

Women Explain Stance on Repressing Prostitutes

WHEN prostitutes' rights activist Wendy Chapkis read a letter signed by 30 prominent women who protested the recent shutdown of massage parlors to Sheriff Al Noren and District Attorney Art Danner last week, Noren at first chuckled and then looked annoyed as he leafed through the letter and petitions the women gave him.

Consequently, the tone for the meeting was set, and what Wendy Chapkis had envisioned as an educational experience for all present quickly turned into a polarized

political debate, with neither side conceding to the others' contentions.

And since that meeting, the daily press has had a field day with the event, branding as hypocrites the women who decry beauty pageants while simultaneously calling for the decriminalization of prostitution.

Chapkis, an author and UCSC graduate student whose master's thesis centers on women in the sex industry, told GOOD TIMES the letter and petitions were months in the works and were "the most appropriate response" to the shutdown of massage parlors last fall.

The letter, whose signatures included City Council members Jane Weed and Mardi Wormhoudt, stipulated that while the women hold various opinions about the practice of prostitution, "we cannot support the new climate of repression of this form of women's work and harassment of women workers."

The letter also stated that as the economy worsens and welfare programs are dismantled, increased numbers of women, the majority of whom are single mothers, are forced to prostitute themselves.

The letter also points out that

when prostitutes are forced to work the streets, they are more likely to be victims of rape, murder and violence than when they work in a massage parlor situation.

Noren responded by calling the women's concerns "ludicrous," adding all they wanted was "publicity." He also said the shutdown was due to the other crimes associated with prostitution, such as drug dealing.

Furthermore, Noren said, "If Mardi Wormhoudt and Jane Weed

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like massage parlors so much, they should open them in the city."

Jane Weed, who was not present at the meeting, told GOOD TIMES that as an elected official, she signed the letter because she "knows the fiscal situation" and "with the relatively limited amount of law enforcement dollars we have, there are other priorities."

"I think there's a drug war out on the streets out there, and I don't think prostitutes are the cause," Weed said. "I think it's time we get down on the perpetrators of crimes that have real victims."

Ann Simonton of Media Watch, whose ongoing "Myth California" protests helped cause the Miss California pageant to leave Santa Cruz, feels there is no hypocrisy in her support for prostitutes' rights.

"Our work is to end violence against women," Simonton said, "and that's why I signed the petition and that's why Media Watch is helping to support it."

But Simonton has met with intense criticism for her position from those who ask if pageants objectify women, doesn't prostitution? Simonton thinks that question simplifies the reality of why women are prostitutes.

"Generally, women become prostitutes because they are poor, out of desperation. I don't think everybody

joining the pageant is in that same desperate position," Simonton said.

"We are exploited in our society in a number of ways. Our society reduces women to commodities for the pleasure and profit of men all the time. Miss California is promoted as the best sexual object, (while) the whore is garbage," said Simonton.

"We never were attacking the pageant contestants as individuals, we are trying to look at the bigger social issues. But no one cares (if prostitutes) are sexually exploited in our society. We are saying, 'We care. She's in danger.'"

Chapkis also feels there is a big difference between protesting beauty pageants and protesting the shutdown of massage parlors in Santa Cruz.

She said the group of women who signed the letter "don't uniformly agree that prostitution is terrific, but we all uniformly agree it's a bad idea that prostitution is illegal — that women can be arrested, harassed and stigmatized for it," she said.

"Another thing is, it is not as if prostitution is billed as anything but the sale of sexual services. Beauty pageants are sold as talent contests or scholarship funds, while the women who protest beauty pageants say that they are making money off of women's bodies and that should be explicit, for advertisers that use the contests to sell products to be up front about that," said Chapkis.

"We have no problem with beauty pageants being called prostitution," she said. •

— Rose Dean