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WORST OF HOUSTON

Sunlight is the best antiseptic

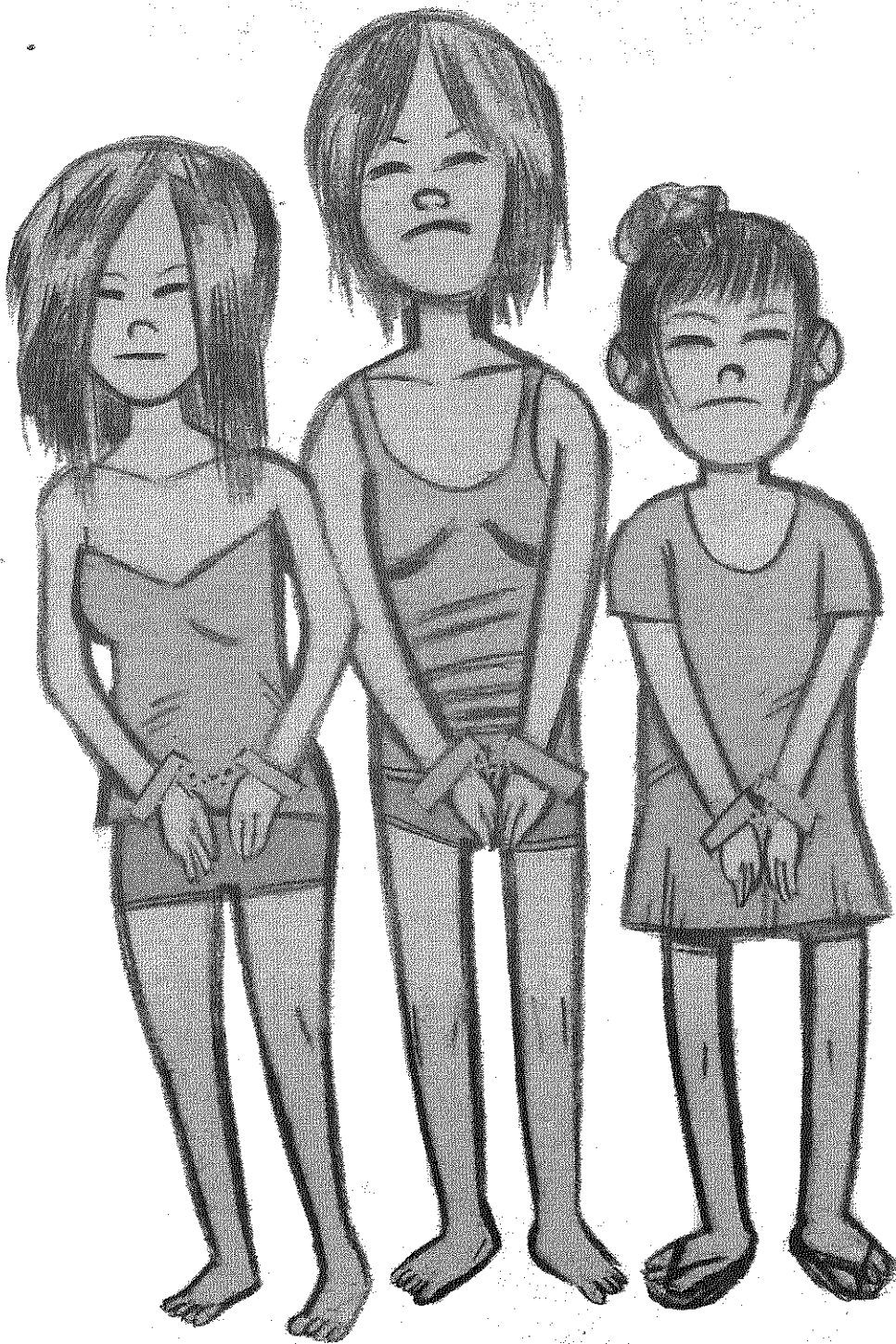
Worst Complicity in Houston's Worst Crime

