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"I Assumed Chicago Would Be In the Forefront": Comments on the Movement to End Prostitution with Survivor-Leader Brenda Myers-Powell

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"I Assumed Chicago Would Be In the Forefront": Comments on the Movement to End Prostitution with Survivor-Leader Brenda Myers-Powell

Abstract

For many years in the 2000's, researcher Jody Raphael, teamed with prostitution-survivor Brenda Myers-Powell, undertook a myriad of speaking engagements in the Chicago metropolitan area, intended to raise awareness of the violence and coercion in the sex trade industry. Ten years ago, they were asked to make a video of their presentation. Recently, *Dignity* editors came across the video and asked for an update on the conversation. This piece is the result.

Keywords

Chicago, prostitution, interview, survivor-leader, movement, violence, sex trade

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Streaming Media

<https://youtu.be/cShN8G0nuPo>

**“I ASSUMED CHICAGO WOULD BE IN THE FOREFRONT”:
COMMENTS ON THE MOVEMENT TO END PROSTITUTION WITH
SURVIVOR-LEADER BRENDA MYERS-POWELL**

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ABSTRACT

For many years in the 2000’s, researcher Jody Raphael, teamed with prostitution-survivor Brenda Myers-Powell, undertook a myriad of speaking engagements in the Chicago metropolitan area, intended to raise awareness of the violence and coercion in the sex trade industry. Ten years ago, they were asked to make a video of their presentation. Recently, *Dignity* editors came across the video and asked for an update on the conversation. This piece is the result.

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In 2010, I interviewed Brenda Myers-Powell, a survivor-leader and co-founder of The Dreamcatcher Foundation, one of Chicago’s leading NGOs dedicated to confronting human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Brenda survived 25 years in prostitution, an experience rooted in childhood sexual abuse and sex trafficking. She was exploited in a variety of sex trade venues. As a result, she also suffered many years of drug and alcohol addiction.

When I received funding to conduct research on prostitution in Chicago, I recruited survivors to assist with the research. I first met Brenda when a fellow survivor, Olivia (heroine of my book, *Listening to Olivia*, 2004) recruited her to serve as a peer researcher, locating and talking to women in the Chicago sex trade. Brenda’s own story involved kidnapping, a near fatal accident, and a miraculous escape. But it also demonstrates how prostitution and “the Life”—as those who’ve been there call it—is manipulated to appeal to girls and young women, many of them sexually abused as children from poor urban neighborhoods.

I was delighted that a foundation grant enabled me to pay the surveyors—all prostitution survivors—well for their work. Brenda was the best of the surveyors involved in the research project. Besides providing information for all the questions, she added direct quotes from the interviewees, often adding insights that spilled out onto the back pages of the survey instrument. At the time, Brenda’s main job was working as a telephone bill collector. The result of that research study was the 2002 report, “Sisters Speak Out,” which demonstrated the extent and

frequency of violence from sex buyers and pimps in both indoor and outdoor prostitution venues.

Because of Brenda's prowess as a researcher, I selected Brenda as the lead researcher for our next research study, "Domestic Sex Trafficking of Chicago Women and Girls" (2008). The 2008 study involved interviewing 102 girls and women in the sex trade industry, all Chicago natives, who were under pimp control at the time of the interview.

Later, Brenda alone located and interviewed 25 ex-pimps for the report "From Victims to Victimizers" (2010).

The findings of these research studies were breaking news in the Chicago region, because many had the misconception that sex trafficking only happened to girls and women from foreign countries coming to our shores. The study results engendered widespread interest. As a result, I received multiple invitations to speak about our research, and I made sure Brenda was not only invited, but always received a generous honorarium from program sponsors.

At our joint speaking gigs, I chose a program format that enabled Brenda to do most of the talking, but allowed me to help steer the discussion, depending on the venue. Between 2008 and 2010 we had countless engagements, and as attendees at the programs followed up with invitations to address their groups or schools, the number of speaking engagements snowballed. We had many fascinating experiences. At one we met a police officer, who remembered Brenda from the streets and talked of his fruitless attempts to help her. Brenda recalled her younger self and the single-mindedness with which she pursued her "vocation."

At another community meeting held in a fairly affluent western Chicago suburb, we encountered the police chief, who was blown away with shock by Brenda's story. He suspected sex trafficking was occurring in his town because it had the only modern hotels in the entire area. I loved watching Brenda talk with the police chief after the program one-on-one, and, if I remember correctly, she was invited to come to train his police officers.

