

# Oldest PROFESSIONAL

AS NORTHEAST NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS TRY TO SOLVE THEIR PROSTITUTION PROBLEM, HERE'S ONE WOMAN'S CAUTIONARY TALE.

BY CASEY LYONS  
PHOTOS BY MICHAEL McCLURE

If this were any other street corner, she might look like a lost farm girl. But this is Ninth Street and Benton, and the woman with the golden tan doesn't want directions. She wants a date.

A forest-green Ford Explorer slows, and the driver nods at her. "What's up?" he asks.

She walks toward the car. "What's up with you?"

A gold cross dangles from a chain just above the black, zipper-front sports bra that she wears all the time. Her stomach edges over the waist of her tight jean shorts.

Holding a big plastic cup filled with ice, she opens the door and hops in.

Sitting shotgun in the Explorer, Darlene sets a price, collects the money and directs the driver around Kansas City's Northeast neighborhood to one of the spots where she'll do business until police get wind of it.

She should be back at Ninth and Benton in 15 or 30 minutes, but that's never guaranteed. Darlene knows that she could end up in an abandoned house or floating in the Missouri River.

Even with a shot of pepper spray in her pocket, she knows that the odds are against her.

She has been in the Northeast drug trade for 15 years as a user and a dealer and has been selling sex for seven. She's one of about a dozen streetwalkers working the Independence Avenue corridor almost every day. She has 50 or so regular johns — "associates," as she calls them.

Most patrol cops know her by sight, if not by her first name. Some neighbors call 911 whenever she walks past.

The Explorer stops back at Ninth and Benton, and Darlene gets out. Her brown, wavy hair is fixed into a ponytail that sits high on her head and makes her ears stick out. She has a gaptoothed smile, and the bridge of her nose is scarred from when a man bashed her with brass knuckles a few years ago.

She makes her way down Benton toward the 7-Eleven on Independence Avenue to refill on ice. Ten minutes later, a tan Chevy Tahoe creeps past, and the driver signals with his hand. "What's up?" she asks.



Seasons might change, but Darlene's work goes on.

Independence Avenue is known for its drugs and prostitutes. Over the past two years, though, neighbors have noticed things getting worse.

In 2007, the Kansas City Police Department made 341 prostitution-related arrests. This year, police are on pace to make 400 arrests, nearly a 20 percent increase from 2007.

Will Royster was tired of it.

"I watched people deal drugs out there. You can't avoid seeing the hooks," he says. "The worst thing about it was, initially, having to deal with it with my kids." **continued on page 10**



**Will Royster — with his wife, Carol; his daughter, Gillian; and his son, Liam — was tired of having his kids exposed to their neighborhood's drugs and prostitution.**

## **THE OLDEST PROFESSIONAL**

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Royster is a former Navy and commercial pilot who shakes hands with a death grip. He's a direct descendant of his neighborhood's namesake Scarritt family and lives with his wife and preteen kids in the house that his great-grandfather built on Gladstone Boulevard.

He says he likes the fact that the neighborhood is an amalgam of cultures and classes. What he doesn't like is that first-generation immigrants see it as a place to land and then leave. And he hates the gangsters, dealers, addicts, pimps and streetwalkers. Or, as he puts it, "assholes who want to come in and steal our neighborhoods and steal our quality of life and intimidate us."

Early last year, Royster started talking to police, prosecutors, judges and politicians about a drug- and prostitution-fighting effort called Stay Out of Areas of Prostitution and Stay Out of Drug Areas. The proposal, which quickly became known by the acronyms SOAP and SODA, would make it illegal for convicted drug and prostitution offenders to be seen north of Independence Avenue in an area between Interstate 35/29 to the west and a to-be-determined spot to the east. If enacted, it would initially cover the Scarritt Point, Pendleton Heights and Indian Mound neighborhoods — some of the city's busiest spots for sex traffic.

Royster says he had seen a similar program work in Seattle. "Within six months, it had a

demonstrable change. Known drug dealers and known drug users exited. I don't know where they went, but it mixed it up. They weren't concentrated up there. Known prostitutes and Johns disappeared," he says.

Kansas City police tried something similar in the 1990s. The idea behind the "Independence Avenue Zone" was to close the avenue to sex traffic by charging repeat offenders with probation violations. But police had to file paperwork to get arrest warrants, and the inefficient program didn't last.

SOAP and SODA would raise the stakes by making violations felonies. Such a change would require a vote of the Missouri General Assembly. (Royster is running for the seat currently held by Rep. John Burnett, who will be out in 2010 due to term limits.) It would also give police the ability to make arrests on sight, which is troubling to some observers.

