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'Hannah Project' Seeks To Break Prostitution Cycle

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by **Heather Graf**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - A new initiative in Davidson County is working to get some answers and some solutions to prostitution.

"The Hannah Project" was started by Assistant District Attorney Antoinette Welch. It's a class for women living a life of prostitution, and it seeks to break the cycle.

"This is not a happy group of women," said Welch. "These are women that are sad and broken and they need someone to treat them with kindness and give them an opportunity to get out if they want."

During the four-hour class, the women learn about sexually transmitted diseases; they're each given an HIV test; and they're offered free counseling from the Nashville sexual assault center.

Welch also hopes to open their eyes to the dangers of working the streets.

"They were not realizing the danger they were

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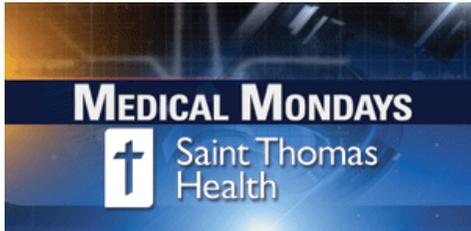
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putting themselves in, or the risk they were at," she said. "Whether it was for disease, assault, or even homicide."

To do that, she shares real-life stories and graphic photos of prostitutes who were seriously injured, and even killed on the streets of Nashville.

One example is Sarah Hulbert. The 25-year-old was shot to death in 2007 by Bruce Mendenhall, a trucker who preyed on prostitutes.

"Honestly, I've been in situation where guys have pulled guns on me and I didn't think I was going to make it out of it," said Gypsy Poole, who attended the class on Friday. "I do not want to live that life anymore."

Another participant said it's tough to overcome the stereotypes associated with prostitution, but said The Hannah Project gives her hope.

"I get tired of the way men look at me, because they look at me as if I'm tonight's dinner, tomorrow's breakfast, and they don't look at me as a person," said Kathy Altaji. "But you know what, I don't have to tolerate that."

Welch said statements like that are proof enough, the program is working.

"It's about [people saying] let me educate you, let me show you help and a way out if you want it," she said. "I've had many of them tell me they are so shocked we're being so kind to them."

The class, oftentimes, is court-ordered, and if a woman charged with prostitution attends, her charges can be dismissed.

If they don't show up, though, it's mandatory jail time.

Welch started "The Hannah Project" about seven months ago, and about 25 to 30 women usually show up to each class.

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