

Unhooking Hookers From the Profession

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For Rene LeBlanc, the moment of insight came when she was counting out the \$2,000 she had earned that day and realized it wasn't enough. That's when the 27-year-old prostitute knew she was an addict-not to drugs or alcohol or even to sex, but to the money and a way of life.

By some standards, LeBlanc (not her real name) was living the American dream. She had money, cars (seven of them, at one point) and jewelry. She didn't think twice about paying \$4,000 for a bed, then giving it away when she was bored with it.

But despite the glamour of the fast life, she was miserable and would go through black bouts of depression. Her behavior became erratic. She wanted to get out of the business but didn't know how.

LeBlanc had never seen anyone successfully leave prostitution, but she had seen drug addicts and alcoholics kick their habits with the 12-step programs based on the credo of Alcoholics Anonymous. Recognizing the similarities in their addictions, she, two months ago, formed a group called Prostitutes Anonymous for hookers who are hooked but trying to leave.

It's a concept that has been greeted with some skepticism by other groups dealing with addictive behaviors and in trying to get prostitutes off the street. But it also has already generated a good deal of interest, and LeBlanc says she hopes to take the concept national.

Prostitution, the now-hefty LeBlanc says over dinner in a dimly lit San Fernando Valley restaurant, is "not addictive for everyone. It's like alcohol; some people can drink. But there are others, like me, who are addicted to the life and can't leave.

"I used to wonder why couldn't I hook like other people? Why couldn't I go in and make the one big kill a day and that's enough?" She shrugs. "I'm just an addictive person. At first I was happy with \$200 a day, then I upped my quota to \$500, then \$1,000 and then even that wasn't enough. If I didn't make that quota I felt like I had failed."

The irony that prostitutes have to confront, LeBlanc says, is that the sicker and more compulsive they are, the more money they can make. "Instead of hitting bottom like other addictions, hookers end up with a new car."

Most programs set up to help prostitutes reenter society are geared toward young runaways, not the sophisticated call girl with a "closet full of furs and a couple of sports cars in the garage."

These same programs, she contends, ignore the "little" problems associated with that life style-always dancing one step ahead of the police, getting shot at, arrested, spending time in jail or risking exposure to AIDS.

'Not a Therapy Group'

LeBlanc insists that hers is "not a therapy group. We're not here to find people jobs or places to stay." Rather, she says, the value of Prostitutes Anonymous is in its ability to help extricate hookers from addictive thinking.

Despite some skepticism, LeBlanc is not alone in her theory.

Norma Ashby, who was in prostitution more than 20 years and in the latter years a madam, is now director of Catharsis, a local prostitute support group. She believes that hookers can rarely break away from the business "cleanly and evenly. The short hours, the flexible time, the money, the excitement are all very addictive," she says.

Ashby has also found that the longer a woman has been in the business, the longer it takes her to leave. She estimates that for every five years in the business it takes three years to get out. "Women step in and out of prostitution a lot," she says. "It's so hard to change the life style that it usually takes some kind of crisis to get out."

On the other hand, LeBlanc's theory has its share of detractors.

Ann Hayman, a Presbyterian minister who runs a halfway house for prostitutes who want to leave the profession, doesn't doubt that a certain segment of prostitutes is addicted to the life style. "But I think dependency needs (placing their lives in the hands of people who can't or won't take care of them) among prostitutes are a far greater issue," she says. "They need help in getting rid of unhealthy relationships."

Priscilla Alexander, spokesperson for COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) in San Francisco, a prostitute rights advocacy group, says "prostitution is as varied as marriage. You've got everyone from a high school dropout who's been arrested a lot to a woman putting herself through law school. I wouldn't call prostitution addictive. I'd call it attractive to some women because of the money."

Jaime C. Jameson, a substance-abuse counselor who has worked extensively with prostitutes in various treatment programs, thinks the "addiction theory is too simplistic. I'm sure some women may fall into the addiction category, but prostitution is a cultural and social phenomenon. Sixty-five percent of all prostitutes are incest survivors."

Still, Jameson, a former prostitute who has been out of the life for nearly 13 years, feels Prostitutes Anonymous is an "important experiment" and has joined the group as a sponsor.

"Prostitutes are a very underserved minority," she says. "PA opens up another option for people who have very few options. That's why I'm supporting it."

Others are more wary. Lois Lee, who as director of Children of the Night has worked for years to get young street hustlers off the streets, is taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"I think the 12-step notion is a good one, but I can't recommend it yet," she says. "I need to check it out and see what's really going on."

Dr. James Crossen, a 12-step psychotherapist, has found that the anonymous programs work best for most people who are caught up in the addictive process. Crossen, head of the substance-abuse treatment center at the Medical Center of North Hollywood, believes Prostitutes Anonymous "is a valid development." He says he has worked with many women caught up in the addictive/compulsive behavior for whom "prostitution is not just another way of making a buck."

Still, he is withholding final judgment. "I don't want to refer anyone to a 12-step program that just supports an easier, softer way to be able to say to themselves and others, 'See how I'm trying? I'm going to those meetings, but I'm still hooking,' " he says. "Because the most important thing is to stop the behavior."

At a recent group meeting in a windowless room in the Valley, five women and a man sat around a table admitting their powerlessness over their addictions.

"My name is Michael and I'm a prostitute," the first one began.

Quick Money

Although he was broke and back out on the street now, Michael, in his early 20s, said he hadn't been hooking for more than two months. Whenever he felt tempted to make some quick money, he said, he thought about things he'd heard at the meeting and it gave him hope.

Another young prostitute, a neatly manicured woman, lamented the fact that prostitutes come from tumultuous, often abusive backgrounds and have no idea of what a normal relationship looks like.

"We wouldn't recognize a decent, normal man if he came up and tweaked us on the nose," she said.

A third woman talked about her financial options now that she is trying to get out of the business. Yet another had gone back to college full time.

For LeBlanc, who has been out of prostitution for more than two years and now works as a computer operator, the change has been significant.

"I can sleep without my hand on the shotgun," she says. "I can walk down the street without looking both ways constantly. That means a lot to me. I'm not throwing up every day."

She hopes to get meetings going seven nights a week and to set up chapters in others cities. The Sybil Brand Institute for Women, where 20% of the population is being held on prostitution-related charges, is considering bringing the program to the prison, Lt. Charles Shultz says.

Two years ago, LeBlanc was herself in Sybil Brand. She had been arrested after running a Van Nuys bordello that was grossing \$30,000 a month. When she got out, she tried to return to the sex industry but was locked out by dogged detectives trailing her. Instead she turned to dealing drugs, using her old clients as contacts.

With so much money and time on her hands, she says, she quickly ran up an \$800-a-day cocaine habit that eventually left her destitute. She turned to Narcotics Anonymous, where her sponsor helped her sort out her life and values.

"Five years ago, I honestly believed there was no way out of the business. I'd talk to women who had quit the industry and they were all back in. It looked hopeless.

"If somebody from the business had come along and said, 'It's possible. There is a way out,' it would have motivated me and helped me get over the fear. If PA just lets them know it's possible from somebody who's been there, that's a real good beginning."

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