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## **Anti-prostitution effort targets high school boys**

### **Lessons on harms of sex trafficking meant to keep men from turning into johns**

Barbara Brotman

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"Raise your hand if you've heard of supply and demand," said Caleb Probst.

A classroom of senior boys at Rauner College Prep raised hands. They knew about supply and demand from studying economics.

Now they were hearing about it in terms of prostitution.

Standing at the front of the room at the Near Northwest Side charter school, Probst, education outreach associate at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, made the case.

"The same principles are involved," he said. "There is a demand to buy lap dances, so people supply it. And the demand comes from — where?"

"People," said Michael Barajas from his seat in the back row.

"What kind of people?" Probst said. "Men of some variety, right? The vast majority, well over 90 percent, of the people who buy these things are men."

But not, alliance staffers hope, these young men.

Using what the organization says is the only such curriculum in the nation, the alliance is trying to reduce prostitution by trying to prevent high school boys from one day becoming customers.

No offense is meant to these particular students. It's not that alliance staffers think they, or the other Chicago high school boys who have heard Probst's presentation, are especially likely to become johns.

Rather, the group thinks they could be part of this problem's solution.

Efforts to stop sexual exploitation have traditionally been aimed at women, said Rachel Durchslag, executive director of the alliance. But "as long as there is someone who will open up their pocketbook to purchase sex, there will be people who will supply it," she said.

The alliance is trying to close the pocketbooks.

Other groups across the country have begun trying to do the same. Last month in Boston, more than 250 people attended an international conference held by Demand Abolition, a group that seeks to end sex trafficking by eliminating demand.

"Over the last couple of years, people have become much more conscious of the fact that women and girls who are in prostitution really are victims of a crime themselves or are victimized and exploited," said Mary Ellison, director of policy for the Polaris Project, a national organization that opposes human trafficking.

The alliance program arose from its 2008 study of men who had purchased sex in Chicago.

More than half of them had started doing so between the ages of 18 and 23.

"So if most of them were purchasing sex in their college years, we couldn't do a prevention curriculum in college; it would be too late," Durchslag said. "We had to reach them in high school."

The alliance wanted to do so. It looked for a high school curriculum it could use, but found nothing anywhere in the country. So the group wrote its own.

Probst, an actor who conducted some of the study interviews, has presented "Empowering Men to End Sexual Exploitation" to 1,155 students at 13 Chicago Public Schools and charter schools since 2010.

At Rauner, Probst had the students stand in different parts of the room depending on whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about sex trafficking. He pursued conversation, asking questions, promising he would pass no judgment on answers.

Was prostitution harmful for the women engaging in it?

Not necessarily, one young man said. "It helps them out," he said. "The females are getting all the money. I'm losing the money; it's going to her."

"Does she get to keep it all?" Probst said.

"No," several students replied in chorus.

Was it wrong for 14- or 15-year-old girls to work at strip clubs? It was, the students agreed.

"They're kids," one said firmly. "They're innocent. They should be in a playground, skinning their knees."

At another session, the Rauner students watched a video in which a woman told hard stories about her life as a prostitute. Statistics flashed on the screen, one reporting that every year more than 300,000 children in the U.S. are victims of sexual exploitation.

"Damn," murmured Joshua Lopez, shaking his head.

As Probst guided the conversation, he gently made points. Women in prostitution are often victims of assault and rape. Many are recruited as minors. Pimps seek out the young and the vulnerable.

Will this program make any difference?

The surveys the alliance does before and after the sessions show changes in attitude, the group says. Only a tiny minority of boys in the pretests said they would personally purchase sex; but after Probst's visits, most of those changed their minds.

And Probst hears from teachers. After he spoke at one school, a social worker there told him she overheard a boy saying he was planning to wear a "wife-beater" to an upcoming social engagement.

Another boy stopped him. "You mean a tank top, man," he said.

"These kids are eager to talk about this," Probst said. "They see things in their neighborhood, but no one talks about it."

"It makes you think about those young girls and how bad they have it," Alejandro Barragan, one of the Rauner Prep students, said after the last session. "I don't even like joking around anymore. I don't even think it's funny."

"We asked men in our survey, 'What would you tell men under 18?'" Durchslag said. "They said, 'That (buying sex) will change forever how you relate to women. You will never look at a woman as a full human being again.'"

"Men said, 'I wish someone had come to my school (to say that). ... I might have made a different decision.'"

[blbrotman@tribune.com](mailto:blbrotman@tribune.com)

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