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Forget the Bootstraps, Part II—Breaking Free

by Margo Pierce

I am a survivor from the life, of the life of prostitution. Everything that we represent here, I am a survivor of—domestic violence, prostitution, drug addiction, criminal justice system, homelessness, rape, all of that. I came here as a client and was a participant in the program in the beginning in 2001. I came straight out of incarceration into treatment and treatment introduced me to Breaking Free.

Joy Friedman, women’s program manager at Breaking Free in St. Paul, Minn, makes direct eye contact as she speaks. There is no edge in her tone of voice and no hesitation in her manner. She is an advocate in a house of advocates helping women leave prostitution. When the door is closed to her office, what was once a bedroom in a converted house at 770 University Avenue West, her presence fills the space between boxes, piles of papers on a cluttered desk and the two guest chairs that leave only a skinny floor space for navigation.

We educate the girls on what they [get] caught up in, cuz a lot of times we, as victims, blame ourselves and society helps us with that, saying, “You should do something else. You should have never gotten in this. It’s your fault. You cause this to happen to you. You chose this.”

In these groups we actually talk about what led up to it. Little girls don’t daydream about being involved in prostitution. I didn’t ask to get raped at 15 by a pimp and have three of his guys torture me and be held captive for 24 hours.

Yeah, I survived it and got out of it, but the trauma that was done to me is with me the rest of my life. That’s a big piece people don’t really look at or seem to forget, is that in prostitution it’s not just the sex piece. It’s not just, “OK, stop having sex, get you a regular job.”

If you’ve had sex with one guy or 1,000 guys, that impact of how you had it—the fact that we’re bought, you compromised your morals, your values if you had them in the first place—and here a stranger is doing things to you that’s supposed to be done in an intimate, loving, caring, respectful, agreed-upon relationship. That stuff sticks with you. You feel less, you feel dirty, you feel, “Oh my God, what have I done?” and that itself can be torture. And then you get that soiled feeling of, “Who’s going to want me after that? Am I ever going to be able to get the husband, the white picket fence, the dog, the family? Who’s gonna want a prostitute for a wife?” And there’s a lot of people who will help you with that as, “Once a ho, always a ho.”

Tricks help you with that. Pimps help you with that to confirm, “Don’t go anywhere else because nobody’s going to accept you. Who in society is going to have a prostitute as their daycare provider, or their receptionist? You’re never going to be anything. And once they find out about your life, they’re going to get rid of you. So stay with me, I love you for who you are and what you do. Don’t worry. It’s safe, we don’t judge you here.”

Breaking Free is one of only a few dozen organizations in the United States that is available to help an estimated 100,000 prostitutes leave “the life.” Breaking Free offers current and former prostitutes a lifetime of support

through peer counseling, support groups, temporary and permanent housing, case management and access to essential services such as health care, mental health support, addiction programs and more, all in one place. By providing a safe place, the house in the heart of an urban center becomes a haven. The first step is a 14-week program called Sisters of Survival

The dynamics of prostitution is what we talk about in there, such as boundaries, recruitment, self-esteem, do you want this job? We compare the job versus a career, or a real 9-to-5 versus prostitution, escort services or dancing. Is that a job? Then we look at the differences in job, like workman's comp protection, 401k plans, taxes. You look at all that.

That's the thing about prostitution people don't understand, you have low self-esteem and somebody in that lifestyle opens their arms to you, it'll come down to—I need someone to appreciate who I am. I need someone to make me feel important. So, a lot of girls get trapped through dancing. When you go into dancing, you're actually the center of attention. Men come to see you. They give you money, they'll buy you drinks. We know there's an ulterior motive, but that feeds that missing piece.

This is a process for every girl. It's a process for me and I've been out 10 years. I still have problems of my own, where I have to deal with issues—like I don't have a relationship. Why? Cuz I don't know how to have one. Even though I'm up here working with women and I'm helping them understand where we've come from and where we can go, that piece of relationship—mmmm. Can't do that yet.

Sex, it has no meaning to me. If that's what a relationship's about I guess I won't have one because I've had enough sex to last me a lifetime. If that's what he wants and that's what it's all about then I'm OK with being by myself.

A woman knocks and opens Friedman's door.

