I'm blessed to have a man who understands," Angel says. She hopes to attend junior college. She says her husband is trying to get his act together, too.

"I don't want any more of the life," she says.

"The life" is what the girls who engage in prostitution call it. Angel was first introduced to the life when she was 14. She was a ward of the state Department of Social Services because her parents were drug users who neglected their children. But Angel ran from her various DSS placements and wound up with a man who gave her a place to stay. He was twice her age and -- unbeknownst to her -- a pimp.

Though she ended up leaving him, Angel did not leave the life for five more years. "I was homeless. I needed something to eat, somewhere to stay." So she did exotic dancing in motel rooms, walked the streets, worked as an escort, and followed the trucking routes south, all at the behest of one pimp or another. She was beaten and held hostage in motel rooms by pimps and was often homeless, she says.

When she did work, she could haul in several hundred dollars a night, all of it going to her pimp, who would dole out meager amounts to her. And when she got busted, she says, police officers would call

her names or demand sexual services. She was usually remanded to DSS custody. Sometimes she was arrested.

Angel's plight underscores an important change in the way the state is approaching teenage prostitution. Thanks to a collaboration between law enforcement and social service agencies in Massachusetts, girls like Angel are no longer considered criminals. They're viewed instead as victims of child abuse; their pimps and johns are considered rapists and pedophiles.

The impetus for the change is that prostitutes are getting younger. When Leora Joseph agreed to manage teen prostitution cases for the Suffolk County district attorney's office, she thought she'd get a couple of cases a year. Instead, there are about 100 blue folders in cabinets or on the office floor. "Until a year and a half ago, DSS would rarely send us these cases because they were worried we would prosecute these girls," says Joseph, who is in charge of child abuse cases for the DA's office. "Now that we're all working together, they send us so many, I'm beyond buried."

Not only are there more girls, they're also younger than ever. Because of the Internet, pedophiles have easy access to child pornography and escort sites, and johns believe that young girls are less likely to carry diseases. The pimps are happy to comply; the younger they are, the more money they bring in.

Olinka Briceno, director of an outreach program for at-risk girls, has seen the age drop over the years she has been at A Way Back, a project of Roxbury Youthworks. "I've seen over 120 girls, and they just keep getting younger." Four years ago, the average age was 15 or 16; now the girls are 12, 13, or 14. "The youngest we had was 11," says Briceno, who has known Angel since she was 14.

Though Angel "aged out" of DSS services when she turned 18, Briceno still mentors her on her own time. "We love this kid and we see the potential," she says. But she knows if Angel ever loses her job, the streets may beckon. "She's just a paycheck away from turning another trick," says Briceno, who has not only given Angel emotional counseling but helped her hunt for jobs and housing.

The state Department of Youth Services is working with DSS, private social service agencies, and law enforcement to treat underage prostitutes as sexually exploited children. "They come into DYS with underdeveloped sexual organs that have been abused," says Laura Prescott, director of female services.

The interagency collaboration was formed after a girl in DSS custody was murdered in 2001. Though the case was never solved, her pimp was the prime suspect. Two years ago, the Massachusetts Prostitution Prevention Project began its work. "We said, wow, there are these kids out there and we really don't know what to do to help them," says Kerry Seitz, coordinator of the project in the Suffolk DA's office.

A year ago, she launched a database and has identified about 100 girls involved in prostitution in the Boston area. The average age is 15, but there have been girls as young as 11. "The numbers are reflecting that this is a huge problem, and the cases we have are just scratching the surface," says Seitz.

The usual profile is someone like Angel, a runaway or "throwaway" girl, abused or neglected at home, with nowhere to go. Pimps troll malls, bus stations, T stops, roller skating rinks, group homes, the Pit in Harvard Square, Downtown Crossing, and streets in gritty urban areas such as Lawrence, Lowell, Chelsea, Lynn, Fall River, and New Bedford.

Their message to the vulnerable girls is invariably the same: You're beautiful. I can take care of you. You'll make lots of money. To combat that, the Home for Little Wanderers, a private family service agency, created a 10-week curriculum for girls called, "My Life, My Choice." It serves as a reality check, to make girls see the life as dangerous, not glamorous. The project was funded by DSS and developed by a former prostitute along with Lisa Goldblatt Grace, an adolescent therapist.

One of the teachers is Audrey Lynch, who spent 15 years on the streets and has credibility with the girls, who are in the care of DSS or DYS. Lynch -- she asked the Globe to use her maiden name, because her children don't know she was a prostitute -- was 16 years old when she first took to the streets. She was 30 when she left with the clothes, and scars, on her back. Instead of money and a home, she had acquired a drug habit and an arrest record.

Now 43, Lynch shares with the girls the tactics and tricks pimps use to recruit, and she talks about the dangers. "I tell them about being robbed, having a knife to my throat, a gun to my head, and the beatings you endure from the pimps and the customers," she says. "I really give it to them raw." While she had fast food to eat and one outfit for work, her pimp ate well and wore fancy clothes and jewelry.

Jack Arnoldy, an apprehension officer for DYS, works with some of the state's most troubled young offenders, including gang members. The underage prostitutes he finds particularly poignant. "It's the saddest work I've ever done," he says. "These guys will promise them the world, and then they'll take the clothes off their back when they're done with them. The girls get nothing but a story out of this life."

The Fay A. Rotenberg School in Chelmsford, a locked residential facility, treats the state's most dangerous female juveniles. Director Mary Harte estimates that 35 to 40 percent of the girls have a history of prostitution. "The pimps will tell them, 'I'll build you a website,' or 'I'll make you a star,' or 'It's just an escort service.' But by the time the girls are done here, they know it's wrong."

In her office, two 17-year-old girls talk about the life. Both have taken Lynch's course. "I've been approached so many times," says one girl. "But I think it's degrading." DYS would not allow their names to be used since they are juveniles.

The second girl also denies ever being in the life, but she says her sister, who is 18, was a drug-addicted prostitute who is now living in a shelter, drug free. "Younger girls are being used because they won't get locked up," she says.

Briceno says what is most needed is a full-service residence for girls trying to leave the streets. Girls like Angel, who was cut loose from services when she was 18, remain at high risk for sexual exploitation, she says. "It's a long-term recovery process and they need a safe place." Locking the girls up, even in youth facilities, does not help, she adds.

Later Angel learns that she did get the job she wanted. She's working a lot of overtime and putting away some money for junior college, where she has been taking classes after earning her high school equivalency diploma.

Still, money is tight, her room is small, the neighborhood marginal. Every night, she says, she is tempted to return to the streets. "I'm trying my very hardest to get my life together. I do not want to be 30, 40, or 50 years old, working Blue Hill Avenue." ■

