

Management Note

New Strategies for an Old Profession: A Court and a Community Combat a Streetwalking Epidemic

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Cleopatra

After several years away from “the life,” Cleopatra hits the street again. But things aren’t like they used to be. The corners that once bustled with prostitutes in the middle of the night are now mostly deserted—except for the police, who seem to drive by every few minutes in their white-and-blue patrol cars. In the early 1990s, cops were scarce, and customers were virtually lining up for Cleopatra’s services. She remembers taking home \$1,500 to \$2,000 a night and says she once made enough in a month to buy her pimp a new BMW.*

These days when the occasional customer comes along, he no longer pays Cleopatra’s asking price but haggles her down by about half. She’s lucky if she breaks \$500 in a night. “It’s really, really hard. It’s changed a lot. They just don’t want to spend the money,” she says, referring to her clients, “because they figure with all the police, and the fact we’re desperate, they can really try to get over.”

On a particularly slow night, Cleopatra, dressed in a skin-tight, low-cut leopard-print leotard, visits two “strolls” that three years ago were guaranteed moneymakers: 29th Street and 11th Avenue and 44th Street and 8th Avenue, but there’s no action—no customers, no prostitutes. Finally, a “john” comes along—but a short while later a cop appears and arrests her. “I caught one date and they arrested me. They said that I was sticking out like a sore thumb, so they took me in.”

Prostitution in Times Square

Not too long ago, Times Square and its surrounding neighborhoods were synonymous with porn theaters, adult bookstores, and prostitutes on well-trafficked corners. In parts of nearby Clinton and Chelsea, women in high heels and almost nothing else could be seen during morning rush hour brazenly flashing potential customers in passing cars.

* Interviews with prostitutes, unless otherwise noted, were conducted by Robert Weidner, a research associate at the Midtown Community Court.

While many people think of prostitution as a victimless crime, for the people who lived and worked in the area it was anything but. Neighborhood residents were afraid to let their children play outside not only because of the scantily clad women and their barely concealed sexual activity, but also because of the crack vials, used needles, and discarded condoms they left behind. "If you have street prostitutes, you also have drug dealers and knives. We literally feared for our lives," said Barbara Feldt, a Clinton resident who in 1990 founded a citizens group to fight prostitution. Feldt said the sandbox in a child's playground across from where she lived was often filled with garbage, including needles and human waste. For Chuck Spence, president of the West 44th Street Block Association, the noise was one of the most memorable features of the prostitutes' occupying army. "We would have dozens of prostitutes on a single block. There was shouting and screaming at all hours and the traffic was nonstop," Spence recalled.

Now, ten years later, the situation is quite different. As Cleopatra's story illustrates, prostitution is now the exception rather than the rule, and the communities of Midtown Manhattan are no longer at the epicenter of what once seemed to be a losing battle against prostitution and petty crime. Prostitution has not vanished completely, of course, but the number of women who once solicited johns in plain view has dropped dramatically—a fact confirmed by police, community members, and researchers. And even prostitutes themselves agree that the environment that once allowed prostitution to flourish—the porn theaters, the neighborhood's seedy appearance, lax police enforcement, and, in the event of an arrest, virtually no punishment—is a thing of the past. "There's definitely been a marked reduction in prostitution," Spence confirmed in 1999. "We now have virtually a prostitution-free environment. . . . It's a much more civil place to live in."

Arrest numbers indicate that displacement of prostitution to other parts of the city has been minimal. So where have the prostitutes gone? Many have gone "underground"—into brothels or escort services. Rather than walk the streets, some now advertise their services on the Internet. The few prostitutes who still take to the streets are a different breed—usually younger and less experienced, without the long criminal histories of veterans like Cleopatra. They also try to blend in with the crowd, abandoning bikini tops and short shorts for sweatpants and jeans. These changes, while they do not "solve" the problem of prostitution, have made it less visible and to a significant degree less disturbing to community members.

This article explains the factors that brought about this remarkable transformation. The article focuses in particular on the role of the Midtown Community Court, a judicial experiment launched in 1993 to respond more effectively to low-level offenses, such as shoplifting, small-time drug dealing, and, of course, prostitution.

