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February 22, 2010

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Federal Hill Resident & Restaurateur Forced to Move Because of Spa-Brothel

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Co-founders, Citizens Against Trafficking

The illegal operation of a spa-brothel on Federal Hill, Providence, has forced a resident and restaurateur to move. The traffic of "johns," the video surveillance of all entrances and exits, the harassment of women who visit and work in the area, and the unsanitary residue of sex acts have neighboring residents and business owners disgusted and fed-up.

They are organizing a protest and petition drive to get rid of an illegal business that law enforcement and politicians are ignoring.

The Fuji Spa is located on the first floor of an historic building at 417 Atwells Avenue. The property is owned by Brett Lipeles, owner of Exhibit & Display Consultants. He lists this address as his business address, although he no longer lives there.¹

Lipeles leased the first floor of the building to the Fuji Spa last spring. Renovations included installing a fully tiled "shower room," a video surveillance system, system, and multiple rooms with built in beds.

(It is unknown if Fuji Spa acquired the necessary permits to make these renovations.)

Before the spa opened for business, Steven O'Brien, an eight year resident of the same building, who saw the renovations being made, told Lipeles that the spa was likely a front for prostitution and possibly

human trafficking. Lipeles assured O'Brien that if anything illegal was going on, the spa would be in violation of the lease agreement and could be evicted. When O'Brien pointed out that prostitution indoors was not illegal (in Spring 2009), Lipeles said that the spa assured him it was legitimate. O'Brien claims that Lipeles acted willfully ignorant that the Asian spa was a brothel business.



Ad from the *Providence Phoenix*, May 2009



Fuji Spa
147 Atwells Ave.
Providence, RI 02909
401-272-3981

Advertisement from *Craigslist*, February 2010

¹State of Rhode Island Office of the Secretary of State, Date of Incorporation Jan 11, 2008.

Soon, O'Brien says there were men coming and going at all times of the day and night. Men often go to the local pub near the brothel for a drink while they wait their turn. O'Brien says, "Everyone knows what is going on."

Before moving to Atwells Avenue, the Fuji Spa was located in East Providence. It opened there in January 2009 in a commercial space across from City Hall. The grand opening advertisement offered "new young Asian girls." After operating there for only a few months, it shut down and moved to Federal Hill. Around this time, many other spas were moving from commercial to residential or mixed use zones likely to avoid zoning codes and local ordinances.²

In August, 2009, CAT co-founder, Melanie Shapiro, accompanied a *Boston Globe* reporter into Fuji Spa on Atwells Avenue where they encountered a young disoriented Asian woman who told them

in broken English that this was her first day and she did not know what she was supposed to be doing.³

The Fuji Spa has caused many problems for women on the same block. Two legitimate businesses are commonly mistaken for the brothel. An upscale beauty salon next door that offers legitimate massage



Advertisement from the *Providence Phoenix*, January 2009



Front door of 417 Atwells Ave. The white buzzer in the upper left hand corner is marked "SPA."

services has had many men come in and mistaking it for Fuji Spa expect to buy sex. Another licensed massage therapist two doors down from the Fuji Spa has been propositioned for sex.

O'Brien, who used to live on the 3rd floor of 417 Atwells Avenue, said there were always strange men hanging around the front of the house. His fiancé was repeatedly propositioned for sex by the men. One time, O'Brien said, there was a white substance that appeared to be semen on the front door handle.

² 417 Atwells Avenue is zoned as C-1, mixed residential or commercial use.

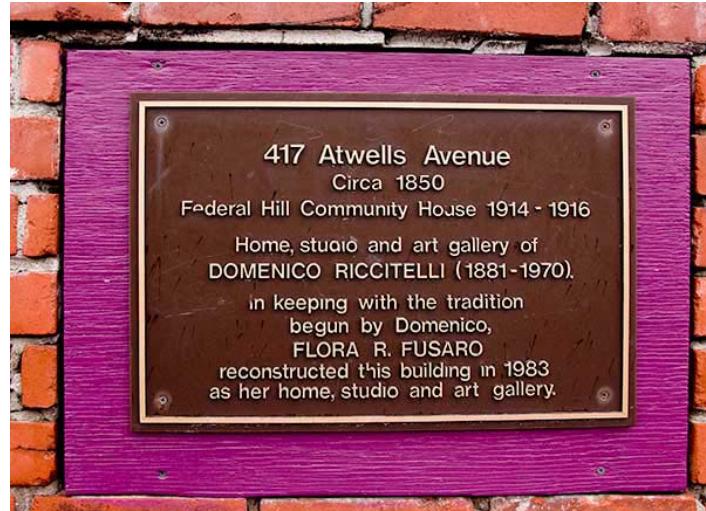
³ Schweitzer, Sarah. "Many seek ban as prostitution thrives in R.I." *The Boston Globe*, 13 August 2009.