Houston Press aids & abets
human sex trafficking

BY AMANDA HART

EDITORS NOTE: This was obviously a hard decision to make as to whether or not to go ahead with publishing this story. First and foremost, it is hard to appear objective when writing about another newspaper that folks would perceive as a 'competitor.' Secondly, I have many long-time friends who work over at Houston Press that I admire and respect and this article has no bearing on the great work they do. I am also a customer of Houston Press where I regularly advertise Fitz shows, Free Press Summer Fest, Houston Palestine Film Festival, etc. I can further illustrate my own hypocrisy by telling you that I have spent tens of thousands of dollars with them all the while having a moral qualm with the issue described here in the following article. Because in 100 years I am sure that when historians describe the worst of injustices that flourished in Houston Texas, human trafficking and its link to the sex trade will top the list. This story is the 500 pound gorilla in the room. And Houston Press and other media organizations complicity comprises but one component in this 3 dimensional clusterfuck. But we have no illusions that such complicity is based on some dark, malevolent plan orchestrated by the illuminati but rather a failure to examine the status quo for what it is. So I would ask that readers open their hearts and minds to the plight of these trafficked women.

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FOR YEARS NOW, I have ignored a rather disturbing reality that exists within our community. I, like most people, would pick up the Houston Press every Thursday and read up on what was going down that week. And every week I would do the same thing, reach a certain page in the paper and refuse to look any further for fear of having to face the reality that exist within the back pages of the Houston Press. It was as if my decision to refuse to flip any further somehow resolved me of any guilt or responsibility. So instead of browsing the pages that were lined with stock photos of women that are for sale, I would stop after I had reached the end of the music section. It was just easier this way. Then earlier this year, I attended a human trafficking education summit and was forced to analyze the ways in which my community and I perpetuate the trafficking and sale of women and their bodies. The Houston Press was brought up in the discussion and the wall I had created that separated me from reality was quickly dismantled. I went home that night and forced myself to begin the process of exploring human trafficking and how it is directly linked to Houston and specifically the Houston Press.

I started my research with the most obvious of offenses: massage parlors. Many of the women who are serving time in these facilities were brought from overseas here under false pretenses (many from poverty-stricken South Asian countries like Vietnam and Thailand) and are forced into prostitution through physical and mental abuse. Their families are threatened, their identities are stripped and they all lack vital resources that keep them perpetually held in this vicious cycle. The women accrue an inflated debt due to travel expenses and room and board that they proceed to pay off by working 12 to 24 hour days in the parlors. Their captors move them every few weeks (while adding to their debt for each move) to keep them disoriented with their surroundings and each other. After their debt is repaid and their time is served, they are "set free." If you were one of these women and at 2 AM you were locked out with no

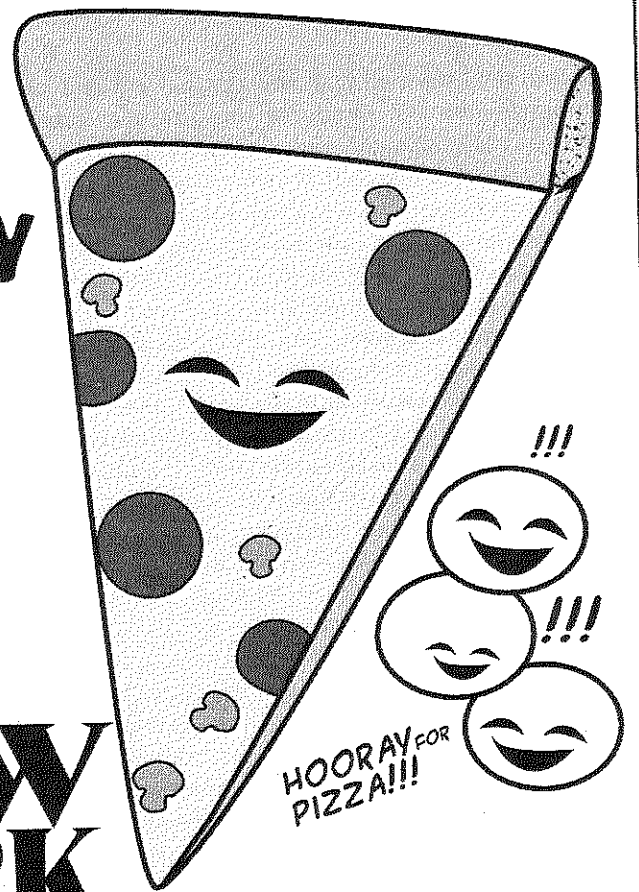
money, a limited knowledge of the native language and not even the basic knowledge of what fucking city you are in, what would you do? One could hope that they find some help or, better yet, burn the building down. But that is not how the sex industry world works, and the reality is these women end up begging their captors to let them back in. These same women are being advertised every week in the backpages of the Houston Press. While I understand that times are tough and the Houston Press and their parent company, Village Voice Media, are doing what they have to do so they can get by, I have to ask them, and myself, "Is it worth it?"