It is important to note, however, that the Midtown Community Court has not worked in a vacuum. As the court's name suggests, "community" plays an important role both inside and outside the courthouse. Activist citizens helped draw attention to the problem of prostitution in the Midtown area and encouraged the police and court system to do something about it. The business community has also played a prominent role by investing in the revival of Times Square and bringing in everything from new restaurants to new office towers. City government contributed by creating new zoning rules designed

to make it harder for porn theaters to operate in residential neighborhoods. And the police, by applying continual law enforcement pressure, helped send the message that prostitution would no longer be tolerated.

The Midtown community's successful assault on street prostitution offers lessons to anyone trying to fight prostitution in their own neighborhood. Perhaps the biggest lesson from the Midtown experience is that there is no one-shot cure for prostitution. What does exist, however, is the potential for an entire community, through a series of unified initiatives, to send a message that street prostitution will simply not be tolerated. And if that message is sent consistently and in a way that the prostitutes themselves can hear it, prostitution itself will adapt—it will move off the streets, become less visible, and allow community stakeholders to reclaim their neighborhood.

It is hoped that other jurisdictions will find in the following pages both practical advice for dealing with street prostitution and an encouraging message: that prostitution may be the world's oldest profession, but that doesn't mean citizens, communities, and governments cannot, with a concerted and well-planned strategy, do something about it.

An Infamous Reputation

The Midtown Community Court was created in 1993 in response to growing community concern about low-level crime. New York City's overburdened court system had understandably given top priority to headline crimes, like rape and murder, but community members in and around Times Square in the early 1990s had a different priority: tackling quality-of-life offenses, like low-level drug dealing, public drinking, graffiti, and prostitution, which assaulted them on a daily basis.

One of those community members calling for a more-serious response to quality-of-life crime, and prostitution in particular, was Barbara Feldt, who lives on 47th Street in the heart of a Midtown neighborhood that many old-timers still call Hell's Kitchen, a moniker that dates back to the days when sailors from the West Side docks used to flock every night to the working-class community's bars and bordellos.

While the sailors were long gone, the community's infamous reputation had endured, helped by the presence of prostitutes, drug dealers, and out-of-town visitors seeking boisterous and often illegal diversions. Feldt was upset about the state of the neighborhood—the crack vials on the street, the lewd comments shouted by prostitutes trolling for customers, and, perhaps most alarming of all, her stumbling one morning upon a man having sex with a prostitute in the vestibule of her apartment building. In a sign of how pervasive the prostitution problem had become, a neighbor simply shrugged when Feldt told her about the encounter. “‘Oh, it happens,’ she said,” Feldt recalled.

A short time later, Feldt founded Residents Against Street Prostitution, or R.A.S.P., which staged vocal demonstrations and called upon the police and the court system to take a more-aggressive stand against prostitution. “The prostitutes were getting a free sandwich [in the downtown detention cells] and then were getting turned back out on the street. We actually watched the prostitutes with ‘time-served’ sentences leave the Court and get into their pimps’ cars, and we had to take the subway home. . . . They beat us

back to the neighborhood, and went right back to work,” Feldt said. A sentence of “time served” meant that the hours a prostitute spent in a cell waiting to appear before the judge was the totality of her punishment.

R.A.S.P. members wrote letters to the police, judges, and the district attorney’s office explaining that prostitution was not a victimless crime. They protested outside criminal court, shouting through bullhorns for an end to time-served sentences. They organized “Silent Light” protests, during which they walked the streets of Times Square in groups of fifty to one hundred shining flashlights on prostitutes and would-be johns.

The Business Community

R.A.S.P. members were not the only ones trying to address the community’s problems. The city, state, and the business community were working together to revitalize the neighborhood and restore its reputation as the crossroads of the world. In one sign of its revival, the Times Square Business Improvement District was formed in 1992, bringing together the area’s businesses in partnership with city agencies, community boards, and not-for-profits to focus on keeping the neighborhood clean, safe, and inviting to tourists, residents, businesses, and potential commercial investors.

