



**The Organization for Prostitution Survivors (OPS)
A SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCY AND AN
AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE**

Testimony of Noel Gomez, CDP
Co-Founder and Director of Survivor Services
The Organization for Prostitution Survivors (OPS)

U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources

Field Hearing on
Efforts to Prevent and Address Child Sex Trafficking in Washington State
February 19, 2014

Good morning Chairman Reichert and Congressman McDermott. My name is Noel Gomez. I am a survivor of sex trafficking, and after almost 15 years I was able to escape and begin my work of helping others to do the same. I am grateful that you are holding this hearing today to focus on how we can end sex trafficking and protect youth in foster care from becoming victims of this crime.

Since escaping, I have completed my Associate's degree, I received a state certification as a Chemical Dependency Counselor, and I also completed my Bachelor's degree in Social Justice at Antioch University. I have spent several years working with youth involved in the criminal justice system, many of them in the system because of prostitution. I have worked as an advocate for youth that have been and, or are being sexually exploited through prostitution. I have also been facilitating the Sex Industry Workers class for the City of Seattle for over three years. I am the co-founder of The Organization for Prostitution Survivors, an organization I started to help sexually exploited people get the help that they need and assist people in this life to exit if that is what they choose.

The Organization for Prostitution Survivors (OPS) was founded to address the harm of prostitution, and create opportunities for adult women in Seattle to seek supportive services and heal from the gender-based violence. OPS has three focus areas: Survivor Services, Community Education, and Men's Accountability, with all aspects centered on the voices and leadership of survivors.

When I co-founded OPS, I recognized an acute lack of services for adult survivors of prostitution while working at YouthCare’s Bridge program and facilitating the Sex Industry Workers Class for the City of Seattle. This acute lack of services inspired me to create OPS, and I collaborated with Peter Qualliotine and other survivors and allies in Seattle to establish OPS in the spring of 2012.

In the past year, several services for women have been established, including weekly drop-in, survivor-led support group, and Art Workshops. Through peer mentoring and empowerment-based advocacy, OPS walks alongside survivors as they identify their needs. We create a non-judgmental environment where survivors are supported to engage in critical dialogue about their experiences, and begin to heal. OPS is a social service agency, and an agent of social change. Ending the harm of prostitution for future generations of women and girls requires changing the social and cultural norms that support it and all other types of violence against women.

Support Group

We offer services to individuals in or out of the life of prostitution. We do not judge, only support. We honor survivors as the experts on their own experiences and support their unique strengths as individuals. We work alongside them to identify their needs and build a vision for the rest of their lives.

The needs for the first programs of OPS were identified early on. Thus OPS created a support group and a drop-in center as the first of its services. As survivors, we all know what it feels like to feel alone or like there is no one that can really understand how we are feeling. OPS offers a place to seek support and understanding that only other survivors can offer. Everyone needs to feel understood, empowered, and appreciated.

Our experiences may look different but we all share a common journey, and OPS support group offers a safe space to talk about that journey – no matter where you are at. We host our support group each Monday evening, and we also host two “drop-in” days, one on Tuesday evenings and one on Thursday afternoon.

Art Workshops

The therapeutic benefits of making art and creative self-expression are vast and they have been well documented especially where trauma and dissociation are concerned. Some of the benefits of art are that it can help increase self-regulation and healthy coping, increase self-esteem, create a sense of belonging and purpose, increase resilience, self-acceptance, self-efficacy and self-care. Our workshops function on a drop-in basis and include a hot meal, time for socializing, movement, poetry, and visual and experiential art.

The healing practice of art is integrative; addressing the physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of human experience. Our work is relational as it unfolds in a safe all-inclusive space where participants are invited to explore the intrapersonal (artist with self), interpersonal (artist with other artist/participant/facilitator/ally), and transpersonal (artist with and part of the collective/group). Our modality is firmly rooted in empowerment, community-building and unconditional positive-regard and love.

Our goal is to open a gallery space and shop where our artists can exhibit their work, generate income, secure employment and further expand their role and participation in the local artistic and business community if they so choose.

Men's Accountability

When people think about or talk about prostitution, the central issue they consider is often about the “agency” of the person being prostituted and whether prostitution is a free choice or is forced. This focus distracts us from the issue of men's accountability and never addresses the more fundamental question of why so many men believe they are entitled to pay for sex in the first place. Part of the nature of prostitution is that the buyer is paying to not hear about the reality of the prostituted person. If he is paying, he cannot be sure that there is consent to whatever sexual activity he is seeking. As survivors, we know that prostituted people do not want to have sex with buyers. That is why we call them “tricks”. Women and children are prostituted for many reasons. Rarely is prostitution “freely chosen” by those who are prostituted. Men, however, possess the power and privilege to choose whether they engage in prostitution or not. OPS encourages men to be allies to women and children and to reject identifying with systems of dominance.

I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to testify about this important topic, and for the work this committee is doing to prevent youth from becoming victims of sex trafficking.

This completes my testimony today, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.