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COLUMN ONE

Shaming and scaring johns into becoming average joes

L.A. tests a program for men caught soliciting prostitutes, giving them some reasons not to reoffend. It's like traffic school, but the stakes are higher and the presentations are squirm-inducing.

By Joel Rubin

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Early on an otherwise slow Saturday morning, 16 men drifted into the lobby of a police station in South Los Angeles.

They had no crimes to report or friends to bail out of jail. A motley crew bound only by their search for sex, the strangers plastered themselves sheepishly against the back wall, their eyes cast down at the floor like so many awkward teenagers at a school dance. A cop working the front desk took in the glum faces and smirked slightly.

A few minutes after 8:30, the men were led down a hallway and into a room. Spanish speakers were told to take seats next to two translators. "We've developed this program to help you," Bill Margolis, a retired LAPD detective, told the group. "If you listen to what these people say to you today -- if you just stay awake and pay attention -- I guarantee you'll be a better person at the end of it."

"And you don't get a second chance," added Art Ruditsky, the bad cop to Margolis' good one. "Get arrested again and we'll see you in court."

This is john school, a new effort by law enforcement officials to stem prostitution in Los Angeles. Built on the belief that a heavy dose of in-your-face shame and scare tactics can do more to dissuade men from looking to the streets for gratification than traditional punishment, the class -- think traffic school with higher stakes -- offers first-time offenders leniency in exchange for a promise that they will change their ways. It is the latest example of how prosecutors and police around the country are rethinking their strategies in the age-old battle against prostitution.

"I've arrested hundreds of street walkers and busted countless tricks," said Margolis, who spent nearly three decades working in the Los Angeles Police Department's vice squad. "All those years, we'd send them to court, they'd pay a fine, spend maybe a day or two in jail and then be on their way."

"We're never going to arrest our way out of this problem and we're never going to stop it altogether. But we can try to educate johns about the dangers to themselves and about the violence the women face. Hopefully we can reduce the demand."

Launched recently by the Los Angeles city attorney's office, the Prostitution Diversion Program currently targets only those johns nabbed by the LAPD along a cheerless stretch of Figueroa Boulevard pockmarked by liquor stores and cheap motels -- one of the city's epicenters for street-walking prostitutes. There are tentative plans to expand the class citywide if the pilot program proves successful, said Sonja Dawson, the no-nonsense city prosecutor who helped start the program.

Last month's class of johns was a bland bunch. Most appeared to be in their 20s or 30s, with a few others approaching middle age. They wore jeans and inexpensive watches. A few wore wedding bands. A young, heavy-set man with sad eyes and a meek voice slumped in a folding chair, seemingly plucked from an office cubicle. Behind him, two others in baseball caps sat silently with their arms crossed and lips pursed. Sitting alone in the front row, another earnestly took notes in a leather-bound binder.

The group was predominantly Latino -- a result of the program's catch-area, Dawson emphasized. No one stood out. Adding to the sense of anonymity was the program's policy of not addressing the men by their names.

From the first class on, Dawson has been surprised by the mundanity of the men. She had expected harder, more distasteful types. "These are middle-of-the-road guys," Dawson said. "They get up to go to work in the morning and then many go home to families. You can feel the shame in the room."

Not everyone is eligible for john school. A man cannot have prior arrests for prostitution, drugs or violent crimes on his rap sheet and must be willing to submit to an HIV blood test. Each john shells out \$600 to cover the cost of the class.

In exchange, the men get a free pass -- of sorts. Dawson keeps the misdemeanor solicitation charges hanging over the men's heads for a year. If a john doesn't get arrested again trying to pick up a hooker, his file is closed. He avoids the typical sentence of 15 days in County Jail and a conviction on his record, not to mention the thousands of dollars in legal fees associated with a day in court.

It's not jail, to be sure, but john school is no joke. For eight hours, the men are yelled at, pleaded with and lectured. One weary-looking john, who says he has come straight from a night shift at work, receives a firm shake from Margolis every time he nods off and eventually is told to stand up to stay awake. Each presentation is aimed at either scaring them straight with all the terrible things that can be inflicted upon a john or opening their eyes to the ugly realities of the sex-for-money industry. It's not meant as a feel-good therapy session or an opportunity to explain away bad decisions, so there

is no give-and-take in the class. The johns are not allowed to ask questions or speak. They sit and listen.

