

Oasis is doorway to recovery for prostitutes

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Anne turned 45 last month. She's amazed she made it.

Before dawn on an icy February morning last year, Anne was trolling for business on the corner of Kensington Avenue and Westmoreland Street. She had been on a crack bender for weeks and needed money.

A woman in a car pulled up. "Do you ever do it with girls?" the stranger asked.

Whatever, Anne thought, and slid into the passenger seat. She figured she could easily rip off the woman, then get the hell out of the car.

As the stranger turned down an alley, Anne glanced in the rearview mirror. A van pulled up behind them. Two men got out.

Anne bolted, but the cops outran her.

Busted for prostitution for perhaps the 10th time in as many years, Anne sat in a police van for three hours as the undercover team picked up two other women. The temperature outside was 17 and dropping. All she had was a hoodie. She hadn't slept a full night in weeks. She was hungry, she was tired, she was dirty, she was cold.

"I was on my knees thinking, 'Dear God, I have to stop.' "

But how?

The old stone house is big and solid. Only the women who live or work there know its location. It's spacious enough to accommodate a large family, with a warren of bedrooms, a cozy living room, and a separate dining room whose long table could seat a dozen.

How it became a safe house for prostitutes - the first of its kind in Philadelphia - is a story of providence.

It begins about six years ago, with Mary DeFusco, a veteran public defender, being pestered by a friend to go along to a meeting about human trafficking. Increasing numbers of foreign women were being smuggled into the country, Philadelphia included, and pressured or forced into the sex trade.

But on that particular topic, DeFusco had a major chip on her shoulder. In her years as a lawyer helping poor women navigate the legal system, she saw thousands of prostitution cases come across her desk. Why, she would argue, was a trafficked woman considered a victim and offered help - but an American caught up in the same mess considered a criminal and locked up?

DeFusco believed that a woman from Frankford working the streets of Kensington was just as trapped as one from Mexico working in a brothel



Sister Kathleen Coll (from left), Mary DeFusco, Sister Teresita Hinnegan, and Sister... (MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer)

in Norristown. Still, on that day in late 2006, DeFusco went with Marissa Boyer Bluestine, at the time also a public defender, to a meeting of the Philadelphia Anti-Trafficking Coalition, which had come together over the problem five years earlier.

More than two dozen people - police officers, trafficking experts, federal immigration officers, women from religious orders, representatives of social-service agencies - sat around a huge conference table in the Center City offices of Catholic Social Services. As the session dragged on, attention shifted to an expert with the Polaris Project, an advocacy group in Washington for the victims of trafficking. She had this observation: "Whether you cross a foreign border or not, many women standing on the streets were forced into prostitution."

es! DeFusco said to herself. She gets it.

DeFusco spoke up. She told the others that there was an urgent need in Philadelphia to help those American women, too. To help them not just beat addictions, but find a safe place to stay to begin their recoveries.

"Does anyone here have housing?" she asked.

Silence.

DeFusco looked around the table. So much for that.

As the meeting broke up, a slight, gray-haired woman approached DeFusco and said, "I want to get out there and help, and you seem to know what's happening to women.

"Can we talk?"

Sister Teresita Hinnegan was impatient. She had been going to coalition meetings for years. "Everyone was talking about it," she said, "and no one was doing anything."

She asked two of her friends from the group - Sisters Terry Shields and Kathleen Coll - to meet with DeFusco and Bluestine.

From different starting points, the five women had come to the same place.

Sister Teresita, 84, had spent a lifetime helping women in need. Joining the Medical Mission Sisters in 1948, she delivered babies as a nurse midwife in rural Bangladesh. Back home in Philadelphia after 12 years, she earned a graduate degree and, for two decades, lectured at the University of Pennsylvania on welfare and the delivery of health care to the poor.

DeFusco told the others she was tired of the revolving door, of women coming out of jail for treatment, returning to the streets, then ending up back in jail.

Prostitution, they agreed, was not the sanitized *Pretty Woman* of Hollywood. "I have yet to talk to a client who has not been sexually abused as a child," said Bluestine, who now works for the Pennsylvania Innocence Project to exonerate people of crimes they did not commit. "That creates a particular victimization that is profound."

For so many, drugs were a way to numb the trauma of the past, Bluestine said.

If there were a safe house where they could stay for a year, they could work on recovery on multiple levels, not only drug and alcohol rehabilitation, but therapy for emotional and sexual abuse, as well as job training and educational help.

All that was needed was the building.

Through a tip, Sister Teresita heard that another religious order was downsizing its presence in Philadelphia and might have a property to unload. But when she called to inquire, her contact was too busy to talk.

Early the next morning, however, the woman called back. She told Sister Teresita that she hadn't been able to sleep, that she had been wrong to rebuff her. Indeed, her order did have a house on a quiet street, and it could be had for a dollar.