It is no secret that Village Voice Media and the Houston Press make some serious cash through ad space bought by the sex industry. Village Voice Media owns and operates the website Backpage.com and since Craigslist closed their adult service section in September of 2010, Backpage.com has picked up where they left off. According to James Rainey of the LA Times, "A Village Voice executive, who asked not to be named for revealing confidential information, said that Backpage.com, where online escort ads and the like go for about \$10 each, produces at least one-seventh of the company's revenue." This is a million dollar industry that is making its earning off the backs and twats of women. Village Voice has stated that they are protected under the first amendment and while they sort of acknowledge the terrible shit their ad space is used for, their stance is that they cannot be held accountable for it. In that same LA Times article. Steven Suskin, Village Voice's Lawyer, is quoted as saying, "Criminals send drugs through Federal Express but we don't eliminate FedEx just because a few criminals do that." (Eds note: This is a bullshit defense and parallel because FedEx does not knowingly accept packages with drugs in them whereas papers like HP are very well aware of the services offered at massage parlors and the conditions the women are in.) Oh well Mr. Suskin, I totally see your logic in comparing mailing drugs through the mail and the sell of women and children on the internet. Thank you for clearing all the confusion up for me. You are safe in the eyes of the law but I have to ask, isn't there some sense of morality that you seem to be lacking? If you know that the money you are taking from massage parlors is the same money that holds those women captive, wouldn't your moral compass send a fucking bat signal telling you this is beyond fucked up? And massage parlors are just one aspect to this enigma. That does not include the "prostitutes" and "escorts" that are also being trafficked through your pages and let us not forget the underage girls that seem to be popping up periodically with accusations that you knowingly allowed their pimps to take out ads on them. And while I agree that the pimps and traffickers are really at fault for their disgusting behavior, you need to take responsibility for making money off of the sales. I mean, you can't actually think that you in no way are a part of this whole underworld. You are the link between the supply and demand. And let's just be honest with each other, you can claim you are protecting first amendment rights all you want but what it really comes down to is money. I understand that you are a business and you do need money to exist but I would hope that you would rather cease to exist than to make your millions off of ads that sell human beings.

Village Voice over the last year began their own human trafficking investigative series entitled "The Truth Behind Sex Trafficking," in which multiple lengthy articles were printed in an attempt to debunk sex trafficking. Their main concern was the trafficking of

