

State Spotlight



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Focus on the Family Action

'Watching justice come alive'

With the nation watching, a college student, a professor and a legislator team up to stop indoor prostitution in Rhode Island.

by Daniel Weiss

Editor's note: Some of the content in this story may be disturbing to some readers.

In 1636, after being banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Roger Williams founded Providence as a refuge for religious freedom. More than 370 years later, Rhode Island's capital city had instead become a safe haven to pursue commercial sex without legal trouble.

This was thanks to a state law that decriminalized indoor prostitution. The law wasn't merely a nuisance; it had paved the way for a massive increase in human trafficking. If not for the efforts of a few unwavering individuals who helped to change the law last year, victims might still be trafficked with impunity into the state today.

Murky politics

The decriminalization of prostitution likely resulted from a lawsuit brought by a so-called prostitutes'

rights group in 1976. The group sued Rhode Island for discrimination, claiming its prostitution laws were selectively enforced against women. Many believed the state would lose the case. Of the nearly 1,100 people arrested for prostitution between 1974 and 1977, 76 percent were women, according to police records.

In 1980, with the case pending, the Legislature unanimously passed a law to decriminalize indoor prostitution.

Professor Donna M. Hughes,

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chairwoman of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Rhode Island, believes the bill was promoted as something different than it was. Otherwise, she reasons, heavily Catholic Rhode Island never would have unanimously passed such a bill.

"This really was something that was sort of shady that happened," she tells *Citizen*. "When you go back and look for media stories, decriminalizing prostitution would have been a big media story, but there is nothing in the newspaper."

The lawsuit had achieved its goal, and the new law slumbered for nearly 20 years. In 1998, while preparing to defend three women arrested on prostitution charges, a defense attorney discovered the law didn't prohibit selling sex indoors. His clients walked.

Police worked around this wrinkle for a few years by continuing to arrest women in massage parlors and brothels for operating without a license. Finally, the spas stopped calling their services "massages," and instead advertised "body rubs" and "table showers," which were not regulated by the state. Thus, police had no ability to prosecute their activities.

Traffickers began to exploit the law. In 1997, when police first raided an Asian "spa," there were only two massage parlor/brothels in the state. By 2009, there were 35.

The heart of the matter

There might still be an openly flourishing sex trade in Rhode Island if not for the efforts of a tenacious college senior. Melanie Shapiro first learned about trafficking through a documentary she saw as a freshman. Like many, she was under the impression that it was only a problem overseas. Then she read about trafficking in an affluent neighborhood three miles from where she grew up.

"I would have never thought

that was happening by me," she says. "Being able to connect what I had seen in that documentary, and knowing that it was happening absolutely everywhere, compelled me to really get involved." In 2007, she began studying under Hughes, an international expert on trafficking.

The following year, Shapiro asked Hughes to serve as her senior honors thesis adviser. Hughes encouraged her to find out how indoor prostitution had become decriminalized. Shapiro's research was the first real inquiry into the



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origins of the law.

Shapiro also wanted to understand whether decriminalized prostitution was leading to human trafficking. So in the summer of 2008, Shapiro staked out every known brothel in the state. She noticed signs of trafficking, including barred windows, sealed exit doors and video surveillance. She also scoured Web sites where johns rated their "experiences." The johns gave indicators that many women lived on the premises and were frequently rotated from place to place. One man mentioned finding his favorite Rhode Island "masseuse" in New Jersey, indicating a well-organized and far-reaching criminal network.

With her thesis finished in April 2009, Shapiro — and Hughes — began working to close the legal loophole.

"We had fresh, original research that we were able to bring to bear on the case in Rhode Island and why we needed a law on prostitution," Hughes says. "It wasn't just an ideological discussion; we had data."

They teamed up with state Rep. Joanne Giannini, who had sponsored a bill to close the loophole four years in a row. They strengthened the bill by adding protections for trafficking victims, including granting immunity for women prostituting under duress. They hoped this would allay the fears of those who opposed prosecution of women.