Last summer, O'Brien opened a seasonal restaurant on the back patio of 417 Atwells Ave. The Federal Hill Wood Grilled Pizza operated on weekends throughout the summer and into the fall. His clientele soon realized that a brothel was operating on the first floor of the building just above the patio. The spa's video surveillance system recorded everyone who came and went from the house and the pizza restaurant. Being watched made his customers feel uneasy. Some men were afraid they may be mistaken for johns if they were caught on tape.

CAT asked O'Brien about the women in the spa-brothel. He said they are all Asian, ranging in age from their mid-20s to mid-30s. They are transported by the Asian madam in a white Lexus with Colorado license plates. (It was parked in the back parking lot when CAT visited.) O'Brien has also seen an Asian man who comes in a different car. The "girls" are always brought in through the back door, and they never go out except for a cigarette break on the small back deck that is monitored by a security camera. He says they have a small kitchen in the first floor spa.

O'Brien has done a lot of research on Asian spas and the Fuji Spa in particular. He has collected advertisements from the "Adult Services" section of *The Providence Phoenix*.⁴ He showed the ads to Lipeles, the property owner, but O'Brien says he didn't want to hear about it. O'Brien calls him "willfully ignorant." O'Brien and Lipeles used to be friends, but the spa brothel has ruined their relationship. Now they don't speak at all. "All for money," O'Brien laments.

417 Atwells Avenue is an historic property. It is a 160-year-old house with a colorful exterior and history. It was built around 1850. It has been used as a residence, a studio and an art gallery. In 1910, it was the location of "The Sprague House," a settlement house for Italian immigrants.⁵ It's a shame to see the property now used by a madam to run her brothel. O'Brien says, "That was my home for eight years. They have defiled it. I felt like I was living in a whorehouse. I felt pushed out. I made the decision to move from this disgusting environment, as I did not want my fiancé



Plaque on the front of 417 Atwells Avenue

⁴ Fuji Spa was also advertised under "Adult services" on *Craigslist.com*, on *Spahunters.com*, *EroticMP.com*, and others. There are also 15 reviews posted on the *USA Sexguide* about Fuji Spa.

⁵ "Providence Neighborhood Profiles: Federal Hill." <http://www.providenceri.com/Neighborhoods/fedhill.html>.

subjected to that kind of place. I didn't want my business to be associated with prostitution and human trafficking. I moved out and I'll take my business with me."

Prostitution was recriminalized in Rhode Island last November 2009. The new prostitution law targets landlords. It is now a crime for a landlord to knowingly permit and profit from a brothel on his or her property. If found guilty, a landlord can be fined \$2,000 - \$5,000 and sentenced to one to five years in jail for the first offense. This provision was strongly advocated for by Senator Paul Jabour. The Fuji Spa is in his Senate district. O'Brien has spoken to Jabour about it. Jabour told him he'd look into it.

Since the passage of the new law, O'Brien says "the activity has definitely quieted down; there's less traffic, but they have defiled the neighborhood and the legacy of the house." Still, the spa-brothel is open and doing business.

Property owner Lipeles has put the property up for sale. CAT wonders how a real estate agent markets a property with a brothel in it.

O'Brien and others in the neighborhood are planning a protest and are going to circulate a petition to get the Fuji Spa closed.

CAT recommends they confront the Providence Police Chief Dean Esserman and Providence Mayor David Cicilline; ask them why they are not enforcing the law. Ask them why this illegal brothel is allowed to spoil the local neighborhood environment.

The Fuji Spa is just one of six spa-brothels in Federal Hill. There have been no raids on brothels in Providence since the passage of the new law in November 2009. Right after the law passed, Lieutenant Mike Correias of the Providence Police Department indicated that enforcing the new law would not be a high priority.⁶

CAT supports the local residents and business owners who are fed-up with an illegal brothel. Prostitution is not a victimless crime. It not only victimizes the women used for sex acts, it ruins neighborhoods for the people who live, work and run businesses there.



Fuji Spa open sign is still on and the house is up for sale

⁶ Vasundhara Prasad, "What does the ban on indoor prostitution mean for RI?" November 9, 2009. <http://news.wbru.com/2009/11/the-brief-11092009-what-does-the-ban-on-indoor-prostitution-mean-for-ri/>