At another presentation we were partnered with a survivor who was also from the west side of Chicago. I was absolutely astonished when she said that as a young girl she saw beautiful Brenda on the street and wanted to be just like her; she said that facilitated her entry into the sex trade. Even today, Brenda is proud of having been so glamorous and beautiful. As she recalled in the interview, her goal was to be a "shiny girl." Even her grandmother encouraged her to get money from those with whom she had sex. Prostitution was all around her, a trap that kept Brenda in the milieu for far too many years.

Eventually an attendee at one of the programs asked whether we would be willing to film the interview. I believe this was for classroom use by a consortium of social work schools in Illinois. We received a DVD of the taped interview but neither Brenda nor I looked at it, since we knew what was on it by heart.

Meanwhile, Brenda had obtained a job with the Cook County Sheriff's Office where she provided programming for women in the Cook County jail and accompanied Vice Unit officers on stings, to provide counseling and assistance to women and girls in the commercial sex industry. Now she runs a street outreach program through the organization she founded, The Dreamcatcher Foundation.

Long before we filmed the interview, Brenda and I had become friends. Today we keep up with one another, periodically telephoning, sharing things from our lives, and, from time-to-time, we get together for lunch. Brenda reminds me, now, that when we filmed this 2010 interview, we were totally exhilarated. "We were optimistic," she explains. We were in great demand for our knowledge and experiences, and individuals and entities starting doing things as a result.

There were some changes that were improvements for women in prostitution. The Illinois legislature agreed to eliminate felony upgrades for individuals charged with prostitution-related offenses. State reforms meant that minors under the age of 18 could no longer be prosecuted for prostitution offenses. Court diversionary programs were established in Cook County's misdemeanor courts for prostitution defendants. The county state's attorney's office established a human trafficking unit, headed by an experienced expert in violent and white-collar crime, which is still in place. Sheriff Tom Dart of Cook County, began his campaign to end demand, by arresting customers and charging them with new, hefty county administrative fines. Dart also began his often derided, but ultimately successful, campaign against Craigslist and Backpage.

I recently had the opportunity to watch a video of the conversation Brenda and I had nine years ago. (See the interview accompanying this article.) I called Brenda and we talked for a long time about whether our attitudes have changed regarding the struggle to eliminate sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Today I find Brenda is justifiably angry. She believes "we should have moved on by now." For quite a few years, she explains, nothing new in the anti-prostitution movement has occurred. There are still no services for survivors. There are few "end demand" activities holding customers accountable, except for Sheriff Dart's small effort; the Chicago police department has not embraced the strategy.

"Given the earlier push, I assumed Chicago would be in the forefront, but we aren't anymore," Brenda tells me.

I have to agree. And even more frustrating, now we hear voices urging total decriminalization of systems of prostitution including pimping and sex buying. Full decriminalization legislative initiatives have been introduced in several states, including Hawaii, District of Columbia, New Hampshire, New York, and Rhode Island. It is also unnerving that media coverage of an essential 2018 law banning sex trafficking online, and allowing civil remedies for victims, the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act-Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act provided decriminalization advocates with maximum face time, hardly mentioning the necessity of curbing sex trafficking.

Meanwhile, media coverage of public figures caught in prostitution stings (for example, Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots), invariably gives voice to individuals opining that prostitution is a victimless crime that should be erased from the books. Mentioning the prospect of decriminalization brings a strong response from Brenda. There is no dichotomy between prostitution and trafficking, she explains, because there is no such thing as a woman or girl in the industry who is independent. Everyone takes a cut of money she supposedly makes, at least 50% and often more. If there is no boyfriend, pimp, or husband in the picture (most common scenarios), there is an escort agency owner/manager, or the strip club owner, with coercive rules and regulations and control over any earnings.

“What are we thinking?” asks Brenda. “If this is legalized, individuals in the sex trade will be targets with no protection whatsoever from pimps, managers, and customers.” I respond that it seems that every decade we have to start over and propagate the same message.

“Awareness, awareness,” exclaims Brenda. “When are we going to actually do something?”

For Brenda, “doing something” means ending demand. Without demand from buyers, there would be no sex trafficking, and no coercion and violence from all the men involved. For this reason, she supports efforts to make prostitution unacceptable, and to hold customers accountable for buying the bodies of girls and women in prostitution. Focusing on the victims misses the point, she says.

Brenda angrily concluded: “No one is listening to survivors now.” Unfortunately, her story and her message are as vital today as they were nine years ago.

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