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minors and they went all FOX news on our ass and even created an interactive map. But, of course, this was all an attempt to shed light on sex trafficking and had absolutely nothing to do with the money they stand to make off of convincing people that sex trafficking is not really happening. It started with a ridiculous fight between Village Voice and Ashton Kutcher. Yep, you read that right. Village Voice posted a five page article directed at fucking Ashton Kutcher. I love that this was indeed their jumping off point in regards to such an intense subject. But either way, the article proceeded to debunk a claim that Kutcher made on CNN in July. "It's between 100,000 and 300,000 child sex slaves in the United States today," Kutcher said. The only problem with their attempt to debunk Kutcher's claim is that they themselves used faulty "junk science" to do so. While I agree that the numbers that Kutcher touted were misconstrued, it does not mean that a good solution is to in turn do the exact same thing in an attempt to make a point. What VVM proceeded to do was spend a few months combing through arrest records in 37 cities looking for juvenile prostitution arrest. Once they pulled their own numbers (826 arrest per year) they then compared them to the numbers Kutcher claimed and from there attempted to downplay a very real problem that exist not just within the states but particularly in Houston. There are so many things wrong with this attempt to figure out the magnitude that is under age trafficking. For starters, VVM only looked at actual arrests. I can't even begin to fathom why they would think that looking at arrests would somehow give them the magical number. As if only people who are arrested and charged with marijuana possession are the only ones smoking weed. Come on now, you have to have a better schematic than that. Not only that, but one would also have to assume the underage girls that were processed in no way lied about their age. Because we all know that if a 16 year old is picked up by the police for fucking prostitution the first thing she is going to do is tell them her real name and age. Also, it is well known that in many cases these girls are not actually charged with prostitution but with something more along the lines of drug possession, running away or petty larceny, which means they were not entered into the system under the title of teen prostitute. There is also the factor that in some cases the girls are properly identified from the beginning and are never entered into the criminal system at all and are instead taken to a facility that will help locate their parents or find other sources of help for them. Once again, not ending in an arrest that could have been cataloged by the geniuses at VVM who came up with this ridiculous calculation. In the article VVM also makes the claim that police departments seem to have the issue under control. This is beyond laughable when you understand how the system really works. In Houston there are a handful (and by "handful" I mean 5) of officers who are dedicated to human trafficking. Not only does the city not have a handle on human trafficking, they don't have the manpower or the money to even properly train officers on how to identify and handle such cases. The gist of the article claims that non profits are misleading people with these numbers (100,000 - 300,000) in an attempt to receive federal funding to keep their nonprofits going. It is interesting that the same company that stands to make millions off of this industry is calling out non profits for using misleading numbers in an attempt to gain financial security. What is that saying about a pot calling a kettle black?

I will say that I do believe that religious zealots are on a witch hunt and they want VVM dissected and on a platter. They are calling for VVM to close down the entirety of the adult advertisements. While I might have an issue with the massage parlors' sale of minors and women who have been forced into prostitution being sold on their site, I do think there has to be a better way to solve the issue without closing the ad space completely. For starters, massage parlor ads have got to go. There is no debating that this shit is just fucked up. VVM has got to do more in regards to filtering through their ads and making sure to remove and pull all ads that are soliciting the sale of minors. If you are going to make the decision to profit from it you need to also invest in the proper precautions to keep the ad space as safe as possible. Writing articles about how human trafficking is really just a "boogey man" and not a real threat or reality is not only bad journalism but just makes you shitty human beings and this is why you are at the top of my Worst of Houston list. **FPH**

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Every week, ads like this are featured in Houston Press that contain subtle language which indicate sexual services are offered. Stock photos of Asian women are re-used for different 'massage parlors.'

Disturbing Facts on Houston's Sex-Trade

Since 2001, more than 20% of the total number of identified trafficking victims nationwide has been located in Texas.

The second largest trafficking bust in U.S. history occurred in Houston.

While the City of Houston collects permit operation fees for sexually oriented businesses, it has no division to oversee that the workers' are of legal age and working there voluntarily.

Houston 2009: Six people including ex-HPD officer John Butler, were arrested in the region's largest sex-trafficking ring bust that forced women as young as 16 into prostitution via 'commercialized sex businesses often disguised as modeling studios, health spas, massage parlors, and bikini bars in Houston, and employed sexually oriented publications and websites to advertise their illicit business.'

As of January 2006, of all human trafficking victims certified in the United States, 25% of them were in Texas, the majority of whom were in Houston. (From U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Rescue and Restore Campaign Results, April 2004 thru January 2006)

162,000, or 70%, of homeless youth are victims of commercial sexual exploitation in the United States. There are over 5,000 homeless children in Houston. (The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children In the U. S., Canada and Mexico, Univ. Pennsylvania/ 2010 Report Coalition for the Homeless)