




AUSTIN WEEKLY news

-  [Breaking News](#)
-  [Classifieds](#)
-  [Photo Store](#)
-  [Subscribe Now](#)

A new Joint Center. An Expert Team.
We've made great strides in orthopedic care.

VANGUARD | WEST SUBURBAN MEDICAL CENTER



PUTTING THE ART BACK INTO MARTIAL ARTS

MASTER S.H. YU
MARTIAL ARTS & FITNESS ASSOCIATES

Home

home : news : news

May 07, 2012

News

- [Taking Care of Business](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Out and About](#)
- [Poetry](#)

- [Viewpoints](#)
- [Street Beat](#)
- [Calendar](#)

About us

Feedback



Community Guide

Education Guide

Search

Search

[Advanced Search](#)

3/14/2012 10:00:00 PM

[Email this article](#) • [Print this article](#)

New law offers hope to sex trafficking victims

Saving lives, changing attitudes

By **ARIEL RAMCHANDANI**
Medill News Service

Brenda Myers-Powell was 14 going on 15 when she turned her first trick.

It was on a warm night in April in 1973, Good Friday to be exact, when she journeyed from her home on the West Side of Chicago to the Mark Twain hotel downtown.

Myers-Powell had noticed prostitutes outside her window since she was 9 years old. When her grandmother told her that these women "took off their panties and men gave them money," Myers-Powell could relate. A latchkey kid left only in the care of her alcoholic grandmother, Myers-Powell had been molested by men coming in and out of her house since she was 4 years old.

Looking out her window at these women with their makeup and fishnet stockings patrolling the streets, Myers-Powell wanted to be like them.

"I always wanted to be shiny," she recalled. "I couldn't be shiny because of the things that were happening to me."

It was not long after she began working downtown that she was kidnapped by two pimps and held against her will for about six months.

"They would threaten and say they could shoot me and put me in a cornfield and nobody would know, and I would believe them," she said.

She finally got away from them after they began to pay attention to another girl they had kidnapped. She never saw the other girl again.

Myers-Powell was one of the many young women in the Chicago area who are commercially exploited sexually. According to the Salvation Army Promise Initiative, 16,000 to 25,000 women are commercially exploited sexually each day in the metropolitan area.

This may come as a surprise to some, who think of trafficking as something that happens in foreign countries.

But "a young woman on one side of the city could be recruited into prostitution and sold in a different neighborhood," said Kristin Claes, the communications manager at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

Illinois recently passed the Justice for Victims of Sex Trafficking Crimes Act. The law, which went into effect in January, aims to help survivors get their lives back. Since 2007, Illinois has had the fifth highest number of calls to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline of any state.

New legal Action

Myers-Powell, who worked all over the country in strip clubs, as an escort and on the streets over the course of her career, is going to be one of the first women in Illinois to petition to have her prostitution conviction expunged on the grounds of her being a trafficking victim.

Under the new Justice for Victims act, a woman can petition any time after her conviction to prove she was a victim of commercial sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is defined as sexual abuse in exchange for money, goods or services. Judges will look at arrest records, medical records and expert testimony.

"The law is really important because petitioners are asking a judge to recognize that they are sex trafficking victims," said Claes, whose organization was a major force behind the law. "This will give recognition by the courts that the victims were not criminals."

This law comes alongside other measures by the county and state to rethink trafficking in terms of the women as victims versus criminals.

In 2010, Illinois passed the Safe Children's Act, drafted by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez. This act wipes the



Reformer: Brenda Myers-Powell helps women free themselves from prostitution. MEDILL

term "juvenile prostitutes" from the criminal code, and sends children arrested for prostitution to social services instead of detention.

Under this law, law enforcement can also go after traffickers through wiretapping.

These laws work together with the Human Trafficking Initiative, also created by the state's attorney, where prosecutors work with law enforcement to coordinate sometimes lengthy investigations. It also networks together nonprofits that help victims.