In the early 1990s, the state-run 42nd Street Development Project helped draw commercial investment to the area, obtaining commitments from a number of large corporations to build or house their headquarters in Times Square. Throughout the 1990s, new restaurants, mega-stores, palatial theaters, and other family attractions supplanted porn theaters, seedy arcades, and empty storefronts. In 1995 the area’s revitalization got a big boost from the City Council, which passed zoning legislation placing restrictions on adult-use businesses. Within months, many of the most notorious porn theaters and shops had closed their doors.

Criminal justice agencies were also launching new initiatives. Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, elected in 1993, as well as citizen groups like R.A.S.P., called for a crackdown on quality-of-life crimes. The New York City Police Department responded with sweeps that targeted prostitution, drug dealing, illegal peddling, and the like. “We deployed heavily in prostitution hot spots where there were a lot of recidivists. We used foot posts and strict enforcement of all traffic regulations to deter johns from driving by, slowing down, parking,” said Deputy Inspector Glen Kotowski, the former commanding officer of the 10th Precinct in Midtown Manhattan.

Police also began requiring prostitutes to wear their street clothes in the courtroom. “The women used to carry big bags with them and change their clothes to be more presentable,” Kotowski said. “But we came up with a policy that the clothes they’re arrested in should be the clothes they wear to court, so the judge could get a good vision of what they looked like out on the street and why they were being arrested for prostitution. . . . I think that brought to the surface how offensive it was to the community.” The police were also supported directly by the Times Square Business Improvement District, which had its own team of forty-five public safety officers, who, linked by radio to the police department, patrolled from 10 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week.

Midtown Community Court

The effort to clean up Times Square got another lift when, in 1993, the New York State Unified Court System opened the Midtown Community Court. The court, situated in a landmark building on 54th Street in Midtown Manhattan, offered a new approach to the kinds of quality-of-life offenses that had long undermined neighborhood safety and order. Before the founding of the Midtown Court, most low-level offenders left court with minimal or no punishment. In the case of prostitutes, for example, 43 percent received sentences of time served, while another 20 percent received conditional discharges or adjournments in contemplation of dismissal. Only 16 percent were sentenced to jail. And while 17 percent were ordered to perform community service or participate in a social service program, like drug treatment, the court lacked the resources to closely monitor compliance, so most prostitutes returned to the streets without fulfilling their sentences. (See Michele Sviridoff, David Rottman, Brian Ostrom, and Richard Curtis, *Dispensing Justice Locally: The Implementation and Effects of the Midtown Community Court* [Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000].)

The Midtown Community Court arose in response to the collective concerns of the residential and commercial communities in Midtown, the police, and players within the court system who were frustrated with business as usual. Court planners identified a number of problems that they hoped the Midtown Community Court, as a judicial experiment, could address. Those problems, as they related particularly to prostitution, included:

Revolving Door Justice. The criminal justice system did little to help or encourage prostitutes to quit the business or change their ways. The same prostitutes were processed through the system again and again, and the visibility of prostitution in the community continued unabated.

Meaningful Sanctions. The most common sanction—a sentence of time served—was the most expeditious way for judges, overwhelmed with large numbers of more serious crimes, to dispose of cases. But for many prostitutes, the time spent in jail was merely a small break from the streets and did nothing to deter them from resuming their “work” upon release.

Changing Behavior. With their money and lives controlled by a pimp, most prostitutes on their own lack the financial and emotional resources to go straight. What prostitutes who are motivated to change their lives need is some form of assistance—in the form of, for instance, a safe place to live, job training, or even just a bus ticket back home. Unfortunately, the downtown court was too overwhelmed to link prostitutes to appropriate resources.

Victimized Community. Perhaps one of the biggest problems identified by planners of the Midtown Community Court was the perception in the criminal justice system that prostitution was a victimless crime. To planners and neighborhood

residents, the community itself was the victim, and the damage to the community caused by prostitution and other quality-of-life offenses needed to be acknowledged and repaired.

Doing Things Differently

The Midtown Community Court has set out to do things differently. The court focuses exclusively on low-level crime. Because the court is guided by the principle that the community is the victim of quality-of-life offenses, it sentences offenders to repay the neighborhood through community service, such as cleaning parks, stuffing envelopes for local nonprofits, and removing graffiti. The sanctions are swift, often carried out the day of sentencing, and are designed to make clear to offenders that their behavior has consequences. The sanctions are also visible: Offenders wear blue vests emblazoned with the Court's name, not to publicly shame them but to show the neighborhood that offenders are paying back the community for the damage they have done.

