

DECEMBER 5 - 11, 2002 -- NO SOLICITING

No Soliciting

The Johns School goes after prostitution demand, not supply

By Clinton Colmenares

It's not yet 7:30 on a frost-bitten Saturday morning in November when men start filing into what used to be called the Workhouse, an old red-brick building where misdemeanor criminals once made amends. Now the Metro Sheriff's Training Center, it's a labyrinth of corridors and dark, dungy rooms. A female deputy sits in a secured booth inside the door giving the same directions over and over with an amused smile. "Uh, huh. End of the hall, to the right."

Through a steel-bar gate, past doors without windows, all the men follow the signs tacked to cheap paneling--"Johns School"--finally arriving in what must be the largest, darkest, dankest room in the place. This is where the men, all of them convicted johns caught soliciting prostitution just a few weeks earlier, will spend eight hours listening to a parade of people tell them about the laws and the illnesses associated with their proclivities.

The flashy "massage parlor" raids on TV recently aren't the only Metro vice crackdown. The school represents a beefed-up effort against streetwalking prostitution. It's unclear whether the johns understand that they're continuing to support the type of women they wanted to pay in the first place. The difference now is that the \$5 sex act they were shopping for has become several hundred, and that most of it will help women get off the street.

Created in 1996 by the Working Group on Prostitution, appointed by then-Mayor Phil Bredesen, the Johns School was an answer to a growing problem in Metro. Prostitution had gripped the coattails of an upwardly mobile city increasingly concerned with its image. Street sex was getting out of hand, hitting close to schools like Shwab Elementary on Dickerson Road.

Rosemary Sexton, a husky-voiced lawyer with the district attorney's office and a member of the working group, often tells the story of "the 12-year-old girl who was walking home from school when a 50-year-old man asked her for a blow job. How would you like that to be your daughter?"

Public health was also at stake. Two years ago, Metro was No. 1 in the country for syphilis. Green Hills housewives had started worrying that their husbands were visiting ladies on the other side of the river and bringing home more than the bacon, says another working group member.

The good people were complaining. Something must be done. But the jails were already crowded, and expensive. In 1996 dollars, it cost \$245 to keep a prostitute for the mandatory seven-day sentence. And these weren't Miss Kitty's saloon girls. A survey of 38 women incarcerated for prostitution found that every one was addicted to cocaine, 40 percent tested positive for HIV and 90 percent had a past STD. They turned tricks for an average of 15 johns a day (one reported 25) for about \$15 each. The women had sex for the first time at an average age of 11. Jail also lacked rehabilitation. Some of the women were arrested hundreds of times, and the working group reported: "A return to prostitution is inevitable."

Another key finding of the group's research: "Women were getting jail time, and the guys were walking away with nothing," Sexton says.

So the group suggested a direct-to-consumer approach to law enforcement and the county's public health blight. The state had passed a law making solicitation of prostitution within a mile and a half radius of a public school--just about everywhere--a felony that carries a \$1,000 fine and a week in jail, with a maximum of 11 months, 29 days incarceration.

The Johns School was carefully crafted as an option for first-time johns. Instead of paying \$1,000, they can pay \$250 for the daylong school, get six months' probation, get tested for STDs and, if they behave, have their records expunged. The money, kept separate from municipal fines, all goes to Magdalene, a residential drug and prostitution rehabilitation program started by Nashville Rev. Becca Stevens.

It's 8 a.m. and the line to get in has gotten longer. Ultimately, 53 will be assembled, the largest group Kenneth Baker can

remember. Baker runs the class. He's young and athletically built, with a buzz cut and a goatee. He sits at a table and checks the names off a list from the district attorney's office. He asks for proof that they were tested for STDs and takes their \$250 in cash.

The johns' faces run the gamut: young and old, poor and middle class, bored and anxious. All of them grew up down the street from someone, went to high school with someone, and all of them were going to pay for sex. Some might be considered handsome, in a blue-collar way. A few are cocky, brash young kids, the kind who think their cars are cool--but the fenders are Bondo-gray and the woofers rattle. One of them, an open-mouth breather, carries his CD case with him dangling from his wrist. Another shows up with what appears to be his mother and his grandmother. He doesn't have enough cash and sends the women out to get more.

There are about 20 Hispanics who huddle in a corner with a female translator, an ironic role in a matriarchal culture. A couple of the men appear to be in their 60s--one looks like a short version of Abe Vigoda. He digs in his ears and rubs his whiskered chin. Another wears bib overalls and tells Baker he has Parkinson's.

At the end of the line is a young black man, a latter-day Michael Irvin, his fingers, wrists and neck weighed down with gold. "I got framed! I'm starting a lawsuit!" he tells everyone when he walks in, although nobody's asked. "There wasn't even a woman in the vicinity!" He'll repeat his claim, loudly, throughout the day. Nobody ever asks him to.

Finally, about 8:20, school begins.

Baker is a mental health worker who runs a company called Behavior Intervention Programs and contracts with Metro to spend most of his days with the fine, upstanding citizenry arrested for spousal abuse or domestic violence. And every six weeks he runs the Johns School.

Baker takes a cognitive behavior-modification tack to leading the class: He tries to make the johns aware of what they're doing, that it's bad, that it's illegal and that it has consequences. He opens with his "bucket of shit" philosophy.

"The world is like a checkerboard," he tells them. You move to a certain square "and a bucket of shit falls from the sky. Even being near one of those squares, you get hit by a bucket of shit. You ever been hit by a bucket of shit?"

And the crowd offers a collective, "Uh-huh."

The Michael Irvin character starts in from the back of the room, "Yeah, man, but that shit wasn't my fault. I was minding my own damn business."

