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# From Teenaged Prostitute to Sex Workers' Rights Advocate

By Tara Burns February 7, 2015, 8:45am

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Photo courtesy of Bella Robinson

Bella Robinson entered the sex industry as a homeless 18-year-old fleeing an abusive marriage that had rescued her from the foster care system. She’s exactly the sort of “victim” for whom sex trafficking laws were invented. But Robinson—now a human rights activist who has been a hooker (her preferred term) for 30 years—doesn’t think of herself as a victim of the sex industry. She says she’s been sex trafficked by the state and victimized by laws intended to help people like her.

In 2012, she told some of her story in the film American Courtesans, going by the name Gina. C... colleges, attending labor tra... turning tricks.

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Bella's mom suffered from schizophrenia and alcoholism. When she was three or four years old, her mom got drunk, took her grandfather's old hunting rifle from the basement, came upstairs, and shot the kitchen windows out while Bella and her three siblings were upstairs asleep. Despite incidents like those, they weren't removed from the home and placed in foster care until she was a teenager. As she puts it, "We used to run away. We were not fond of being dumped off with strangers."

At 15, Bella found herself in her longest-lasting placement, a group home run by a retired minister and his wife. She hadn't been back to school since getting into trouble in the eighth grade, but got her GED, started junior college, and soon had her own motorcycle and a job doing home care. She also started hanging out at a bar where she joined the pool league and met the 41-year-old man who would become her husband.

The group home was in a rough part of town, and all the other girls got pregnant by the time they were 16. "Shit," Bella says, "I don't think they cared about us, as most of the girls didn't even go to school. I remember the other girls used to steal all my shit and I was the only girl that had a job. I knew I had to get out, and I didn't make enough money to live alone. Plus, I was underage."

Around this time, marriage started to seem like a viable option to the 16-year-old. "It wasn't a real marriage, it was a marriage to get me out of foster care. It was more like a business arrangement," Bella says. Today the government considers guardians exchanging something of value for sexual access to minors a form of sex trafficking, but in 1981 the state was eager to let Bella marry a 41-year-old man with a record for domestic violence.



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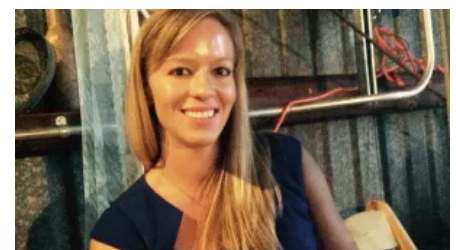
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They got married by a justice of the peace found in the Yellow Pages, with no ring or honeymoon, two weeks after Bella turned 17. Her grandmother sprung for a trip to a dinner theater as a reception. Later that night, Bella had sex for the second time in her life. She was so naïve that when he asked for a blowjob she thought it was “some weird shit.”

“I guess this was my first act of prostitution. I guess legally I was a trafficking victim as I was underage and marrying a man the same age as my mother,” Bella ways. Under federal law, any minor who has sex as a survival strategy or in exchange for a place to live is considered to be sex trafficked.

It was only a few days before Bella realized that her husband was an abusive “rage alcoholic” who tried to isolate and manipulate her. Bella remembers being screamed at every day, for everything. One day she screamed back at him and he raised his hand. He didn’t hit her, but she knew he would the next time.

Bella’s husband convinced her that leaving him meant going back into state custody, and she chose to remain in an abusive marriage rather than return to state care. Social science research shows that many teens find survival sex and abuse preferable to the foster care system. In a 2009 research report, the [Young Women’s Empowerment Project](#) wrote, “We were surprised how many stories we heard from girls, including transgender girls, and young women, including trans women about their violent experiences at non profits and with service providers. This was upsetting because adults and social workers often tell us that seeking services will improve our lives and help us actually can make the foster care system.”



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In 2011 a criminologist, commenting on research from John Jay College which showed that 70 percent of youth involved in transactional sex had previously been involved with “assistance agencies” and only 10 percent had pimps, told Village Voice, “The question becomes: If [this research] is correct, what do we do with that 90 percent? Do we ignore it? How hard do we look at how they got into that circumstance? You could make the case that for the 90 percent for whom they couldn’t find any pimping going on—well, how does it happen?”

This is how it happens.

Bella ran away from her husband just days after her 18th birthday, when she was freed from the threat of state custody. Sleeping in her car and working part-time for minimum wage, she soon realized that having a home would be nearly impossible. That’s when she met two drag queens (that was the term they preferred at the time) who turned out to be her saving grace.

One of the drag queens, Joey (short for Joanne) was turning tricks on the strip, but Bella didn’t know that yet. “I never asked where Joey had got the money to put gas in my car or buy me cigarettes and food,” Bella ways. “I soon found out. I ran out of gas, and had to walk a few blocks to a gas station and a guy in red camo offered to give me a ride. He asks me out. I tell him NO, and tell him I am married, and he pulls out his badge and said I am under arrest for prostitution.”

Bella calls this chapter in her life, “How a cop stalked me and sealed my fate with my first prostitution charge and conviction because I wouldn’t go out with him.”



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The sort of incident Bella describes is depressingly common—women have been arrested for just walking down the street so often that it's been coined “stop and frisk for women” or “walking while trans.” But does arresting youth for prostitution lead to prostitution?

Joanna Morse, a licensed marriage and family therapist, says that it certainly could. “Young people in that stage of life, known as ‘identity versus role confusion,’ should actively be trying to answer important questions like, ‘Who am I? What can I be?’” she explains. “Young people are significantly influenced not only by peers but also by role models, which could certainly, for better or worse, include law enforcement. It stands to reason that weighty labels, such as those imposed through criminal justice systems, could become powerfully and negatively deterministic.”