Critics of SOAP and SODA say arresting women for felonies misses the point that they are victims, too. "I definitely think demand is what drives the whole problem," says Kristy Childs, who founded Veronica's Voice, an organization that helps sexually exploited women. "Without the demand, there would be no supply and there'd be no recruitment."

The way Jude Huntz sees it, SOAP and SODA amount to another acronym: NIMBY — "Not in My Back Yard." Huntz is director of human rights for the Catholic Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. He says SOAP and

On most weekdays, Darlene gets one meal a day at the Salvation Army's Beacon of Hope Café.



ers who lived in the truck lot hung a blue tarp to stay dry.

Darlene's first trick was a three-way with a trucker. A friend invited her into the man's rig, which was bound for Nashville. Her pay was dope, hotel rooms and the promise of adventure. She was 32 at the time, which made her two decades older than most girls when they start.

She was raised Linda Darlene White, but almost no one calls her Linda, and White isn't her birth name. Though she mostly remembers the good times growing up, long-timers in the neighborhood say her mother worked the same streets that Darlene does now. By the time she was 10, Darlene and her siblings were moving in and out of foster homes. She dropped out of Hickman Mills High School when she got pregnant her junior year. She's 39 now and has lived in and around Kansas City for most of her life.

**S**he came to prostitution late but arrived with a decade-long crack addiction. She was hard-bitten, headstrong, instinctive and only too willing to get into a scrap. "It's like this," she says, slipping into the third person, "Darlene is a soldier."

She has rules of engagement. "I never get high with none of my dates. If I'm gonna get in a vehicle, I only mess with the ones I know." And she avoids the police patrolling Independence Avenue. "I don't mess with the avenue. Period."

Those rules keep her safe. There's another rule that she says keeps her alive. "Out here, you can't show no emotions. Out here, if they see any kind of emotions, they'll be coming for you," she says.

Darlene walks along the high barbed-wire fence surrounding the truck lot, to the corner of Lydia and Admiral. There, between a motel and a mosque, she turned her first few nervous tricks.

Then life started to take on a new rhythm. She'd binge and hook for four weeks without sleep, then return, bedraggled, to sleep. She was carless, jobless and homeless; Darlene's four children were living with her fourth foster mother. But as long as she had crack, life was OK.

She went on like this until the night when a muscular security guard stopped his van in front of her. She hopped in, and they drove to a spot he said he knew.

After their date, **continued on page 12**

fight gang and drug activity by making the risk of penalties greater than the crime's reward, but neighbors also saw an opportunity to talk about prostitution. In July, years of pent-up anger spilled out at a community meeting at St. Anthony Catholic church on Benton. So many people showed up that organizers had to move the meeting from the basement to the sanctuary.

As Murano worked through her Power-Point presentation, defining prostitution and its causes, one man popped off in frustration.

"We didn't come here for a lecture," he shouted from a pew. "Let's get started with the meeting. I don't think anyone came here for this."

Later he apologized and explained himself to the crowd. "I have three young girls living in my house under the age of 10. They see the prostitutes walking by the window. I had to buy the house next door to get rid of the prostitutes."

Lots of people have stories like that. But while almost everyone in the neighborhood agrees that something needs to be done, they can't agree on what.

SODA pushers care only about their own "parochial concerns, not the concerns of the larger community and the people who find themselves trapped in drug addiction and a life of prostitution."

City Prosecutor Beth Murano and Maj. Anthony Ell, commander of the Kansas City Police Department's East Patrol Division, say police can't arrest the Northeast out of its problem. "We cannot have a single law-enforcement approach or a lock-'em-up approach," Ell says. "You have to deal with the root causes."

For the KCPD's vice squad, that means attacking demand. In a break from national trends, police here have arrested more johns than sex workers since 2007. That year, police made 201 arrests for patronizing (johns) and 136 arrests for solicitation (sex workers). In 2008, there were 226 for patronizing and 158 for solicitation.

"People are on us about arresting more of the johns," says Sgt. Brad Dumit of the vice squad. "We do, but people don't realize that."

Most people only see the streets. Royster says he proposed SOAP and SODA mainly to

when she was putting her pants back on, the man pulled out his black .357, held it to her head and started punching her. He snatched back his money, grabbed her wallet and said, "I got your ID. If you tell the police about this, I'll come around and kill you."

When he drove off, she starting walking back to the trucks. She was bloody, and her clothes were torn. A passer-by picked her up. He wanted to take her to the emergency room or call the police. "No," she remembers saying, "Don't call the cops. Just take me back up to the avenue."

Most of the Northeast's streetwalkers won't report crimes against them for fear of getting in trouble or being harassed. They'd rather nurse their black eyes and fat lips, self-medicate with crack and MD 20/20, and spread the word about the violent johns.

But dates mean dope. Three weeks after the .357 was pressed against her head, Darlene was back eyeing cars at Admiral and Lydia. If violent men with loaded weapons couldn't keep her off the corners, how could SOAP and SODA do any better?

