



Aol. THE LATEST NEWS, VIDEOS, ENTERTAINMENT & MUCH MORE STAY UP TO DATE

April 19, 2012

HUFF POST **SAN FRANCISCO**  
 THE INTERNET NEWSPAPER: NEWS BLOGS VIDEO COMMUNITY

Edition: **U.S.**

- [CA Canada](#)
  - [Québec](#)
- [FR France](#)
- [US United States](#)
- [UK United Kingdom](#)

Like 5k Follow

Search The Huffington

THE BLOG

Featuring fresh takes and real-time analysis from HuffPost's signature lineup of contributors  
 Hot on the Blog

[Russell Simmons](#)[Evan Shapiro](#)[Sen. Bernie Sanders](#)[Lilly Ledbetter](#)

- Login with Facebook to see what your friends are reading
- [Enable Social Reading](#)
- i

**[Vanessa Pinto](#)**

Blogger, Fleur De Lis SF

GET UPDATES FROM Vanessa Pinto

[Like](#)

21

**Confessions of Callgirls, Dishing the Dirt on Prostitution**

Posted: 04/11/2012 5:28 pm

React



"Fifty bucks grandpa, and for 75 the misses can watch." -- If you are a film buff, you will recognize that line from *Pretty Woman*. *Pretty Woman* is sadly what too many people think of when they think of prostitutes; some tragic fish net wearing woman who turned to street walking out of desperation. No matter how far back we go in history, sex as a means of work has always existed. I wanted to get a real look at prostitution, so I contacted Patricia West, the Director of SWOP (Sex Workers Outreach Project) [Bay Area chapter](#). West and her colleagues were kind enough to let me infiltrate one of their meetings and speak candidly on what it's like to be a sex worker.

When I entered the room, I saw five very average looking women. Women you would see at the grocery store or the gym. Their names are Kitty Stryker, Jenna Cohn, Ryan Basilleux\*, Shannon Williams, and Patricia West. [SWOP-USA](#) is a national social justice network dedicated to the fundamental human rights of sex workers and their communities, focusing on ending violence and stigma through education and advocacy.



Shannon Williams on the right at a SWOP rally.

SWOP also creates a safe space for sex workers to come together and build community. "I was always very isolated in the work that I did and wasn't able to find a true sense of family in the sex-worker community. I walked in the shadows and lived a double life," says Cohn. SWOP hosts skill shares and workshops ranging from taxes, self-defense, and clothing swaps.

Basilleux came to Portland from Virginia where she was a sex worker. She recently became part of the group that is creating [SWOP Portland](#). It was after she was arrested, she realized an unmet need for a community could mean the difference between life and death for some people and began working with the SWOP East chapter and creating a support group for sex workers she knew in Virginia.

"I am and was a social justice activist for queer issues and sexual violence. After my arrest, I was outed on my college campus, where I had a few clients. I had no support, and I was also in the Women's Studies department, so I had issues with some professors who were sex worker phobic, believing all sex workers were oppressed and victims anyway, so I didn't have any safe space there either," explains Basilleux.



Community is an extremely important thing for sex workers. Sex workers face challenges most people do not. How many people do you know who can be arrested simply for going to work? Being arrested is a very real fear for all of these ladies. Three out of five of them have already been arrested for prostitution. SWOP Bay Area came to the aid of Williams after she got [arrested](#). Williams was arrested for prostitution when she was a teacher at Berkeley High School. Her arrest became a national news story and at the press conference SWOP rallied around her in order to help her with her legal battle.

Because prostitution is criminalized, the women of SWOP have experienced police abuse throughout their careers. Basilleux shared what happened when she was arrested: "I was 21, and I was arrested by a police officer in Richmond, Va. The police officer brutalized me and said if I performed sexual favors, they wouldn't take me in and press charges. I was physically and legally coerced by this really imposing, tall, physically strong guy in a uniform. I was physically and sexually assaulted, and then processed through the system. Having that non-consensual experience with a law enforcement officer was really traumatizing and triggering. There was no accountability for me to pursue it, and that was so disempowering. I could advocate for myself, but there was just no way of seeking justice -- not even alternative justice," explains Basilleux.

Being violated by the very people who are paid to protect you is at times a reality for most of these women. After Basilleux shared, Williams then told us how she had been raped by a police officer. "I was raped by a cop. He even said, 'Don't even bother going to the police, because they don't give a fuck. You're a prostitute and nobody cares what I am going to do to you.' He was right. I couldn't go

to the police and say that he had raped me. I felt like I couldn't tell anybody, and I didn't tell anybody for many years," says Williams. Statistically, it seems there is no accountability for the crimes that take place against sex workers due to the laws that exist today.



