Reflections on Attending the Prostitution Offender Program, December 2004

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What a privilege and an honor to be witness to such an amazing program. From my standpoint as a single mother of two young boys and having had personal experience with abuse in my life as well as a family member who had an addiction to pornography, I knew that the Prostitution Offender Program would, at the very least, teach me a bit more about a part of the world that really is only a few steps away from most anyone's life. Most of us just don't understand the realities of this world or even want to admit that it exists.

My first thoughts, while I sat in this room filled with men who are undoubtedly having some personal issues to deal with, were about who these men actually were and what led them to this fork in their road. Did they have an addiction issue? Were they just curious? Was physical disability a factor (as one man was in a wheelchair)? Did they really think it was okay to solicit sex for money in a public place? Was this really their "first time?" Or was this just the first time they got caught? Regardless of all of these factors (or excuses), one thing is always clear about this type of relationship between men and women: it is a power-over scenario and it exploits and abuses women. This point, along with many others, was made loud and clear throughout the program.

As the program began, it immediately became clear as to why soliciting prostitution is a risk to the John in much more detrimental ways than simply getting caught in a sting operation. Derek's presentation on sexually transmitted infections, although delivered very gently, clearly proved that these men are risking a potential death sentence for both themselves as well as anyone they are physically involved with. This was a very personal start to the program and it only became more eye opening and personal as the day went on.

The video presentation, which depicted women (or girls, really) being manipulated and beaten into a life of prostitution, helped to show the disturbing side to this world that is probably the furthest from the John's mind when he's making his exciting deal with her. Still, at this point, however, I think that many men (and women) continue to justify their actions or beliefs about prostitution by saying to themselves that not all women are in it for these reasons nor are they all treated this way.

The case for prostitution starts to seriously lose its momentum, however, when the two police officers, who have years of experience with prostitutes and people whose lives are affected by this trade, begin their spiel on incarceration in the federal and provincial system and then speak very candidly about how, in all their years of experience, they've never met a prostitute who did it because they actually wanted to do it. We've all heard the stories of upstanding young women putting themselves through school so they can become doctors and lawyers, etc. and choose to pay their way by prostituting themselves. Or we hear the other common story of women who do it because they enjoy sex so much. However, when these officers ask the men to think of their own daughters or wives or sisters or nieces and whether they would ever choose to do this work – to give a hand-job or blow-job to old men or men with baby car seats in the back of their cars or, worse, to risk being beaten or killed by a John – without being hooked on drugs or controlled by a pimp, these satisfying stories about women actually wanting to do this work start to lose their credibility. When they go on further to explain how prostitution is about "survival" and how a man in a federal prison, too, will submit to performing a sex act for another man to avoid being beaten to death, the point almost becomes entirely made. Women don't choose to sell their

bodies on the street. They have to in order to survive, just as any man likely would if he was under another man's power.

After digesting just a small portion of the presentations, I started to wonder about why it takes this type of behavior to gain access to this type of program with all of its critical and invaluable information. This question, fortunately, was asked in a different way by one of the participants who has children and wants them to be aware of the dangers of drugs and prostitution and pimps, etc. It was at this time that Amanda's program was introduced as one tool which is currently being used to educate young people, parents, medical professionals, and others in the community, about the realities of prostitution and sexually exploited youth. If anything, this man's query gave me some hope that these men might actually be serving some larger/higher purpose. Believing that everything happens for a reason, good or bad, I feel a sense of comfort in seeing the potential for the messages to reach beyond the walls of the room in which they were delivered.

The most moving and poignant part of the program was the "experiential" speakers. Three brave women took the time to speak to, for all they know, the very men who bought their services, abused and exploited them and, in some cases, almost killed them. There was nothing more moving than hearing their true-life stories of their reality of life as a prostitute. They, too, confirmed that they've never met another prostitute who did it because they wanted to. These women confirmed, without a doubt that no girl gets on the street to do a guy for money because she chooses to. She is trying the only way she knows at that moment to survive. End of story.

As much as I was affected by all of the speakers throughout the whole day, nothing compared to the overwhelming emotion that came over me when Lisa, one of the experiential speakers, came into the room and wept continuously while sharing her outward anger at herself, the Johns, and this society. The presence of this brilliant and beautiful woman, having experienced so much emotional and physical pain in her young life, was so much more than these men deserved. I, too, became angry along with her as she shared her feelings and spoke her truths. Although Lisa spoke volumes to these men, sharing her very significant testimony, one of the most memorable statements she made toward the end of her disclosure was probably the greatest message she could give to these undeserving men. She simply said to them, "If I can change, so can you."

Overall, I left the program feeling quite saturated with new and valuable information. I am very thankful to Ian Mitchell for allowing me the opportunity to be an observer. Most of all, however, I praise the three brave women who took the time to share some of the most intimately painful experiences of their lives. My heart was filled with admiration and respect toward these women. One can only hope that the male participants came away from this program with at least this much.