

MEDIA
DREAM CATCHERS WORKSHOP
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THE GREAT ESCAPE: Addictions, sex trade targeted

Sarah Elizabeth Brown

A trio representing a Winnipeg program aimed at helping women escape the sex trade are bringing their knowledge to Thunder Bay. A trauma counselor and two support workers, who've both experienced addictions and prostitution themselves, are putting on a one-day workshop March 24. It's being presented by the Elizabeth Fry Society and a women's committee from the Ogden-Simpson neighbourhood.

Lynne Moss-Sharman, a volunteer and board member with the Elizabeth Fry Society has worked with women in the justice system for years. She read about the Dream Catchers program at Winnipeg's Klinik Community Health Centre in December, and immediately thought to have its leaders speak here.

Winnipeg is a bigger city, but Thunder Bay has many of the same problems, said Moss-Sharman. She said Tuesday that she hopes the workshop spawns a network involving service agencies, front-line workers and women on the streets. It's aimed at service providers, sex trade workers and their family members. Prostitution doesn't just happen in the Simpson Street area, she noted. "That's a very, very small part of it," she said. It can be found on the north side of town too, and around some hotels, she said.

Some women work out of their homes, and junior and senior high school girls are being coerced into the trade, said Moss-Sharman, noting she's seen 14 year olds working Simpson St. Two high school counselors have signed up for the workshop, said Moss-Sharman.

Because it's a largely hidden problem, estimating the number of women in the sex trade is difficult. She's heard a needle exchange program estimate of 60 to 70, but her gut tells her there are more, she said.

Leaving the sex trade is complicated. Judging by the number of local methadone users – estimates vary from 500 to 1000 – and the evidence of addiction she's seen among jail inmates, drug dependence is a huge problem, she said. Another facet is the increasingly sophisticated drug supply. It's not just cocaine and heroin anymore – there is an array of easily-produced synthetic drugs along with a host of commonly abused prescription drugs.

Welfare cuts and fewer safe-house beds add to the mix. Further complicating a woman's escape from prostitution is the fact that most in the sex trade have some sort of sexual trauma in their backgrounds, said Moss-Sharman. A common reaction is to diagnose psychiatric disorders and prescribe medication – switching one drug for another.

Many are ashamed of both the past abuse and what they have to do now to feed their drug habits. Many are aboriginal, and products of residential schools and the reservation system. "So there are multiple issues to be dealt with in their healing," she said.

Call 622 7850 to register.

Thunder Bay Source

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DREAM CATCHERS TARGETING LOCAL SEX TRADE

Lindsay LaFraugh

[Group photo]

Poverty, racism and a history of sexual abuse are just a few factors that are leading local women into a life that most of us will never see or experience up close. It may not be visible in some areas, but hundreds of women and high school girls are trapped in a life of prostitution, escort services and quite frequently drug abuse and it is happening all across the city. "There are a number of things that can lead women down this path, the most common being drug addictions," said Lynne Moss-Sharman, member of the Ogden-Simpson Neighbourhood Women's Coordinating Committee.

"Addicts require money to support their habits and once they are addicted it is very easy to get caught up in the sex trade." She went on to say that she has encountered situations where women are forced to do drugs or given them unknowingly by boyfriends, pimps, drug dealers and gang members who eventually force them into prostitution.

The Coordinating Committee is working with the Elizabeth Fry Society to encourage women across the city and especially in the Ogden-Simpson area, where there is a well-known history of prostitution, to help. A sex trade exiting workshop called Dream Catchers originated at the Klinik Community Health Centre in Winnipeg and has had great success in getting women off the streets during its 5 year existence.

Trauma counselor Carie Winslow along with two peer support workers are bringing the vision of Dream Catchers to women in Thunder Bay caught in the sex trade, as well as their families, support workers, and various other professionals from across the community. "The guest speakers from Dream Catchers are going to take us through, step by step what they did to reach people and how they achieved their success," said Moss-Sharman.

An increase in young Aboriginal girls on the streets is possibly one of the most terrifying reasons that Dream Catchers was called to help and inspire. "We are seeing more and more girls at the high school level in the trade. Escort services are well hidden, but the women who are visible are native and a large amount of them are teens," said Moss-Sharman.

Posters and the help of the health care and social service workers who are dealing with many of the women caught up in the sex trade are hoped to encourage them to attend the workshops, where no personal information or names will be collected. "I think we have a crisis on our hands here. These are very difficult times for single mothers and for aboriginal women out in the region," said Moss-Sharman. "The health of these women is being compromised and they're becoming almost disposable commodities. As a community we need to provide the support for a safe exit from an early death."

The Dream Catchers workshop will be held at the Ogden Community Centre on March 24 from 9.30 to 4.00 pm. For more information or to register call 622 7850. Space is limited.