Realistically, Bella says, she probably would have become a prostitute anyways. Being arrested for prostitution just made it an easier decision, because she was angry she had been accused of it to begin with.

Having been publicly and permanently identified with a criminal record, she turned to Joey to learn how to become a prostitute. Joey gave Bella condoms and taught her how to pick up dates and to charge \$20 for oral, \$40 for sex in hotels. She told her to always make the guy pay for the room. Joey also taught her to keep track of car tags and the makes, models, and colors of clients' cars. Bella and Joey would check in with each other after their dates. Joey never asked her for any money, and Bella soon learned that it was much easier for her to pick up dates than it was for Joey.

Just a couple weeks earlier, when she was 17, today's laws would have called Bella a victim of a sex crime. But at the time, Bella's story was a fairytale: “I learned if



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hotel, food, and smokes for the day. Then I got to live in my castle and not have to kiss any man's ass."

This gaping canyon between how youth see their circumstances in the sex trade and how they are perceived by law enforcement and nonprofits has led to a lot of jail time for juvenile "victims" of this "severe form of human trafficking." Jolene Goedin, an FBI agent with Alaska's Innocence Lost program, said at a 2013 sex trafficking conference that she finds it necessary to imprison youth who are in the sex trade if they do not understand that they are victims or "admit" they have pimps. She says that keeping them in a juvenile detention facility is for their own safety.

"By the time I was 19," Bella says, "I found the escort ads in the yellow pages and was on my way. Back then the rate was 100 bucks an hour and the girl got 60 of it. Two dates a week was more than working full-time for minimum wage. I was on my way, and even after 30 years, all the shit that I have been through, I have never been sorry that I made the decision to be a sex worker. I did have to endure the criminal justice system many times, violent cops. I got raped as a street worker one time. All in all, I am very lucky nothing really, really bad ever happened to me. Some days it sucked but most days were OK, and many days were awesome."

When she fled Florida and landed in New Jersey after a foreclosure and missing a court date in 2007, Bella had been out of the sex trade, working in home health care and raising her daughter, for years. Knowing she needed to stay "off the grid" to avoid the legal system, Bella turned back to sex work. She faced a steep learning curve to re-enter the sex industry as an independent internet escort, but she managed it for ten months. Then she made friends with a local lady who had been doing outcalls because she had children at home. They worked together at Bella's house for about six weeks before the SWAT team kicked the door in.



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Bella was charged with prostitution. She pled guilty and spent 90 days in jail. When she was released, after being locked up and unable to pay her bills for three months during the holidays, she was ordered to pay a fine of \$3,720 or go back to jail. That verdict seemed to Bella like the definition of sex trafficking: using coercion—the threat of jail—to induce a person into prostitution which the courts received money from. “I felt like [the judge] was telling me to go turn some more tricks to pay it or he would issue a warrant for my arrest,” Bella explains.

Sienna Baskin, an attorney at the Urban Justice Center’s Sex Workers Project, also thought that a case could be made for this being sex trafficking. “You could say that the court system ‘recklessly disregarded’ the fact that she would have to make the funds through sex work, and there is definitely coercion, threat of imprisonment. I think the question is who would be criminally responsible... it may be hard to impute criminal liability to ‘the system.’”

When she got out, Bella learned that prostitution was decriminalized in Rhode Island, so she packed up and moved right away. In the decriminalized environment, she felt utterly free for the first time in her life. If anyone tried to hurt her, she knew she could dial 9-1-1 without going to jail herself. Then, in November 2009 Rhode Island re-criminalized prostitution. The reason given for criminalization was that the state police insisted they couldn’t investigate trafficking without criminalizing prostitution.

“Rhode Island had more minors arrested for prostitution every year before 2009 when they criminalized us,” Bella says.



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In 2009, police started finding the bodies of escorts who had been murdered and dumped in Gilgo Beach in Long Island. That's when Bella says she decided to become an activist. But as an outspoken critic of the rescue industry, she has been accused of not caring enough about the victims of trafficking.

Such insults are often slung at sex workers' rights activists, says Alana Massey, a writer and sex work activist. "Female sex work activists are regularly—and I'd say intentionally—characterized by anti-sex work groups as angry, self-interested, and manipulative in order to defeminize them," she says. "It is a strategy that makes it easier to characterize sex work activists as traffickers and pimps than what they really are: vulnerable women advocating for themselves within a system that is set up to marginalize and dehumanize them." Ironically, Bella is exactly the sort of vulnerable woman with a history of trafficking that she's been accused of not caring enough about.

"I doubt they even care about the victims," Bella says of those who criticize her. "I think they hate us [victims] for being hookers."

Bella has revived the Rhode Island chapter of Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) and joined the board of directors of the Erotic Service Provider's Legal Education and Research Project. She works hard to educate people about sex worker's rights, reaching out and presenting to labor organizers, university students, and politicians. The main thing Bella wants people to know is that even if they disapprove of prostitution, "all woman need to feel safe dialing 9-1-1, and if you are a criminal or an illegal immigrant it is easy to rob, rape, threaten, beat, exploit, arrest, or murder you [because you can't rely on the police]."

Bella's life today is far from her beginnings as a child bride and homeless teen hooker. It's like a fairy tale, Bella says, "but a true one, with a happy ending, as I survived it all."

Follow Bella Robinson and Tara Burns on Twitter.



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