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CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE

Raising Awareness of Sex Trafficking, One Lecture at a Time

By JAMES WARREN
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Chicago just hosted an infuriatingly insightful show and tell on sex trafficking, with a West Side pimp providing the sordid show and a prominent legal scholar providing the tell.



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It happened last week as Catharine MacKinnon packed a University of Chicago Law School auditorium for a lecture on "Trafficking, Prostitution and Inequality" just as a federal courtroom revealed the thankfully short run of United States of America v. Datquinn Sawyer, a k a "Daddy," "P," "P Child," "Pharo," "Pimpin' P" and "Rabbit."

When I mentioned this later, Ms. MacKinnon wasn't aware of the coincidence. It didn't matter. Worldwide, she's encountered many people like Mr. Sawyer — who was convicted Monday of running a prostitution ring — and their mostly female victims.

"The underlying allegations fit perfectly into the world I study and engage," she told me. "Going after this pimp is exactly what should be done, and the facts are standard," she added, alluding to Mr. Sawyer's violent ways.

Ms. MacKinnon is a charismatic, even intrepid, scholar and feminist activist who helped pioneer the legal claim for sexual harassment. She serves as special gender adviser to the International Criminal Court, she helped win a case establishing the rape of Bosnian women by Serbs as an act of genocide, and she is one of the most-cited legal scholars in the English language, said Michael Schill, the law school dean.

"She is one of the most dynamic, creative and influential legal thinkers of the past 30 years, having had extraordinary influence raising consciousness about international human rights violations in the realms of rape, prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse," said Geoffrey Stone, a prominent University of Chicago law professor.

Richard Epstein, a colleague of Professor Stone with a libertarian and contrarian bent, is more qualified: "She is an angry feminist with a strong sense of right and wrong. In some

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work this manifests itself in libertarian directions by seeking out the perpetrators of mass violence against women. In other cases she is a strong egalitarian in favor of equal wage policies and the like. Always passionate, sometimes informed.”

The lecture was sponsored by the university’s Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality. Ms. MacKinnon, who once taught at the university, had rock star trappings and she did not disappoint. Now at the University of Michigan, she mixed compelling analyses with dark-suited elegance and the air of a tall and graying Katharine Hepburn.

She eviscerated distinctions we tend to make — between adult and child prostitution and forced versus voluntary labor, for example. She pilloried some academics’ notion of prostitutes as “sex workers” who act voluntarily and gain a certain liberation, even sexual equality, by being compensated.

Legalization only accelerates illegal prostitution, she said, and most prostitutes never exit poverty. Such exploitation was clear in the Sawyer trial, where David Peilet, a defense lawyer with a hopeless task, did not contest the core allegations.

Testimony showed that nine females who worked for Mr. Sawyer were often homeless and destitute; one was a chronic runaway with bipolar disorder. He impregnated three of the mostly underage girls. They often worked along Cicero Avenue, beside railroad tracks, in cars and alleys, and occasionally in hotels, including a W.

He beat them with a studded belt, his fists, a hammer and the heel of a shoe. In her lecture, Ms. MacKinnon spoke of a diabolically effective strategy by which pimps enforce dependence by “distancing the body and psyche” through brute force and drug addiction.

Mr. Sawyer took in from \$100 to \$1,000 from each one daily and kept them impoverished, as detailed by Michelle Nasser and Marc Krickbaum, the prosecutors. If they did well, he might let them sleep in a bed with him. Otherwise, it was on a couch or the floor of a small apartment.

Like many Americans, I associate sex trafficking with faraway lands.

“Trafficking happens here and men are spending tiny sums of money, relative to their incomes, to get sexual profits and pleasure out of people who would not be there were it not for child sexual abuse, domestic violence and destitution,” said Kaethe Morris Hoffer, legal director of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

When I spoke with the prosecutors after the quick verdict, I wondered about Mr. Sawyer’s victims.

The government is trying to help them. Yet, as Ms. Nasser said with fittingly tragic understatement, “It messes them up for a long time.”

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