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## Prostitution at the Strip Clubs in Providence

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## Prostitution at the Strip-Clubs in Providence

Melanie Shapiro, co-founder of Citizens Against Trafficking, interviewed a woman about her observations and experiences in several strip-clubs in Providence. The woman gave Citizens Against Trafficking permission to use her full name, but for her protection, we will call her "Ruth."

Ruth described a chaotic and often dirty environment in the strip clubs where women are pressured to engage in prostitution, and competition among women is so intense they physically assault each other. Pimps are frequently present to monitor the girls or women they control.

Ruth moved to Providence six years ago when she was 18. Young and on her own, she was swept up by a rough crowd of guys who dealt and used crack and cocaine. Hanging around the strip clubs with them until early in the morning was "the thing to do when you were bored." After hours, her friends would sell cocaine to the women working at the clubs.

They visited Club Fantasies, Club Desire, Satin Doll Gentlemen's Club, Cheater's, the Sportsman's Inn and Club Balloons. Over a period of several years, Ruth "hung out" at the strip clubs. She talked to the women, and eventually ended up stripping at the Satin Doll.

At Cheaters, a strip-club on Allens Avenue in Providence, Ruth observed the women in the bathroom. The girls would rush into the bathroom and "yell out the prices they were charging for various sex acts." She watched as one woman dried herself off with a hand dryer after a sex act with a john.

There is no law against indoor prostitution, so the women are pressured into prostitution. At many of the strip-clubs, the majority of the money they earn comes from performing sex acts in private booths. The clubs charge exorbitant fees for the use of the "lap dance" booths. Therefore, some women prefer to go outside the club for prostitution, although it is more dangerous. Many women prefer to pay the high rent for the private booths because it enables them to engage in more sex acts. Ruth said that some women are "working days, nights, and after hours."

When asked if the clubs are safe, Ruth said, "There were a lot of nasty guys and you have to be real tough to handle them." Ruth said the clubs are dangerous sometimes. "One time I was downstairs smoking a cigarette and taking a break when a fight broke out upstairs."

Serious violent crimes occur in and around the strip-clubs in Rhode Island. In July, a Sportsman's Inn patron was robbed at gunpoint. In December at the same club, a boyfriend, and likely pimp, shot his girlfriend, two patrons, and a bartender, then fled the state. Because of the shooter's serious criminal record, he was featured on America's Most Wanted.

Competition among the women drives the prices down. Ruth was shocked at the violence between women. "The girls would get into physical fights with one another at Cheaters. They

would do anything to knock off the competition. They would try to set each other's hair on fire with hairspray or slash each others' faces."

Although the atmosphere is often chaotic, Ruth said that the pimps had a very strict "system" of unwritten rules that the girls have to follow. For example, new girls have to be careful not to sleep with other girls' pimps.

Many of the women are branded with the pimp's mark. Ruth said the women have tattoos which "dubbed them as prostitutes." Their tattoos depict different sexual acts or positions, literally creating "advertising on their bodies." Service providers in other states say that up to 80 percent of girls controlled by pimps are tattooed or branded with marks of ownership, according to Donna Hughes, professor at the University of Rhode Island.

When new girls arrived at Cheaters, Ruth characterized them as "vulnerable, young, and with no other options." Many of the women have a troubled past which create emotional and substance abuse problems. Ruth said the dancers "almost never get on stage sober. While they get dressed, they snort a line of coke together."

The pimps prey on the young women's vulnerabilities. The girls are tightly bonded to their pimps, who they call their "daddies." Ruth said "their 'daddies' may be the only ones who pay attention to them and they convince themselves that the pimps care about them." Some of the women say they have a "nice pimp," which Ruth says is an oxymoron.

"The pimps strut around the club and wait for the women to run money to them and sexually service them." After working long hours at Cheaters, the pimps make the women prostitute elsewhere to make more money or to "take care of business" as they call it.

The out-of-state pimps and girls live in hotels. One well known girl at Cheaters lived with her pimp in Massachusetts and he drove her to Providence to "work." In the women's bathroom, where women congregate to talk, she told the others that she had to perform sex acts on the hotel manager so he wouldn't report them to the police.

The women who come from out-of-state always bring a suitcase with clothes "just in case." They have to be ready to move at a moment's notice. They can be thrown out of a club or dumped by their pimp with nothing more than the bag they brought with them. Ruth said that one night, outside the Sportsman's Inn "I met a girl with a suitcase in her hand. She was pissed off and freaking out because she had nowhere to stay. The Inn would not let her stay in the hotel upstairs."

In June of this year, a 16-year-old Massachusetts runaway was found beaten and incoherent in South Providence. The alleged perpetrator was her boyfriend and likely pimp. She had a purse full of condoms and was stripping at Cheaters. (See the Citizens Against Trafficking web site for more details, <http://www.citizensagainsttrafficking.org>). When police revealed that there was no law to prohibit 16 or 17 year old girls stripping in Rhode Island, the omission drew national media attention with news and discussion CNN and The Bill O'Reilly Show on Fox News.

Representative Joanne Giannini is drafting a bill to prevent underage girls from working in strip-clubs. Giannini says, "I have to close another loophole" in the law.

Ruth also visited Club Balloons, one of the Tapalian family owned strip clubs on Allens Avenue. Club Balloons is an 18+ club, meaning that 18-year olds are admitted. It is open later than the 21+ clubs. Ruth said the place is “dank, dirty, and seedy.” The women working there complained to her about the length of time they had to dance on a makeshift stage. Men repeatedly discuss the prostitution of minors at this club on the Internet.

During the day, from 9 am to 9 pm, the basement of Club Balloons is used as a bondage “dungeon.” The club is part of a large sex industry complex comprised of Cheater’s, the Megaplex, a gay sex club, an adult entertainment store, and a “lingerie modeling studio.”

Later, Ruth worked as a stripper for three months “for the hell of it” at the Satin Doll. Ruth said she would always either drink or use cocaine before she got up on stage so she wouldn’t be nervous. Prostitution commonly occurs during the day shifts there, but it is less frequent than at Cheaters. Generally, she worked the night shift. One day she worked the day shift and took a man to a lap dance room. He exposed himself, began masturbating, and tried to get her to perform a sex act. When she refused, he cynically commented, “You’ll be doing it in six months.”

After a few months, Ruth decided to stop stripping because, “I got over it.” The clubs “don’t fit into my lifestyle anymore.”