It wasn't enough for some. When the Rhode Island Coalition Against Human Trafficking — where Shapiro served as co-director — refused to support the bill, she left the group and co-founded Citizens Against Trafficking with her former professor. She was 21.

The campaign begins

In May 2009, Giannini's bill finally made it out of the Judiciary Committee and passed the House by a wide margin. She credits increased public awareness and the rapidly deteriorating conditions across the state.

Despite initial success, Giannini's bill soon ran afoul of the entrenched political machine. In June, state Sen. Paul Jabour, who agreed to sponsor a companion bill, pushed a different bill through the Senate that gutted the provisions in the House version.

Giannini was not completely surprised. "In this state, there's a progressive movement that is moving very far to the Left, away from family values and more toward a liberalism that says all these things are OK," she tells *Citizen*.

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Professor Hughes explains that the Rhode Island political process sometimes devolves into strong-arm tactics.

"You go along to get along, and if a particularly powerful senator wants a bill, then everyone will vote for it," she says. "The Senate did indeed pass what I think is a terrible prostitution bill. It decriminalized pimping and made prostitution a violation akin to a parking ticket."

Activists fell into two camps. Supporting Giannini's bill were the governor, attorney general, State Police and the Police Chiefs Association. Jabour's bill had the support of the ACLU and sex businesses.

With little hope of reconciling



In 2007, Melanie Shapiro, left, began studying under professor Donna Hughes, an international expert on trafficking.

the bills, Citizens Against Trafficking began a public awareness campaign. The group built a Web site, developed an e-mail list and began publishing bulletins based on Shapiro's honors thesis. It quickly became the state's primary source for awareness and activism, with 20,000 Web site visits a month.

They knew they needed fresh research, so Shapiro began investigating the state's strip clubs. She published a report chronicling the violence occurring in area strip clubs, including shootings, stabbings and outbreaks of sexually transmitted infections.

Shapiro also interviewed a woman who had performed in a Providence club. "Ruth" explained that

because prostitution was legal indoors, most dancers in Rhode Island strip clubs were pressured into it. She said girls were frequently brought in from out of state, many younger than 18.

Shapiro's reports were bolstered by news of a 16-year-old Massachusetts girl who was found in Providence beaten and incoherent, with a purse full of condoms. She had been stripping at one of the clubs. Incredibly, there was no law prohibiting 16- or 17-year-olds from stripping in Rhode Island. So Giannini set out to close another loophole in the law.

As Citizens Against Trafficking made this information public, people started asking to help. When people called with stories, Shapiro turned them into public bulletins.

Everyone's battle

The fight that started with just three determined women became everyone's battle. American Baptist churches mobilized alongside Bishop Thomas Tobin and the Catholic diocese. Business owners banded together, and town councils passed resolutions urging the state to pass the bill.

As public pressure grew, so, too, did the obstructionism in the Senate.

"Every government has some corruption, but I was just astounded by some of the tactics behind the scenes," Shapiro tells *Citizen*. "When the cameras are on, things are a little bit different."

Shapiro was threatened and called names, but refused to back down. She catalogued the brothels in each Senate district and published the information on the Web site. She also took a *Boston Globe* reporter to several of the brothels, generating much-needed national attention. Soon after, the fight was highlighted in *The Wall Street Journal* and *National*

Review and on CNN.

"It wasn't insulated anymore," Shapiro says. "It wasn't just Rhode Islanders complaining. The whole country was watching."

The pro-prostitution crowd entered the fray in the form of a letter opposing Giannini's bill signed by 50 members of the academic community — including several self-described "sex radicals," or people who oppose any limits on sexual behavior. Knowing the letter was sent to give cover to the obstructionist senators, Citizens Against Trafficking quickly published several bulletins highlighting the signers' motives.

"We have found documents about what their agenda is: to get sex right in the public square, right in everyone's face," Hughes says. "It's bondage, it's sex with animals, it's every paraphilia you've ever heard of and probably more, and they want that right in your face."