A difficult game to beat

Even while on the offensive, law enforcement faces myriad problems in tackling the issue.

The sex trade is highly lucrative. A drug dealer, for instance, can only sell drugs once, but a pimp can sell a girl multiple times in a day.

"It's a billion-dollar industry," Myers-Powell said. "People don't play when you're talking about that kind of money. They're very dangerous, they're very harsh."

Women like Myers-Powell might also encounter problems as they craft their petitions. Because prostitution is illegal, when Myers-Powell sought out medical treatment she would use different names. She remembers going to Mount Sinai Hospital on the West Side to get treatment after she was shot and then again to get the bullet removed. But medical records in her name only showed she had gotten the bullet removed.

"I'm trying to figure out, did I use one name when I got shot and another name to get the bullet out? I got frightened because the police were always talking about locking me up," Myers-Powell said.

The Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and the Salvation Army provide legal services to help women craft their cases.

Myers-Powell is unsure what will happen with her case, or those of other women in the future. "I don't know because we haven't even done one yet. We don't know how this will play out."

Hold the johns responsible

Those trying to end trafficking say real change will come when the johns, or clients, are held responsible.

"For too long our culture has blamed women and girls for the harms of prostitution," Claes said. "Without demand from men there would be no prostitution."

For Myers-Powell, that evidence is clear as well.

"You could lock up a drug dealer and a new drug dealer would set up shop immediately, but when they would lock up the customers it would go down. If we hit the demand side as consistently and harshly hard as we hit suppliers, we would have a great impact."

Cook County Sheriff Thomas Dart has organized two National Days of Johns Arrest. On the most recent one, during this year's Super Bowl in February, 216 sex purchasers were arrested.

Myers-Powell picked up her last client, a white man who looked like he could be a doctor, in a white Mercedes in 1997. When they finished, he began to beat her. As she struggled to leave the car her clothes got stuck in the door. He dragged her six blocks, and the rough concrete scraped the skin off of the left side of her face and body.

In the hospital she met a doctor who helped her get into a safe house, where she lived for a year and a half, reveling in little things people often take for granted, such as being able to open the fridge and make herself something to eat.

Now in her 50s, she runs the Dreamcatcher Foundation, along with another woman she met in that house. The foundation intervenes early to keep girls out of trafficking.

Myers-Powell's crusade recently took her to a middle school in Dolton, where a young woman was being trafficked and trying to recruit other girls. Myers-Powell's goal was to bring the girl to Anne's House, a safe house run by Salvation Army's Promise program, which helps trafficking victims.

As to whether she was worried that the young girl wouldn't come with her, that she might not trust her, Myers-Powell said, "Yeah, they're going to trust me. I'm a diva."

Article Comment Submission Form

Comments are not posted immediately to the website. Each submission must be approved by the website editor. There may be a delay of 24-48 hours before your comment appears on the website.

By you submitting a comment you grant Austin Weekly News the right to post your comment online and print it in our newspaper.

Note: All information on this form is required. Your telephone number and email address are for our use only and will not be attached to your comment.

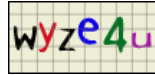
Name:

Telephone:

E-mail:

Passcode:

This form will not send your comment unless you copy exactly the passcode seen below into the text field. This is an anti-spam device to help reduce the automated email spam coming through this form.



Please copy the passcode exactly
- it is case sensitive.

Message:

Submit

Clear Form

Copyright 2011, Austin Weekly News,
141 S. Oak Park Ave., Oak Park, IL 60302, 773-626-6332

To view any of the other newspapers or publications owned and operated by Wednesday Journal, Inc., click on the appropriate title.

[OakPark.com](#) | [Wednesday Journal](#) • [Riverside Brookfield Landmark](#)
[Chicago Journal](#) • [Forest Park Review](#) • [Chicago Parent magazine](#)

Software © 1998-2012 [1up! Software](#). All Rights Reserved