**M**ost working girls deal with the threat of imprisonment the way clock punchers put up with an annoying co-worker or a long commute.

Near the corner of Wabash and Amie is another one of Darlene's landmarks.

"Down there is where they line girls up when they do a sting," she says, pointing down Amie Street. Last November, she was one of the women arrested. After she got in a fight with her husband, Ray (an out-of-work ex-con who relies on Darlene to keep them in food and cigarettes), she hit the street to get crack money — and violated her rule about tricking with strangers.

The undercover cop was a fine-looking man with gold on every finger. Around his neck was a thick gold chain with a gold dollar-sign medallion. He was built, Darlene recalls, "like a brick shithouse." With looks like those, he had busted 12 girls in 45 minutes.

Sitting on the curb with the plastic handcuffs on tight, Darlene heard one of the girls talking. "She goes, 'I been out here about a week now. I'm tired and I'm hungry. I told this brother I'd fuck him for nothing.'" The girl said she figured he was a cop.

Sometimes jail is a vacation — three hots and a cot. But when police bring streetwalkers to the station, jail time isn't guaranteed. More often, women are arrested for disorderly conduct, trespassing, possession of a crack pipe or jaywalking, which are city-ordinance violations and equivalent to traffic tickets. With only 200 beds in the municipal lockup — and police prioritizing violent crimes — women who do spend the night in jail are usually back on the street and doing their thing the next morning.

Most of the time, it looks like they're just hanging out, and hanging out isn't illegal. If it's hot or if she's tired, Darlene will sometimes drag a lawn chair to the sidewalk and wait for dates. The cops can stop and question women who seem suspicious to them, but in

the absence of tools like SOAP and SODA, law enforcement amounts to chasing women from street to street.

"If they're not jaywalking, if they're just standing on the street corner, I'm limited in my job," says Officer Darren King of East Patrol. "Vice helps get the job done."

A conviction on an arrest during a Narcotics and Vice Division sting can bring time in the Jackson County Jail. But the girls know how that works, too.

"Tuesdays and Thursdays are vice days," Darlene says. "Every other Saturday is a prostitution sting or a drug kick-in."

When Darlene got caught, the Jackson County judge looked at her good record of making court dates, then took a 3-inch stack of offenses and reduced it to two charges.

She pleaded guilty to solicitation for immoral purposes and possession of narcotic equipment and got two years of unsupervised probation — she was to do no drugs, no hooking. She was back on the street the next day. The same thing happened in 2004, when she was arrested for charges involving prostitution and drugs.

In 2007, Darlene missed a court date and got 33 days in the Municipal Correctional Institution. She detoxed, started treatment for her crack addiction, went to Narcotics Anonymous meetings and started counting sober time. She stayed clean for nine months. It was her first extended sobriety since she had been a teenager, but like addicts say, the streets are always only one hit away. Darlene took the hit.

"It's not that it makes you feel good," she says. "It's just, you get high. You get the rush, the adrenaline rush that you want. It's playing hide-and-seek with the cops. You know they're watching, and you're gonna get in the car while they're sitting right there. That's the rush."

For 15 years, Darlene has chased that rush into Northeast hideaways that most people would rather not see.

**D**arlene steps around a decapitated snake on the wooden bridge at the Kessler Park pond. She used to bring her dates all up and down Cliff Drive. "This here is like memory lane," she says as she hops over a trickling stream and follows it up into the woods. "Right in here," she says, "we put a blanket down and set here and listen to the stream."

She lingers for a second before heading toward the pond. She walks around the sidewalks that slant into the water. "Sometimes we'd just set right down there behind the wall."

Walking west on Cliff Drive, Darlene pauses at a sweeping curve with a wide shoulder. "This here was my favorite spot," she says. It's a little cut in the wall with stone steps leading down into a thick tangle of brush. Darlene steps down and climbs over a log. "This used to be all clear, down in here."

At the bottom, looking back up toward the wall, she says, "I used to set right there and smoke my shit, or over there on that rock. I never carried nothing on me. I'd leave pipes at each of my spots so I never carried nothing on me."

The good memories end at a shadowy bend 100 yards farther west.

"There have been two incidents down in here," she says, putting fire to an Echo 100 cigarette and walking along the shoulder.

She stops at the stone wall. Behind it, the ground dives 50 feet to a clearing that's marred with debris and a car tire. "That's the spot," she says, pointing. "That's the tree right there."

One summer night, seven years ago, a dishwasher-blond man with brown facial hair beat Darlene into submission, pinned her arms behind her, tied them to the tree and raped her standing. When he finished, she slumped down with her back against the tree.

