

York Region's prostitutes lurk behind closed doors, not on street corners

Sex for Sale

The first in a series of articles examining the seamy side of York Region

Sheila Crosby will never forget the time her husband abandoned his family

for an exotic dancer at Richmond Hill's infamous Fantasia club, a strip joint where police say women sold much more than looks at their naked bodies.

Disillusioned, Crosby lost 40 pounds as she sunk deeper and deeper into a depression that lasted three years.

"I couldn't eat. Anything would make me sick. It just emotionally wipes you out," the 40-year-old Richmond Hill woman says. "I was absolutely devastated."

Crosby and her 12-year-old daughter are among the unseen victims of the sex trade — family members who are hurt when time and money are spent on prostitution.

York Regional Insp. Chris Barratt agrees selling sex creates innocent victims.

Barratt, who headed York Region's morality bureau when it conducted raids that eventually closed down Fantasia with prostitution-related charges, knows how strip joints, massage parlours and escort services can hurt people such as Sheila Crosby and her daughter.

"One husband was spending all of his paycheques in these places," he says. "Prostitution is often referred to as a victimless crime, it's not really."

While prostitution may not exist on York Region's street corners, it has become part of suburban life.

York Region men once had no other choice but to travel to downtown Toronto where they ran the risk of being busted by police in highly visible red-light districts.

Now, these men are flocking to covert sex shops in their own region where they can purchase anything from lap dances to sexual intercourse.

Over the last few years, police have raided a number of strip joints.

Officers laid a variety of prostitution-related charges against 115 people in connection

with Fantasia, as well as the Regency and Major Mack hotels in Richmond Hill.

Police also laid criminal charges against Bunnies strip club in Markham after an undercover female officer worked as a stripper there.

In a glimpse of the evidence against Bunnies, the undercover officer told Markham's licensing committee strippers regularly performed illegal sexual acts.

A stripper told the female officer, "The more sex you have, the more money you make."

The allegations must still be heard in court, but the testimony, along with evidence that between 100 and 200 used condoms were regularly found in so-called VIP rooms, was enough for the town to pull Bunnies' business licence.

According to Det. Sgt. Mike Fleming, head of York Regional's drug and vice enforcement unit, raids have helped keep prostitution out of most strip joints. But he admitted the region still has its share of businesses that offer sex for cash.

"Patrons who want that kind of activity, through word-of-mouth networks, will find

See MESSAGE, page 10.

Story by Gianni Colavecchia, photo illustration by Rob Alary

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