I've got a girl on the phone who's in desperate, desperate measures. I don't know exactly how to handle this.

Friedman picks up a pencil at the same time she picks up the phone and begins to talk.

Where ya at?

It's OK honey.

Are you OK at the moment? Are you safe?

You remember me? Where did I see you?

Good for you! You don't want to do it anymore.

You need to see your probation officer.

Do you have an addiction?

Keep it real with me.

Last time you used?

What's your drug of choice?

Have you ever been to treatment, honey?

It's OK.

You're tryin' to fix a problem by admitting to it. That's not a bad thing.

You can let 'em know you been sober.

It's not like you're tellin' on yourself negative, you're tellin' them you need help.

It's not your fault—someone's using your situation.

Whatever we're askin' of you ain't nothin' compared to where you been.

We want to get you someplace safe to stay.

Have your probation officer call me.

I can advocate on your behalf.

You don't have to be with those men.

You don't have to do this.

You deserve better than that.

You can do this.

It's going to be hard because it's going to be change but you can do this.

You got bigger and better things waiting on you out there.

It's OK where we are right now.

Friedman hangs up the phone, makes some notes and then looks up.

The girls are real willing and open to hearing me because I talk our language, so they know I've been there. There are certain things about that lifestyle that, if you've been in it, there's just certain language and certain things you know that you can't just read that and learn it.

Word has traveled so a lot of people know me or know of me. And they know me from the streets and they know me from this side. The women are real receptive to it because they want out.

A lot of girls are falsely convinced that there is no way out and they're terrorized or tortured into believing that if they try to get out this individual will find them, hurt them or hurt their families—that instilled fear is real to us. It may not be real to everybody else, but it's real to us and that's all that matters. "I believe he's going to go hurt my kids or my mother or my family members because I've watched him do it to other girls."

So you're scared to even try to attempt it, you feel trapped mentally, not to mention physically, so that you don't go nowhere. You don't try to escape because you're scared of the consequences—what if?

Right now I have a lady that needs to move into transitional housing. I have two of them actually—one of them is coming from the criminal justice system, one is coming from treatment. Now both these young ladies, both these girls have extensive criminal backgrounds and they want to get out. But once again, those barriers of, "If I get out, what kind of job am I going to be able to have?"

I'm a role model for both of them right now because they've seen me come up out of the dirt, literally, out of jail with nothing and advance up the ladder as I have and get that respect and bring back things that I never thought I'd have and getting positions that we never would have thought women like us could be in.

Vednita [Carter, Breaking Free founder] believes in hiring survivors, regardless of the backgrounds. We believe in second chance opportunities and empowering them.

But with these women I show them that we can do this despite our records, despite everything in that. All they have to do is want it. If they want it, Breaking Free and myself are willing to walk, Vednita is willing to walk not in front of them but side by side with them, hold their hand the whole journey, not halfway through it.

This program offers a lifetime of support. So it's not like after 14 weeks you're done with our program or the funding ran out so your stuff is over. This is ongoing so if you leave us today and go back to the life, we're not going to feel any different about you. We'll pray for you and try to hope that God protects you while you're out there. And that you come back to us alive. We've got many women that haven't made it back and that we ended up attending their funerals.

So what I do is just let them know if you fall, it's OK. Call me. We have an emergency cell phone, they can call any time. I'm out in the streets doing outreach, so when I see them I treat them no differently from the first day that I met them, which means a lot to them.

We want people to know that we're human—don't have that sympathy and pity for us—poor her, poor her. No, it's just a situation happening. I need help and support to get out of it. We're women like you. We are somebody's child. How would you want your child to be treated if this happened to her?

No one's exempt from this. The women involved in this didn't cause this. The facts here are a woman's caught up in a very violent situation and as a community we need to come together and embrace her, otherwise why should she get out of it?•

The American myth of individualism tells people who are struggling with addiction, abuse, mental illness or poverty to simply pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. In reality, specially designed services and other kinds of support are essential to the process of transformation. This column is the second in an occasional series that will explore what it takes to Forget the Bootstraps in order to live a better life.

Published by Denver VOICE July 2, 2010

<http://www.denvervoice.org/featuresnews/2010/7/2/forget-the-bootstraps-part-iibreaking-free.html#comments>