The court also provides a range of on-site social services to address some of the underlying issues that fuel criminal behavior, like drug addiction, mental health problems, and lack of education or job skills. Some of the social services are geared specifically toward prostitutes, like health education and counseling groups, while others are for all types of offenders—and even ordinary citizens who visit the court voluntarily—including drug treatment, job training, and English-as-a-second-language classes.

In dealing with prostitutes and other low-level offenders, the court has from the start delivered a one-two punch: it insists on meaningful punishment by requiring community restitution, but also mandates social services. When it came to prostitutes in particular, the court in 86 percent of cases has ordered community restitution—and often required participation in social services, as well.

Over time, the court has developed a system of graduated sanctions, by which the judge imposes increasingly longer community restitution sentences on chronic offenders. Under the system, a first-time offender might get only two days of community service, but a repeat offender might get up to ten days. The court also holds surety hearings in some instances to make certain that the money used for bail is lawfully obtained. The court still relies on jail as a sanction, but usually reserves it for recidivists on whom intermediate sanctions have had little impact. Thus, when the court does send an offender to jail, it often issues longer sentences than had previously been meted out downtown.

Evening Shift

At the Midtown Court, a special evening community restitution project was created just for prostitutes because such a shift makes it very difficult for prostitutes to walk the streets at night. “We tried to put community service at a time when it cuts into their sleeping or working, so we started a crew at 4 o’clock in the afternoon and had them working until 10 o’clock,” explained Jeff Hobbs, the court’s community service program

coordinator. Overall, compliance with community service at the court is high (75 percent compared with 50 percent downtown), in part because the court usually requires defendants to begin their sentences within twenty-four hours of appearing in court.

Laurie, a prostitute with several years experience on the streets, explained to independent evaluators how the sanction of community service affected her ability to work: “This really sucks. I’ve had to work all day in the basement of the courthouse stuffing envelopes and when I get out of work, I’m tired. And my man is waiting outside for me in his car, expecting me to go out to the avenue and work all night for him. Hey, I can’t do this for too many days in a row before I’ll drop from exhaustion.”

As a result of experiences like this, prostitutes almost uniformly considered the Midtown Court tougher than the traditional court. “I would rather [be] locked up for ‘time served’ because it’s much easier. Less hassle,” Sugar said. “You go in there, time served, you get out, and you go and do what you gotta do.” Cleopatra agreed that “Midtown’s tougher.” In contrast, she says, the downtown court thinks “that if they hold you [before arraignment] then that’s good enough punishment for you.”

Changing Behavior

Punishment by itself will not stop most prostitutes from returning to the streets. Prostitutes face a host of problems that make it hard for them to leave “the life” even if they sincerely want to quit—and, of course, many are actively resistant to going straight. Because their lives are often controlled by a pimp, many lack the money or the independence to make a break. Many also lack the necessary education and job skills to find legal employment. Issues like drug addiction, mental illness, domestic violence, and health problems are also common obstacles.

The court tries to address these issues by requiring prostitutes to participate in social services available at the courthouse. Some services are geared specifically to the needs of prostitutes. Health education classes, run by staff from the New York City Health Department, last for two hours and focus on practical health matters, like sexually transmitted diseases. The goal of the classes is to help prostitutes minimize health risks to themselves and others and to let them know what other sort of help is available. “The health education class is a forum where you can plant a seed,” said Maria Almonte, a social worker at the court who works with prostitutes.

The court also offers a counseling group for prostitutes, which runs for six sessions over two weeks and focuses on emotional health, living skills (like opening a bank account), and goal setting. The counseling group uses lectures and group discussions to encourage prostitutes to talk about the dangers of their work, their concerns, and the steps they can take to get off the street.

Judge Eileen Koretz usually mandates the counseling group for offenders for whom community service and jail have proven ineffective. “Usually I start for first and second offenses with the health education class and community service,” Koretz said. “After that, they’ll start doing jail time, anywhere from ten to ninety days. And then, if they

come before me again, I'll send them to group counseling. It seems to be more effective that way. They realize now that they can end up in jail, and so they're a little more motivated to change and take advantage of what the court has to offer."