The reason SWOP wants prostitution decriminalized versus legalized is for that very reason. Decriminalization is the removal of the laws against prostitution. Legalization is a group of laws regulating prostitution, like what they have in Nevada. Only a few hundred women are able to work legally within the highly regulated system.

"If sex work was decriminalized and we were no longer seen as criminals, the police would start to prosecute people for beating us, raping us, and stealing from us. I don't trust the government to legalize sex work, because in places where it is legalized people are still working illegally. Legalization with all these regulations really wouldn't solve anything," says Williams.

The anti-trafficking movement concerns SWOP, because they feel it is also being used as an anti-prostitution movement. All of these women agree that sex-trafficking of any kind is horrific, but there is a difference between [consent and coercion](#). None of these women are coerced to be sex workers. There is no pimp forcing them to work or a drug habit to feed. These are adults who make a conscious, informed decision to run their own business. Sex work is a business, and these women work for themselves. So with all of the hardships they face by society, I wanted to know what they enjoy about being sex workers.

"I enjoy the sense of connection; I work with a lot of people who have disabilities, so I really enjoy helping people who have many forms of disability figure out how to be sexual. I love helping women with sexually traumatic backgrounds and teach them how to be sexual again," says Stryker.

Cohn loves the independence and freedom that comes with being a sex worker. She runs her own business, chooses her clients carefully, and enjoys her job. Basilleux is a sex worker because: "It gave me space to redefine my sexuality and articulate my desire. I do a lot of healing work and help people get through traumatic experiences through touch" says Basilleux.



Williams found sex work when she was trying to go to school, working full-time, and raising a 19-month-old baby. What she found after doing it was how much she enjoyed it. She likes the flexible hours and being her own boss. She also enjoys the freedom it gives her as a mother. If her kids are sick or need something, she can take the day off. "I like it from a business stand point, but I also really love the work. Sex is fun, pleasure, and joy. I get to give my clients these fun and joyful experiences, and I feel really good about the service I provide," explains Williams.

West found her way into prostitution after studying its history in college. She left Texas and moved to San Francisco in order to have this career. "I found that sex work was not only totally liberating, interesting, and exciting, but I was also growing so much from the work. I was learning about myself, and I was learning about how to create healthy boundaries with people when they are at their most vulnerable. My sex work is about me, a powerful sexual female being that owns her sexuality and is making decisions about it. It's my body, my choice," says West.

It's ironic that in a society where everybody is looking for a hand out these women are simply fighting for the chance to work. Sex workers are everywhere folks, but in most places they are hidden. There is a reason that prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. Everyone has a relationship to sex and they do not always have a way to express it. We pay for every other service known to man, why shouldn't sex be added to that list?

The next time you find yourself chuckling at a dead hooker joke, realize that some jokes are based on reality and simply not funny. Those stereotypes are what feed into the violence that occurs every day against these women. Sex workers are discriminated against, targeted, and brutalized because it is very easy to victimize them. Sex workers have no recourse of action to protect themselves. SWOP is trying to change that.

Sex workers are not what they are portrayed to be. They are PTA moms at schools; they are students, hairdressers, and they are all around us, terrified that someone will find out. Too many people and entities discount sex workers and don't even see them as people. If you are a sex worker, please know that you are not [alone](#). SWOP can be opened anywhere in the US. If you are interested in opening a chapter or are simply looking for community, please contact [SWOP](#).



*\*Ryan Basilleux's name has been changed for the purpose of this post.*

Follow Vanessa Pinto on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/fleurdelissf](http://www.twitter.com/fleurdelissf)

#### Sponsored Links



#### 60-Year-Old Mom Looks 27

TODAY ONLY: Mom Reveals Free Wrinkle Trick That Has Angered Doctors!  
[ConsumerLifestyles.org](http://ConsumerLifestyles.org)



#### Prior to a Heart Attack...

Your Body Will Warn You With These 4 Signs Your Heart is About to Stop  
[www.newsmax.com](http://www.newsmax.com)



#### "African Fruit Burns Fat"

Learn How This Strange 62-Cent Exotic Fruit Is Making Americans Skinny  
[HealthScienceMag.com/AfricanMango](http://HealthScienceMag.com/AfricanMango)

#### FTTN Black Gold Rush!

A Boom in Domestic Oil Exploration Fuels Stock, Buy Your Shares Today!  
[www.FirstTitanEnergy.com](http://www.FirstTitanEnergy.com)

[Buy a link here](#)