

Veronica's Voice Calls Out

A symbol for the transformative work Veronica's Voice does, the butterfly adorns the walls of the church basement which houses their offices. Veronica's Voice has a new promotional video aimed at educating people quickly about their mission to social change for victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Over 100 visitors to their STAR Center last week had the chance to watch the DVD, which calls for volunteers who want to help women who work in the sex industry become productive members of the community, people who, as Kristy Childs, foundress of the organization states on camera, "what to see these women become whole." On-screen is the organization's name-sake, the late Veronica Neverdusky. There is a wall inside the offices of Veronica's Voice where job information, missing persons and other relevant items to women who are looking to stop working in demeaning and destructive trades.

T. Abe, 28/2/07

It may have been Mardi Gras and the walls may be painted purple, but the only beads to be seen were part of conventional jewelry, and the only exposed skin was shown in bits and pieces on a television screen in the corner. The STAR Center, where Veronica's Voice bases its work, opened its doors last Tuesday to over 100 visitors interested in learning more about what's being done to save the lives of the sexually exploited. The church basement in Historic Northeast where Kristy Childs and her staff offer assistance to women is not a dreary place but one of hope.

Childs founded Veronica's Voice over a decade ago to take her own experiences to help women change their lives and recover their selves after being used in prostitution and other sex trades. Since November 2004, over 330 women have come through the center. Since the founding, over 5,000 women in the Kansas City metro area have been in contact with Veronica's Voice. Some come from as far away as Springfield. The nearest similar operation to Veronica's Voice is in Denver, Colo. Outreach is part of what Veronica's Voice does, named for Veronica Neverdusky, a friend of Childs who died at the age of 21 while working as a prostitute, and whose 1993 murder is still unsolved. Last week's open house was all about outreach, to the part of the community who doesn't feel the darkness inside that comes from working in sexual jobs. There was plenty of food, a number of "what you can do," "committees to join" and other hand-outs about sexual exploitation, and committee members themselves

and others to talk to, peer counselors, court advocates, and Judge Joseph Locascio, who works for the Kansas City Municipal Court and has years of experience of watching the revolving door of justice do little to change the fact of prostitution.

A new promotional video played in one front corner of the reception area, while another screen across the room reeled through hundreds of informational slides about trafficking laws and other technical details; for example, even if a woman is really just a girl, laws define her as a willing accomplice in her own statutory rape if she happens to take money for the act. Veronica's Voice has an advocacy committee that works to increase public awareness about such laws and which celebrated a victory a little over a year ago, when President George Bush renewed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and authorized additional funding to deter trafficking, punish traffickers and protect and rehabilitate the victims (estimated at \$361 million through 2007). Among the millions of women trafficked internally within the borders of countries, it is estimated that between 14,500 and 17,500 are trafficked in the United States every year in this \$10 billion industry.

Other committees include development (grant writing, for example), fund raising planning, finance, volunteer, public relations/marketing, and facilities (maintenance). Anyone with an interest in reducing the blight of sexual exploitation from our culture - anyone who has seen women working in their neighborhoods as prostitutes - can find a role in being part of the solution. Much of that starts with education. In the video, Child's talks about how it is a lack of choices that gets women and men involved in prostitution. It is also about self-esteem and what a person bonds to as a young child. If that happens to be sexual trauma instead of love, Child's states, that's what a person attaches herself to; prostitution can become a way to try to gain control over what has happened to someone. There are two survivor women featured in the short video, too, and their statements about Veronica's Voice (and their presence at the open house as healthy women no one would ever "suspect" their ever having been so lost) are priceless facts that are most often missing from usual community discussions about prostitution, drug use or even popular culture. One woman, Tashika, says on the DVD that Veronica's Voice was "basically my beginning." "I was able to have a second chance," she said and that without the guidance and the support of Veronica's Voice, she would not have known where to start. Child's and her staff offer starting points for the non-exploited, speaking engagements and training on a wide variety of

initiatives such as “John School” (addressing the demand), pornography’s relationship to exploitation, how to identify and work with women/girls who have been exploited, and the connection between prostitution, trafficking and exploitation, “connecting the dots.”

To learn more, please see www.veronicasvoice.org or call the STAR Center at 816-483-7101. Veronica’s Voice may also be contacted at starcenter@veronicasvoice.org or through P.O. Box 172472, Kansas City, KS, 66117-1472. For immediate needs, the crisis line for Veronica’s Voice is 816-728-0004.