"He took gas, the kind you use to fill up a lighter, and sprayed it all around me. Then he lit it." And he walked up the hill.

It had rained a few days earlier, and the leaves were still damp. A few caught on fire, the ones that were on top.

"I really thought that was it. I thought, I'm gonna die down here. Then I thought, No, I'm not gonna die down here. I felt a piece of glass behind me, so I started sawing. It was that thin white cord, so it didn't take long." She stops and takes a few drags from the Echo. "I stomped at the fire with my feet. It burnt me on my legs," she says, swiveling her calf forward. "Right there. You can still see the dark spot it left."

She pulls at the Echo and looks at the steep, trashy slope. "You try running up that hill — trying to get up there with rope around your hands and ankles, tearing the tape off your mouth and the rag he shoved in your throat so you don't scream while you're burning alive."

She ran to her brother's house on St. John. The two of them and a friend hopped in a truck to look for the man. They spotted him and gave chase, but he disappeared into a thick stand of trees behind the Salvation Army at Ninth and Bellefontaine.

A few months after the attack, she saw him at a Truman Road bus stop. The hair on her arms stood up. They both boarded the bus, and he sat a few seats behind her. She moved forward a row. Then she heard a low voice in her ear. "Those men who were chasing me," he said, referring to Darlene's brother and friend, "one of them fell, and they never caught up."

Darlene got off at the next stop. She figures the man with the dishwasher-blond hair is still around.

When she finishes telling this story, she lapses into a long silence. It lets in the sound of distant trains. Then she begins: "The only thing you're thinking is, I didn't get to tell my kids and my mom and my dad that I love 'em."

And then she starts to cry.

Thinking about her family, and about being alone and vulnerable and full of regret, overpowers her toughness.

"When you're a tough bitch, you do not show emotion about any of this," she stammers as the tears slip around her scarred nose. "If you show any emotion, then you're a soft bitch." She looks away and down and lets herself sob.

**B**right plastic flowers punctuate the white tables in the Salvation Army's Beacon of Hope Café, a soup kitchen at Ninth and Bellefontaine. A line forms at the service window where workers distribute 150 meals every weekday. Today it's taco salad.

Darlene doesn't have her own apartment. She and a few other girls stay with a friend. She's happy to have the room, but it's often abuzz with late-night activity and a phone that won't stop ringing. If there's a sanctuary from

Darlene's daily hustle, it's the Salvation Army. It would also be a sanctuary from SOAP and SODA, which would make it illegal for her to hang around outside. This is where vigilant neighbors call 911 whenever they see her heading toward the Salvation Army building, and SOAP and SODA would ensure that they only needed to call once to get Darlene jailed and off the street.

Wearing dark sunglasses and a black tank top with her sports bra visible underneath, Darlene brushes in around noon and waves to her friends as she gets in line. Then she heads to her usual back-corner table, carrying a partitioned tray piled with chips, meat, cheese, lettuce, tomatoes, green beans and canned fruit. Many weekdays, this tray of food is all she eats.

"Don't you leave," she shouts to someone across the room. "C'mere, what's wrong with you?"

A little kid walks up. He's maybe 8 years old. He gives her a hug. "I have to go home," he says.

"I don't want you to go home," Darlene answers. "I thought you was supposed to be my man. How you gonna be my man if you go home?"

The kid cracks a smile and puts his arm around her neck.

"Baby, you know what?" Darlene says to a friend who always sits with her. "I've had this little guy since he was this big," she says, placing her hand a couple of feet from the floor. "I've had you since you was what, 4? 5?"

Darlene signed over parental rights for her own girl and three boys to their adoptive mother years ago. She only gets to see her kids once a year now. Like most of the Northeast's other downtrodden souls, she finds replacement family here.

Sitting at her corner table, amid the lunch-time chatter and familiar neighborhood faces, Darlene has a notoriety that's different from the one on the street.

In here, she fetches a food tray for an older friend and listens to the other woman's problems, trades stories with other working girls, and calls out bad parenting when she sees it.

Her temper sometimes flares, too, such as when she and another woman almost get into it over a skirt that Darlene thinks is too short. She says it's about respect and money. Girls who are too obvious make it harder for everyone, she says.

As she eats, people show their respect by bringing over trays of unfinished food and placing them in front of her. "See?" she says through her gapped smile, as she sandwiches taco meat, cheese and lettuce between tortilla chips. "Everyone loves Darlene."

When lunch is done, she tops off her cup with ice, walks up the stairs past the chapel and the waiting room for services, and heads back onto the street.

She takes off her tank top.

## READ MORE

**G**o to [pitch.com](http://pitch.com) for:

- A map and photos from Darlene's tour of the Northeast
- A prostitute's day in Municipal Drug Court
- A short profile of Amy Ford, a reformed prostitute