Almonte, who leads the groups, says that because prostitution is such a complicated issue, the court cannot hope to change lives overnight. Focusing on topics like mental health and physical care, Almonte helps the women improve their lives, if only incrementally. "If we're talking about physical care, we may find out a woman is walking the streets twelve or fourteen hours a day. I ask her how can we improve the situation," Almonte says. "Realistically I have to focus on what little steps they can take to help them feel better. Every little thing good they do for themselves, makes them wonder, 'Why am I still working the streets?' The healthier they make their lives, the less comfortable they'll be with their current lifestyles."

Almonte also finds she has to puncture prostitutes' unrealistic vision of their lives. Many women talk about making enough money to retire, but Almonte tells them in plain language that that's an unrealistic goal. "The reality is, 'How can you save if you give all your money to your pimp and if you don't have a bank account?'"

For most prostitutes, it's a long process, Almonte says. "First they leave their pimp and stop working in the street. Maybe they get a job at an escort service. But at least it's a step off the street. Then they work just on the weekend. And then they get a job at a strip club. Building a new life takes a long time."

Personal Relationships

One of the keys to bringing about lasting change in the life of a prostitute is building personal relationships between the women and court staff. "Frequent arrests give us the opportunity to really get to know the women," says John Megaw, the court's clinical director, "and frequent community service allows the community service supervisors to get to know them over time, which is a key to engagement. We will always remind folks, 'Whenever you're ready, we'll be here.'"

Community service coordinator Jeff Hobbs has met hundreds of prostitutes over the years and knows how to earn their respect. When they come up with excuses for why they can't do community service, Hobbs always has an answer. "I'll tell them, 'While you're doing community service, you belong to the Court. . . . If you don't want to do it, I'll get a warrant for your arrest and we'll get you back in here, and you'll go to jail.'"

Hobbs can also sense when a woman is ready to accept the kind of help the court can offer. "Some of them eventually realize that the pimps just want their money, that love has nothing to do with it. We'll hear, 'He's not like other pimps,' and then for some of them we'll stop hearing it and that's when we pounce. That's when engagement starts to work and then the tears start to flow. 'I don't want to do this anymore.'

"That's when the tag team begins," Hobbs continues. "Everyone on the staff starts delivering the message: 'The clothes he buys you are more ho' clothes so you can make

more money for him; when you're ready to square up, I want you to know you can always come and see me. If you need a place to stay, I have a place for you.' We've had pimps waiting in the courtroom while we've taken her down the back stairs and taken her to Travelers' Aid and gotten her on a bus going out of town. . . . When the tears come, you know you got them."

While prostitutes say Midtown is more demanding than the downtown court, many also say that they prefer the experience of the Midtown Court. There's a perception that the sanctions—although sometimes onerous—are fair. And the fact that the Midtown Court has clean holding cells, a staff sensitive to the experience of prostitutes, and a quick arraignment process does not go unnoticed by offenders either.

"It's a quick system," said Peppa. "It only takes about two or three hours to see a judge. And it's always a female judge. She's a b—h. I think she's harder on us because we're females like her. . . . Community service is all day—cleaning toilets and stuffing envelopes. . . . Even though I hate doing it, I guess the community service is fair."

Disappearance of the "Strolls"

In the end, it's impossible to know for certain how many prostitutes have been persuaded to quit the business altogether. But from the perspective of stakeholders in the Midtown community, it almost doesn't matter. What does matter is that visible signs of prostitution in the neighborhood have been dramatically reduced; arrests for prostitution dropped 56 percent after the court opened, and the prostitutes who still troll the streets became almost invisible.

In interviews conducted by researcher Robert Weidner and ethnographer Richard Curtis, dozens of prostitutes said that they had changed their hours, their clothes, and their "strolls" (the locations where they conduct business) to avoid detection in response to pressure from the police, the court, and the community.

Curtis, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, observed that two major strolls virtually vanished after the opening of the Midtown Court. On one strip—9th Avenue between 44th and 45th streets—Curtis observed that over a period of eighteen months in 1994 and 1995, the number of prostitutes on the stroll dropped from about twenty to less than ten, and street activity became less visible.

