

Dear John

Can you teach men who pick up prostitutes not to buy sex? Part education, part intervention, a “school” in Worcester takes aim at reducing demand on the streets.

By Catherine Elton | October 11, 2009

It's been some 15 years since her johns could find her in Boston's Combat Zone wearing a bra, panties, garter belt, and stilettos. She worked there for years, enticing men in slowly passing cars to pick her up with the promise of a good time. In the back seat, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes along with urgent, escalating moans, she'd tell her customers how much she liked it and how she wanted more.

But on this midsummer day, as she stands nervously before a group of johns in Worcester, she wears a T-shirt, Capri pants, and flip-flops. She introduces herself as Tina, a pseudonym. Her dark brown hair is pulled back off her face, which bears no trace of makeup. Now 47, Tina looks like any ordinary mom you might see at the supermarket. But she has something very different to say.

Without making eye contact with the men seated before her, she tells them how she was sexually abused starting at age 12. How it unleashed a downward spiral, taking her from life as a straight-A student in a loving home to a life of drugs and prostitution. She cries as she tells them of some of the pimps she had over the years. There was the group of pimps who surrounded her one day and pummeled her with their fists until she agreed to work for one of them. There was the one who wouldn't let her go home until she'd earned her daily quota, even when it meant staying out till dawn in driving, toe-numbing rain. There was the one who stabbed her when she told him she wanted out.

And then she tells the johns of the lies she told, every day, to men like them: “When I was in the back seat of your car and you were on top of me, when I was giving you [oral sex], I couldn't use my own voice to tell you what I really felt. But when you touched me, my skin crawled. I hated it. I hated it. I was scared. I was in pain. I felt violated. I didn't care about you. I just wanted one more hit of crack so I didn't have to feel like I felt when I was 12 years old,” she says, tears flowing. “This isn't a victimless crime. I haven't turned a trick in 15 years and I am still healing.”

The men in the audience are alleged criminal offenders, but on this July day they're also students. All 18 of them are attending the state's only “john school,” a daylong educational course for any men who have been arrested and charged with soliciting sex on the streets or over the Internet in Worcester. The crime is a misdemeanor punishable in Massachusetts by up to a \$500 fine and a year in prison. But unlike other men arrested for the same crime anywhere else in the state, they were given an option. By paying a \$200 fee and sitting through a six-hour series of presentations and testimonials about prostitution by Tina and others, they're avoiding a conviction.

For years, law enforcement efforts to curb prostitution focused almost exclusively on the women who sell sex. The men who pay for it were all but left alone, and in many cases they still are. But that is slowly starting to change. No one knows exactly how many women work in prostitution in Massachusetts or whether it's on the rise (1,229 arrests were made last year of both men and women on charges of purchasing or selling sex), but experts do say that the age of initiation is dropping to 12 and 13 years old and that the girls and women who sell sex are suffering increasing levels of violence at the hands of pimps and johns. All this has prompted interest in addressing the men who drive the prostitution industry by purchasing sex.

There are at least 48 other john schools around the country. Like the one in Worcester, they seek to reduce the demand for paid sex by educating men about its effects. Authorities and activists are studying the possibility of setting up a john school in Boston and subsequently in other cities around the state.

During Tina's emotional story, one of the men weeps quietly. When she's finished and walks away, all the johns are clapping. The question for Worcester, and other communities in the country with these programs, is whether they're learning.

The Worcester program, officially called the Community Approach to Reduce Demand, is run by the local YWCA in cooperation with Worcester's police department, district court, and probation department. It was founded and is directed by Cathy Boisvert, a friendly, engaging woman with a folksy way of talking and a big smile that belies her no-nonsense

nature. Boisvert, who also works at a shelter for battered women in the city, has long labored on domestic violence issues as a community activist.

Boisvert was asked by her boss at the YWCA, where she works part time, to set up a program to help prostitutes leave the business. At the time, she knew little about the subject. But the more research she did, the more she saw that men who beat women share similar attitudes with men who buy sex from women. Both groups, she says, typically believe they own -- if even for an hour -- women's bodies. It became clear to her that working on the issue of prostitution without confronting the men who buy sex was tantamount to trying to stop domestic violence without addressing the men who perpetrate it. "I tried to find out as much as I could about what other organizations working on prostitution were doing," she says. "Along the way, on my quest for information, and in between lots of [Internet] pop-ups for pornography, I stumbled upon information about john schools."

The first john school is thought to have started in the early 1980s in Michigan. One of the models for Worcester's program was one started in San Francisco about 14 years ago. In 2004, Boisvert began working on a plan, and in September 2007, after her tireless advocating, the Worcester District Court approved her proposal and launched the course.

Since its inception, 96 men have been arrested in Worcester in solicitation cases, and 88 of them have opted to take the class. Of those, 72 have successfully completed one of the nine Saturday classes held so far. Those who fail to report to class must return to court. The fee that johns pay to attend covers the cost of the course and then some; whatever is left over goes to the sister program Boisvert launched that works with prostitutes.

The men who attend range in age from their 20s to 70s and represent all races and income levels. Perhaps the most prominent attendant was a professor of infectious diseases who claimed he had been doing research. The most recent class, in July, which was also the first a reporter was allowed to observe, was the biggest to date.