Citizens Against Trafficking received help from *The Providence Journal*'s deputy editorial writer and Pulitzer Prize finalist Ed Achorn. Hughes credits Achorn with keeping the pressure on public officials by naming those who were blocking the process. He was also one of the few to detail what was occurring in the "spas." In one article, he wrote:

They are trapped in dirty brothels, day and night, fearful of being beaten or killed if they try to leave ... they serve men with their bodies from the time they get up until they go to sleep. They sleep on filthy mattresses and cook from Sterno cans in a back room. They are essentially slaves.

The break

As the summer dragged into autumn, there was still no compro-

mise between the two bills.

Hughes turned her awareness campaign outside of Rhode Island. Soon, letters of support came in from the National District Attorneys Association, and global trafficking experts Laura Lederer and Janice Crouse from Concerned Women for America, among many others. Focus on the Family Action also sent out an e-mail blast to Rhode Island constituents, asking them to contact their senators to support the House bill.

Perhaps the most important letter came from Ernie Allen, president and CEO of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Allen informed officials that Rhode Island was not a "viable participant" in the Innocence Lost National Initiative, which had dismantled 36 criminal enterprises and rescued 770 child victims of prostitution, "because of a loophole in your state's statutes."

Equally powerful were the words of the nation's top trafficking official, Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, who expressed alarm about allowing indoor prostitution in Rhode Island. "It is a legitimate concern that such a hands-off approach towards the so-called 'sex industry' can result in a zone of impunity in which police can't go and where traffickers can exploit their prey," he said.

These letters sent a very strong message to Rhode Island lawmakers. "It became harder and harder for them to make an argument that they didn't need the law," Hughes says.

October surprise

By late October, the public pressure campaign had paid off, and a compromise was reached. On Nov. 3, 2009, with Giannini, Hughes and Shapiro looking on, Republican Gov. Donald Carcieri signed into law every major provision of Giannini's original bill and also

Lasting impact

As important as the win was for Rhode Island, Melanie Shapiro thinks their work helped reverse a global movement toward the decriminalization of prostitution.

Donna Hughes says a lot of people are ready to fight trafficking, but begin to lose interest when the discussion turns to prostitution. "They're all connected," she says. "It's sort of interesting to see how we manage to divide it all up, between prostitution, between trafficking, between pornography, as if somehow they're not connected."

To learn more about trafficking, prostitution and pornography, visit CitizenLink.org/trafficking. ●

prohibited minors from working in strip clubs.

Shapiro said the battle was intense, but worth it. "When I watched the governor sign, I felt like I was watching justice come alive," she says.

Hughes was elated. "Last spring,

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**Donna M. Hughes,
professor at
the University
of Rhode Island**

everyone told us, 'You can't win.' Everyone told me over and over again that there were a couple of powerful senators that couldn't be beat. I heard that all during the spring, and I heard that all during the summer, and then, slowly, things changed."

Hughes cites constant pressure from Citizens Against Trafficking, the piercing editorials from Ed Achorn and the courage of Joanne Giannini.

"She is one tough woman," Hughes says of Giannini. "She just fought every single day. Certainly, we could not have done it if at some point she decided this isn't worth fighting, but she never did."

Giannini praised the "regular citizens who came forth and decided they didn't want this in their neighborhood." She says the battle is not over. "I expect to be targeted because I led the charge," she says. "I will just say, 'I did what I felt was right,' and I trust my voters to stand tall with me."

The new laws, which include harsh penalties for johns, immediately began to deter trafficking crime. The sex message boards indicated that many predators were no longer willing to come to Rhode Island, and some brothels shut down rather than be investigated. Shapiro also noticed the local alternative weekly newspaper featured only a quarter-page of brothel ads, down from several pages.

In December, state police arrested 14 people for prostitution offenses. The long cleanup had begun. ●

Daniel Weiss is the senior analyst for media and sexuality at Focus on the Family Action. Check out his blog at citizenlinkblog.com/drivethru/.

Paid for by Focus on the Family Action.