Sister Teresita and the others spent a year working on the old house, which needed tens of thousands of dollars in repairs and upgrades. They raised money from religious orders and received a small federal grant, as well as donations from individuals. They bought secondhand furniture from thrift stores and outfitted bedrooms with donated sheets and curtains.

In March 2009, the house was ready. They named it Dawn's Place (<http://www.ahomefordawn.org>), after a prostitute who had been murdered in Camden a few years before.

From the start, the safe house was intended to shelter both American and foreign women, and so far, the mix has indeed been half and half.

Among the first group of residents were five women from Mexico and Ecuador. All had worked at a brothel in Norristown that became linked to a major trafficking bust.

In that case from 2010, four illegal immigrants ran a prostitution ring that included two brothels in South Philadelphia. Over a span of six months, the pimps had more than 60 Hispanic women, who had been smuggled across the border, working for them. They kept track of clients with tickets and punch cards. The brothels also ran a takeout service where women were "delivered" to customers. After the case broke, one of the women ended up at Dawn's Place.

Federal agents who work on trafficking investigations say they need Dawn's Place. "It's very important to have a place where victims feel secure and safe," said John Kelleghan, head of Department of Homeland Security investigations in Philadelphia.

Cases usually start with a tip, but cannot be built without the cooperation of victims. "They've been through a traumatic event in their lives," he said. Dawn's Place "certainly gets them back and stabilizes them to a point where we not only work with

them to build a case, but they can get their lives back on track," including staying in the States.

Since opening, Dawn's Place has housed 30 women from as near as Kensington and as far as Poland. One Mexican teen had been sold into prostitution by her parents at age 11.

Not all of the foreign women who are placed at Dawn's Place were working in the sex trade.

One group was trafficked into the country to work as indentured housekeepers. Many of the Americans were referred to Dawn's Place by the courts. Some heard about the program in jail. Last year, 816 women were arrested for prostitution in Philadelphia. Foreign women, meanwhile, were steered there by federal officials with Homeland Security, the FBI, and the State Department.

The safe house is their home. By day, those trying to kick addictions go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings or outpatient clinics for treatment. Those who need to heal emotionally meet with therapists. Women can enroll in GED classes or take job-training courses in the community.

At night, they return home to cook meals together, celebrating birthdays with special dinners.

"Sometimes, we all just sit around the table, the nuns and the prostitutes," said Sister Terry Shields, of the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary. "We're all women. This is Gospel."

One of the residents was a 54-year-old veteran of the streets of Kensington, who kicked her drug

addiction and reunited with her parents after a 30-year estrangement.

Two Southeast Asian women recently got hotel jobs and plan to soon move into their own apartment.

But not everyone has a happily-ever-after ending. Some have relapsed to drugs and prostitution.

"That could be seen as failure," Sister Teresita said. "But even for those who are not ready and return to the streets, we feel they have had that time with us, and it's another step toward them finding themselves and becoming whole again."

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Anne heard about Dawn's Place while in jail at the Riverside Correctional Institution.

On that cold February morning in 2011, she was almost grateful to get arrested. "I was out of my mind by then, smoking like crazy," she explained, taking a break from reading a novel in the backyard of Dawn's Place.

Anne's descent into drugs and prostitution was swift and absolute. A dropout at 16, she grew up in a fatherless home with four brothers and a sister, and a mother who headed every day from work to the local taproom. Anne had a daughter at 19 and married.

At 32, two things happened that sent her life into a tailspin. She learned that a younger brother had molested her 13-year-old daughter. Around the same time, she discovered her husband was cheating on her.

"I kind of lost it," she says now.

"Try this, it will help," a relative told her, handing her a crack pipe.

It was love at first hit. "It was the only thing that took me out of myself," Anne recalled.

She so neglected her daughter that she reported herself to the Department of Human Services; the girl was sent to live with her father in Pittsburgh.

Anne needed money for her habit, and the streets of Kensington became her ATM. For a decade, she flopped wherever she could - a friend's sofa, crack houses, a hotel room if a trick could pay. Her daughter would come back to Philadelphia to look for her, leaving notes with hookers and dealers. Anne ignored the messages.

When she hit bottom after the last arrest, Mary DeFusco, the public defender, told her about Dawn's Place. Anne got released to Interim House, a short-term inpatient drug-treatment center, and after that moved to Dawn's Place.

Even though many of the staff and volunteers are from religious orders, there is no proselytizing at Dawn's Place. But Anne's days are regimented. Like all the residents, she taps into services offered by groups on the outside. She goes to Narcotics Anonymous meetings and counseling, while also taking GED classes. She moves out in July and will work as a peer counselor for a recovery house.

Clean for 14 months, Anne has reconnected with her daughter and has no desire to return to Kensington, or all that it represents.

DeFusco recently gave her a big color copy of a mug shot from her last arrest. Her face was gaunt, her eyes

glazed. "When I look at that face, I see no hope," Anne said. "Now, I have so many different dreams."

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