Prostitution is shadowy backdrop to Schaumburg hotel slaying

World’s oldest profession is nothing new in suburban communities

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In Room 331, the party was just cooling down. Joshua Sims, his cousin and a girlfriend were preparing to head home to Minneapolis later that day after having spent a couple of weeks in the Chicago area.

"We were all just playing cards, drinking Jack, having a nightcap," said Vicky West, a visitor from Louisiana, who was the fourth guest in the Schaumburg hotel room.

Sims had a .45 caliber pistol, which hardly seemed necessary at such a mellow moment. But it was loaded, just in case. Sims had prior arrests on weapons, drugs and assault charges back home. The memory of a beating he’d received in a suburban Minneapolis nightclub was still fresh, his sister said. If need be, he could get his hands on the pistol quickly.

One woman in the room had a record of prostitution arrests. Another would soon join them.

Prostitution has long been a sordid fact of life in the communities around O’Hare International Airport, according to vice investigators. The “Operation Room Service” crackdown by Cook County sheriff’s police in October netted dozens of prostitution arrests in the O’Hare area. Earlier this month, eight women were caught in a similar sting in a Schaumburg hotel.

The incidents show that prostitution continues to thrive, with hotel rendezvous frequently set up online. It’s a shadowy world often intertwined with drugs, violence and cyclic abuse. And the events about to unfold in Room 331 on March 16 underscored the dangers.

A little past 1 a.m., someone knocked on the door. It was Kristian Branch, who said she needed help. Busted for prostitution in a nearby hotel four nights earlier, she had other trouble this night. She said through the door that she’d just gotten into a fight with her boyfriend, Mario Charles.

It wouldn’t be the first time he was accused of attacking her. In 2008, the Rockford resident was convicted of beating Branch after a neighbor encountered him pinning Branch against a parked car while punching her in the face.

West, 27, had mentored and occasionally sheltered Branch, sometimes renting rooms in the same northwest suburban hotels. The pair trusted each other. So when Branch asked in, West obliged.

In getting to know West, Branch had learned West had a monthly inheritance, and that this particular day likely was payday.
Five doors down, in another room, Branch’s boyfriend, Charles, waited with a loaded .25 caliber pistol. He knew about the inheritance money, too, prosecutors said.

Scarlet pasts

Branch and West both had brushes with the law.

West had been arrested for prostitution last June after an undercover police officer set up an appointment with her — she advertised on Craigslist as “Britnee” — at a Schaumburg hotel. She told police she had been working out of two hotels for six weeks.

Branch, a resident of Elgin, had been arrested four nights earlier in the Schaumburg raid after pleading guilty to another prostitution charge that same day.

In addition to the sheriff’s stings, Schaumburg police have made seven prostitution arrests so far this year, on pace to double last year’s total of 17, said Sgt. John Nebi.

But it’s not just the selling of sex that worries police or advocates. The criminal element often associated with it is another major concern. And it was on display in Room 331 at the Homestead Suites Hotel the night of the party.

The events of that night “Illustrate the criminal industry that often surrounds prostitution,” said Lynne Johnson, advocacy director for the group Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

Ten minutes after Branch entered, there was another knock at the door. It was Charles, her boyfriend, dressed in a leather jacket and blue jeans. He said he needed to use the bathroom. They let him in.

Charles went into the bathroom — and came out with a gun drawn. He pointed the weapon at Sims and his cousin, authorities said.

He then ordered everyone on the floor, police said.

Sims, West and the two others in the room threw themselves down. Charles searched for money as Branch approached West. She began hitting West and demanding money, according to prosecutors.

Charles allegedly ordered those in the room to strip.

Sims reached under the bed and pulled out his own pistol, police said. Charles shot him, but Sims got off a fast shot. The sound of gunfire filled the room.

‘Always fighting’

It’s unknown how Charles and Branch first met, but their mothers and court records confirmed that their two years together were far from idyllic.

“They had a relationship where all they did was fight,” said Branch’s mother, Theresa DeLaRosa of Elgin. “Kristian is a drug addict and an alcoholic, and so is he. So they were always fighting. But they were all each other had.”
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