Ruditsky softens the men up with graphic photographs of swollen, disfigured faces of johns who had been set up by prostitutes to be beaten and robbed.

"You go in looking for a little sex and you can end up a victim," he tells the group. "How are you going to go home and explain a black eye to your wife? How are you going to explain that your car is gone?"

"And you think you're tough enough for jail? You're not going to have a nice time in county, folks. It's a terrible thing to say, but there will be a question of whether you survive in there."

Next up is a health worker's crash course in sexually transmitted diseases. Backs stiffen and knees bounce nervously as she projects stomach-turning images of infected penises. One man's eyes well up with tears during the next presenter's story of a man who died after contracting HIV. Loud applause breaks the heavy silence at the end.

Released for a lunch break, the johns squint in the sunlight as they push open the station doors and scatter. One 30-something man stays behind, staring out at the passing traffic and looking slightly shellshocked. "That was a lot of information," he says, not wanting to give his name or occupation. "It got to me."

He had been looking to "release some stress" the day he propositioned an undercover LAPD officer posing as a prostitute. "Thank God she caught me," he says before walking away in search of something to eat.

The afternoon session starts with two recovering sex addicts relating stories of how their uncontrolled desires had landed them in police custody and rehabilitation groups. The day culminates with testimony from two former prostitutes. They shatter the idealized notions that researchers have found johns typically harbor about prostitutes -- namely, that the women enjoy the encounters -- with stories about their lives of drug abuse, rape and violence at the hands of the pimps they worked for and johns who sometimes beat them.

"It's not a fantasy out there," Cathy Washington tells the men. "It's not a fun life doing what I did. I felt like my life was in total jeopardy all the time

"Would you want someone messing with your daughter? Then why mess with someone else's? Go home, take a cold shower."

The city attorney's office is targeting prostitutes as well, contracting with a nonprofit group that runs a more extensive job-training and counseling program aimed at getting women off the streets.

Whatever leniency the john school offers goes out the window with repeat offenders. So far, only one of the 44 graduates has been rearrested, according to Dawson. She has charged him with both counts and isn't of any mind to help him avoid the mandatory minimum of a month and a half in jail. "I'm going to meet him in court," she said. "He's not going to be happy."

City officials had only to look north for the blueprint when pulling together their class. Since 1995, a nonprofit group and San Francisco officials have run about 7,000 men through one of the country's first programs. There are similar programs in Britain, Canada, South Korea and about 40 cities and counties throughout the U.S., although not all of them excuse johns from convictions and sentences.

At first glance, it seems these schools shouldn't work, said Michael Shively, a researcher who recently completed the first comprehensive study of the San Francisco program for the National Institute of Justice. The one-day, throw-everything-at-them-and-see-what-sticks approach, he said, lacks the intense, targeted and longer-term therapy that is generally thought to be needed to change a person's behavior.

Indications are, however, that the classes are a relatively cheap and effective carrot to dangle in front of johns. California prostitution arrest records, Shively's team found, show that recidivism rates among San Francisco men dropped 30% in the decade following the launch of their john school. A newer program in San Diego posted similar results, he found.

The unexpected results, said Shively and Martin Monto, a University of Oregon sociologist who studies prostitutes and their clients, offer a window into the minds of the roughly 20% of American men who researchers believe will pay for sex sometime in their lives. The numbers from San Francisco and San Diego suggest that far from being hardened deviants, most johns -- especially those who have had few encounters with hookers -- are surprisingly malleable creatures susceptible to the full-frontal assault of john school.

"Most of these guys fall into one of three basic categories: Sad sacks who are looking for a girlfriend-like experience; those who don't want to deal with the emotional component of a relationship and just want the sex; and thrill seekers. Only a very small number are actual sociopaths," Shively said. "A lot of the themes in the classes appeal to these guys' sense of empathy and self-preservation."

By late in the afternoon, as the class in L.A. winds down, the nervous edge of the morning has dissipated and been replaced by a palatable sense of both exhaustion and relief. One man rubs his temples wearily. Before they are released, Dawson has them reflect a final time on what landed them there and whether the class has had any impact.

"It helped me to think on other people that I might be hurting for my actions," one wrote on an evaluation form.

"Scared me to death," wrote another.

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