The buckets are more likely to fall on them at strip clubs, on Dickerson Road, renting porn or going to a massage parlor, Baker calmly explains. Then his voice rises a little. "You have to go to court, hire a lawyer and waste a Saturday. And if you still don't understand after this, you know what you are?" Crescendo. "You're just plain stupid!" A calming pause. Nobody voices disagreement. "And possibly sex addicted."

Beliefs, he tells them, cause behaviors. "We do what feels good," he says, then he introduces the first speaker.

Jim McNamara, a public defender, begins by dispelling myths. The first one is that a cop posing as a prostitute has to tell a john she's a cop if he asks.

"That's entrapment, man," Michael Irvin says, and mumbles about his constitutional rights.

"They're allowed to lie to you," McNamara says. They can also make the first move. "All they have to establish is that you were soliciting, asking or engaging in some sort of negotiation," he says. "And 100 percent of the time they wear a wire."

There doesn't even have to be a woman, much to Michael Irvin's chagrin. "Loitering for purposes of prostitution" is a wide legal net that catches men hanging out just a little too long in an area known for prostitution.

The next myth targeted is that hookers can be classy. "The life of a prostitute is hard," McNamara says. "The decoys the cops most often use are the most beautiful women on the street."

Next, Brad Beasley, an STD surveillance officer with Metro, steps in and hands out envelopes, results from the required STD testing. The room goes quiet. Abe Vigoda looks perplexed. Then Beasley walks around showing photos of active syphilis and herpes in various locations on the body. Everyone's disgusted. He tells them about gonorrhea of the eye.

Later, Beasley and his coworker, Dederick Yeargin, say very few of the johns test positive, mostly because they use condoms, but also because they often have sex with a prostitute's hand.

At 11 a.m., the johns face fireworks from a former prostitute. Regina Mullins turned tricks for 12 years, starting as an escort. She addresses the crowd like she's at a 12-step meeting, then she coils up and spits street venom.

"Good morning. I'm an addict recovering from drugs, alcohol and also prostitution," she says. "I came this morning to give you some hope for your life."

She tells her story: "What started as a \$300 date without sex turned me into a \$5 ho," she says. She tells them every girl on the street gets raped and robbed. "Most of you guys come out power trippin' and you would rape me. You'd take what you want, my dope, my sex."

"A lot of girls have gotten smart," she says. "You can find yourselves being raped or robbed, or getting an STD...then you take that shit home to your girlfriend or your wife. They don't know you're fucking off. You can put it back on them."

The cycle of prostitution runs from an anxious addict eager for money to one who's depressed and apathetic, and finally to a woman bent on taking the offensive, armed with syphilis or HIV. "My thing was to get y'all before you got me."

Then she softens and tells them how their money is being spent at Magdalene, how she got off the street and has been clean and legitimate for three years. Mullins works 20 hours a week as a weekend house manager and volunteers at the hub of Magdalene operations, in the St. Augustine Chapel on Vanderbilt's campus, where program founder Stevens is the residing minister.

Bredesen was in favor of the Johns School if the money went to help women, Stevens explains in her church office. All of the speakers volunteer, and the money represents about one-sixth of Magdalene's operational budget.

Last year, Magdalene started Thistle Farms, a cottage industry operating out of St. Augustine in which the women make and sell fragrant potions that soothe and heal. There are bath salts called Lot's Wife and an ointment called Balm of Gilead.

"Thistles are the gangly weeds that grow along Dickerson Road," says Stevens, a woman who seems both intensely passionate and carefree.

Magdalene has helped 100 "drug addicted, streetwalking women," Stevens says. The first step is breaking a chain of hardheaded myths--that women want to be prostitutes, that they'll never change, that prostitutes can't be raped. (Eighty-seven percent of the women who have gone through Magdalene are clean and are not working as prostitutes, a statistic twice the national average, Stevens says.) "Prostitution is not the oldest profession. Sex abuse is. To heal that, we have to heal the men as well as the women," she says. She has sympathy for the johns, but adds, "When you disregard the humanity of another just to get your needs met at the most basic level, it's sick."

After lunch, Baker explains the term "activating event." Something happened, he says, that led the men to believe "I've got to have some. It's the same thing in domestic violence or alcohol abuse. You didn't get your way. But what if everyone in this room had stuffed their feelings of horniness? You wouldn't be here."

Abe Vigoda awakes from a nap. Michael Irvin shows up 15 minutes late.

Another speaker, Dr. Reid Finlayson, a Vanderbilt psychiatrist and sexual addiction expert--once an addiction consultant to the NBA--describes sexual addictions and recruits for a new sexual addiction research study.

Finlayson wraps up his presentation by passing around a list for people to sign if they want to be contacted for the study. Several sign up. One is James, who says he's in the restaurant business. He's married and has children, and says he's been going to prostitutes for 18 years, "at least," to get away from his problems. "I never realized that it was selfish indulgence. [The class] made me realize the actions of one person go a long way."

Bill, 49, graduated college from David Lipscomb. He was married twice, was a Church of Christ minister, sold men's clothes and most recently worked for the state in human resources. He's been on disability for bipolar disorder for almost a year. He knows he's an addict. He started visiting a porn store near his home. "I kept them in business. I'd go two or three times a week and get three to four [videotapes] at a time."

Soon, he says, "I had to reach out to something more exciting." He trolled for women. And then a different woman each time. He didn't consider their looks. Over the course of a couple of years, he spent several thousand on his daily habit, one so automatic, he says, "I didn't even think about getting in my car and heading [to Dickerson Road]."

After the class, Bill and James say being arrested was the best thing that could have happened to them. They're being evaluated for Finlayson's research and hope to turn their lives around. Bill's in therapy.

And Michael Irvin said he would be calling his attorney.