At the beginning of the research period, shortly after the opening of the Midtown Court, the 9th Avenue stroll had been characterized by "milling around" behavior, Curtis said. But with stepped-up enforcement by police and increased punishment at the court, the prostitutes no longer lingered on corners or sat on stoops propositioning passersby. Instead, Curtis observed that they began to blend in with pedestrian traffic by walking briskly up and down the block, as though they were on their way to an appointment. They would try and catch the eye of a potential "date" as they passed on the sidewalk, but were much more discreet. They almost invariably waited for the man to make the first move—a significant change from past practice.

New Clothes, New Techniques

The women also began to dress less ostentatiously and began going out without make-up, wigs, or anything that evoked the stereotypical image of a streetwalker.

“To a person, they started to dress more conservatively, going from booty shorts and bikinis to wearing jeans, sweat suits, and less makeup,” said Weidner, who wrote his dissertation on the Midtown Court’s effect on street prostitution in Times Square. “The inexperienced johns may not even know they were prostitutes.”

Some also began exploring new, more private ways of attracting customers. Weidner found that ads for escort services in Manhattan newspapers shot up by approximately 50 percent in 1994 and 1995 following the opening of the Midtown Court. And a number of prostitutes reported how they tried to hide themselves by using cars to look for potential customers. Their pimps would rent vehicles for them, and the women would drive up to lone male drivers and solicit business out the window. “Everybody drives cars,” Monica reported in 1997. “If you stand now, it’s funny: Guys think you are police. Before, if you were driving, they used to think you were the police because there wasn’t that many girls driving.”

For the community, these efforts by prostitutes to mask their professional activities are a welcome improvement. “Prostitution doesn’t bother me, but street prostitution really does,” Feldt, the community activist, said. “It shouldn’t intrude on anyone else’s space and life. Having a street prostitute on your block is like having a car alarm on your block go off all night.”

As for those still on the street, they are a new breed. An analysis of the court’s first three years found that prostitutes passing through the court were increasingly younger and had fewer prior convictions. Specifically, the proportion of prostitutes twenty-one years old or younger increased by 49 percent from 1993 to 1996, and the proportion of prostitutes with no prior misdemeanor convictions jumped by 63 percent in the same period. These numbers suggest that the chronic offenders with more experience adapted to the increased pressure from the police and the court by changing their behavior, leaving the streets to neophytes.

The neophytes themselves pose their own unique challenges. “On the one hand, someone who is just getting into the business is less entrenched, so you’d think it would be easier to get them out,” says Julius Lang, coordinator of the court. “And yet, for a lot of them, you see the completely opposite phenomena. They say, ‘I came here for the bright lights and glamour and a couple of arrests haven’t worn me down. There’s still a pot of gold here and I’m going to find it.’ Just how to reach them is something we’re still grappling with.”

Arrest numbers indicate that displacement to other parts of New York City has been minimal. To minimize displacement to other parts of Manhattan, the Midtown Community Court in 1994 began taking prostitution arrests from the entire borough. Thus, a prostitute seeking to avoid prosecution at the Midtown Court could no longer simply cross the street into another precinct, but had to actually take a subway, bus, or car across a river to New Jersey or a more remote part of the city.

A Collaborative Effort

No single initiative could ever hope to eliminate prostitution, whose reputation as the world's oldest profession suggests that it's going to continue to exist in some form for a long time to come. But what the Midtown experiment has shown is that the practice of prostitution can at least be modified to the benefit of communities besieged by streetwalking.

The efforts targeting prostitution—such as community protests, increased police enforcement, changes in zoning rules, business investment, and the Midtown Court's use of punishment combined with help—seem, when looked at individually, rather modest. But when applied collectively, their impact on prostitution has been tremendous. “It was really a nice combination of the community, justice system, the D.A., and everybody working together,” said Barbara Feldt.

For community stakeholders, who were at one time confronted daily with large numbers of g-string-clad prostitutes, the drastic reduction in the public presence of prostitution has been celebrated as a significant achievement. Perhaps the most remarkable sign of triumph is the fact that Feldt disbanded Residents Against Street Prostitution in 1997, declaring that street prostitution was no longer a problem in the neighborhood. “It's been a long road, but I can stand before you and resign,” Feldt said at R.A.S.P.'s last meeting, declaring, “There is not a street prostitution condition here anymore.”

