

# University of Rhode Island

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## Men Still Visiting Brothels

Melanie Shapiro, Esq  
Donna M. Hughes, Dr.



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***Men Still Visiting Brothel on Federal Hill***

Melanie Shapiro, Co-founder, Citizens Against Trafficking

Wednesday night, I gave a talk at Brown University, as part of the Human Trafficking Awareness Week. After the talk, I stopped for a coffee on Atwells Avenue on the way home. One Spa, an illegal spa-brothel, is next door to the coffee shop and just above the office of the *Federal Hill Gazette*. From the time I got out of my car and returned with my coffee, I saw three men go into the brothel—one white man in his late thirties dressed in carpenter pants, a flannel shirt, and baseball cap, one older balding white man with glasses, and a middle-aged Asian man.



I have been inside the One Spa brothel two times. The first time, I was alone. I climbed the flight of stairs to the second-floor hallway. The door to the spa was propped open and the madam was waiting at the top of the stairs for me with a phone in her hand. (When I left, I and noticed the surveillance video cameras and realized that she saw me before I arrived).

I am not frightened easily, but I remember the first moment I was face to face with the madam, I felt my stomach drop and was taken aback by her aggressive posture and the cold look in her eyes. She is an Asian woman probably in her forties with long straight black hair pulled back into a low ponytail. She demanded to know what I was doing there. I pretended that I was looking for the local newspaper. She escorted me through the hallway away from the brothel and down the stairs. She waited at the top of the stairs until she saw me exit the building.

Some months later, I took a reporter from *The Boston Globe* to this spa-brothel. When we got to the brothel, a woman who said she was a "receptionist" had us wait in the front room of the brothel while she went to get someone. The madam I had met before appeared. Even though I

was with another person, when I saw her cold, hard look again, it made my legs shake. She promptly escorted us out of the brothel.

Another time, when I stopped for coffee, I saw the same woman pacing up and down the side street with a large brown paper package in her arms. She looked like she was waiting for someone.

One Spa was one of 12 new brothels that opened in Rhode Island in 2009. The spa advertises Asian women with taglines such as “Hot Asian Girls,” “The One Spa is open for your pleasure,” “Enjoy a soothing body rub with a friendly Asian girl.” It is open from 10 am until 2 am every day.

The “johns” reports of buying sex in this brothel make me angry and upset. On the Internet forums, they say the women are timid or fearful and do not want to engage in sex acts. One john said that a younger woman called “Shiney” protested his sexual touching (she “had a frown a mile long”). He became impatient and treated her in a humiliating way to complete the sex act. Another john wrote that a woman called “Blue” “didn’t really make me feel like she was enjoying herself.” Groups of johns have hosted Bachelor’s parties at this brothel. The johns say the women here are shipped around frequently. It also appears that they live in the brothel.

Wednesday night, I was reminded of how much work there is yet to do. After talking with an engaged and hopeful audience at Brown University about sex trafficking, it was a letdown to see three men walk into a brothel less than fifteen minutes later.