John schools aren't the only way to try to reduce the demand for prostitution. Some communities step up enforcement of their laws. Others favor shaming tactics, such as printing johns' names in the newspaper or sending "Dear John" letters to the homes of arrested men. In Boston, police have the authority to tow johns' cars when they make an arrest. Worcester uses a combination -- towing, sending postcards to the car's registrant, and printing names in the paper, in addition to the class.

John schools are increasingly being recognized as an effective approach to stemming demand. There has not yet been any formal review of Worcester's program. But last year, Abt Associates, a research and consulting firm in Cambridge, published a US Department of Justice-funded evaluation of San Francisco's john school. It found that men who attended reoffended at a lower rate than men who didn't. The researchers also found that the recidivism rate in the city dropped precipitously after the school started and continued to stay low independent of the rate of stings police carried out. "In a nutshell, the program reduced rearrest by at least a third and maybe up to a half," says Michael Shively, the lead author. Considering that the programs cost taxpayers little or nothing and even help support programming for women who want to leave prostitution, he says he just can't find a downside to the basic john school concept of educating arrestees.

Some people, however, disagree with the programs on an ideological level, believing that what makes prostitution dangerous for women is the fact that it's illegal. They support decriminalizing prostitution, as has been done in Rhode Island, where "indoor prostitution" (anything but streetwalking) is now legal.

Other researchers, like Devon Brewer of Interdisciplinary Scientific Research in Seattle, say that the arrest is such a significant deterrent to re-offense that john schools simply don't provide significant added value. Psychologist Melissa Farley, who directs the California nonprofit Prostitution Research and Education, doubts a six-hour course can change the way men think and believes what works better are stronger laws and prosecution. She's concerned that schools that cost as little as Worcester's let men off the hook too easily. (San Francisco's school costs \$1,000.) She also objects to programs that allow johns to avoid a conviction. Worcester's school, like most, is optional. But in many programs, completion of the course is a condition of a sentence and doesn't remove the charges from a record.

Boisvert, while hopeful the schools are reducing recidivism, says much of what she wants men to get out of her class is difficult to capture in arrest statistics. "It is a lot harder to quantify changes in attitudes and beliefs," she says. "The feedback we are getting from class participants is that they are getting positive information. And you never know how that might affect how they interact with people in their family or what they may go home and teach their children."

It's the start of class, and the men shuffle silently into the room. After they fill out paperwork, a member of the vice squad goes over what they already know: why they're here. A public health nurse, Pat Bruchmann, then begins her presentation, displaying oversize pictures of disease-ridden genitalia and explaining the risks the men are taking for

themselves and their partners. At least four of the men listening wear wedding rings.

Barbara Haller, a Worcester city councilor, gives a stern talk about how prostitution affects her constituents. She tells them of the everyday girls and women living in the prostitute-ridden Main South area of the city who are often tailed by the cars of men trolling for sex or who are propositioned on their way to school. She recounts the story of a man who took his daughter to a local park to play, only to find a couple having sex behind a tree. She describes how businesses and families have left her district because of the rampant prostitution, and the drugs and crime that follow it. "Victimless crime?" she bellows. "Are you kidding me? A lot of people have been hurt as a result of the decisions you have made. I'm asking you to stop."

Anne Early, who directs a domestic-abuse intervention program in Worcester, explains how easy it is to view a woman as inferior when you don't see her as a whole person with her own life, family, and aspirations. She asks the men who have daughters to raise their hands, and seven sheepishly do. "When you solicit sex," she says, "that's someone's daughter."

As the day wears on, between doughnut breaks and pizza for lunch, the men, who mostly keep quiet and to themselves, watch documentaries about the trafficking of women and prostitution. They hear about substance abuse and how prostitutes get into their line of work to support habits or start using drugs to enable them to do what they do. They receive information on where to go for help if they have a drug problem themselves or if they have a sex addiction.

Between presentations, Boisvert prompts the men to connect the dots between topics they may never have considered related. Over a third of the women who become prostitutes have been raped or sexually abused before age 17, she says. Many women become prostitutes when domestic violence drives them to homelessness. Boisvert says that all of the prostitutes she has ever worked with have abused drugs or alcohol.

The last presenter is Tina. She talks about the myths of prostitution, her struggle with addiction, and her run-in with the law. "There was a man in a black robe telling me that I was going to MCI-Framingham for a very long time if I didn't seek treatment. I chose treatment in 1993, and that was the last time I was in the streets."

Later, after the class, she says she understands the impact she can have. "By ending with a survivor like me talking to them, they can really put a face on everything they have heard all day," she says. "When I see a guy crying, I know I have touched them."

One of the men who was moved is a 39-year-old who works in high tech. Like other attendees, he spoke later on the condition he not be named. He says he felt deep shame as he listened. "I feel like what I did affected her life."

A 26-year-old unemployed construction worker says later that, overall, the class was too long, too expensive, and too sexist. "I understand prostitution ruins communities, but then families should move," he says, adding that pimps are the problem, not johns.

Another participant, a 37-year-old unemployed mental health counselor, departs with a different perspective. When his wife left him, he vowed never to get emotionally involved with another woman. Seeking out prostitutes, he thought, was the perfect answer, where no one gets hurt. "Now I realize it isn't the solution. If they had put me in jail, I'd probably have gone back to it. It probably wouldn't have changed anything. But now I have been exposed to that information. I'm transformed," he says days after the class. Of course, no one knows whether that's truly the case. Only the streets hold the real answer.

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