While there are many factors associated with prostitution that are beyond the court or the community's control, it is clear from the Times Square experience that by working together, the criminal justice system and communities can have an impact. It is also evident that there's no one formula or approach that works for every person or every jurisdiction. At times when street prostitution has appeared to be on the rise, the court has developed new responses—the evening community service shift, for instance, was developed in response to an increase in street prostitution in one particular precinct. Police, too, respond with increased enforcement when street prostitution appears to be on the rise. While court staff acknowledge that their influence over a problem as long-standing and generally intractable as prostitution has its limits, they say they intend to push those limits as far as they can to keep prostitutes off the streets while helping as many as they can to quit “the life” once and for all.

Monica

By 25, Monica was an old hand at walking the stroll. She had been turning tricks since the age of 17, moving from city to city in search of money, drugs, and the life that for a few years, at least, seemed fun. Her favorite place was always New York City. She used to live in a hotel in Jersey City and come into Manhattan most nights. “You'd go in, make money, leave,” she says. “[And when you got arrested] there was no bail, there was no problem, there was no community service.”

When she first hit the streets in New York “there were like 50 girls on every corner.” But then when she returned a few years later things had changed—there were more

police stings and a new court to deal with, something called the Midtown Community Court. Monica found herself before a Midtown Court judge who gave her two days of community service and mandated her participation in a health education class.

“I tried to con Jeff [Hobbs] the first day . . . ‘Oh, I got a cold and I can’t stay today.’ But everybody was like, bulls—t, you’re staying . . . [After a day of community service] I maybe got an hour and a half of sleep and got all ready again to go out. I had to do that. I thought, ‘I’ll go to the West Side. This will be different.’ It wasn’t. The cops again. I hadn’t even finished my community service.

“They take me to the Court and I ask, ‘Who is the judge?’ They told me, and I went, ‘F—k, it’s the same judge.’ [When she sees me, the judge says] ‘You were seen yesterday. . . . You have to finish your community service and I’m giving you ten more days.’”

Monica felt trapped. She wanted to skip the community service but worried that if she got picked up again soon—which seemed likely—the judge would remember her and be so mad she might give her a few days in jail. Monica had been in jail enough times before to know that it was the last place she wanted to be, so she decided to perform the community service.

She showed up day after day in the court’s mail room to stuff envelopes, and she found that it was not as awful as she had anticipated. Willie Figueroa, the mail room supervisor, was friendly to her, and treated her with respect. He and others on staff seemed sincerely concerned about her. They kept telling her that prostitution was no kind of life and that she would come to a bad end if she continued. They also offered her help to make a break: housing, job training, and a bus ticket back to her hometown in New Hampshire were available just for the asking.

A feeling Monica had had periodically in the past began to surface again—a feeling that she wanted out. She was sick of being a prostitute, getting arrested, facing the constant danger and her manipulative pimp.

“It’s not like you plan. You can’t . . . but you get your money for the day and you are like, I want to leave. At the next opportunity, I’m out.” Encouraged by Hobbs, Figueroa, and John Megaw, the court’s clinical director, Monica made her move: While her pimp was out, she packed her clothes and grabbed all the money she could. The court placed her in a safe house. And then she sat down with court staff who helped her fill out a college application.

She started taking classes and got a job as a saleswoman in a store, earning enough to pay rent on her own apartment. She also went to several different criminal courts in other boroughs of New York City to close all her open cases.

“I paid almost \$300 in fines. Do you know how good that felt? I brought letters from Midtown Community Court, talking about what I was doing, and that I was going through a process of rehabilitating. . . . I had proof that I was changing my life, and these judges respected that so much that they let me get out without doing my time. . . .

I went to the people at Midtown who helped me and said, 'Oh, thank you!' I mean, I brought them flowers. I mean, it was because of them that I was able to do all that stuff. They gave me a chance to move on, to start my life all over. Twenty-five years old and I was starting all over again."

*Monica graduated from college in June 1999. **jsj***

