

NEW PROGRAM GIVES JOHNS AN EDUCATION

By ROBIN FRANZEN, *The Oregonian*

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PORTLAND - When men show up at the Justice Center on Sundays, avoiding eye contact and mumbling for directions to "that class they are supposed to go to," center personnel point the way to Joe Parker. He's the quiet man with mutton-chop sideburns waiting in a sparse, fluorescent-lit conference room on the third floor.

Parker's class is for johns -- guys caught buying sex from prostitutes.

And for the next six hours, he and two co-presenters lay out an unflinching picture of a trade that is so ugly beneath the surface it might make these guys think twice before revisiting the streets for \$20 of fantasy fulfillment. They'll get an eye-opener on sexually transmitted diseases, abusive pimps, criminal prosecution, urban blight and how as johns they create the market that fuels all this misery.

By attending the class, the offenders can reduce the amount of court-ordered community service they must perform.

"I talk to them very directly," said Parker, a retired psychiatric nurse who worked at Dammasch State Hospital and the Justice Center Jail. Although johns may think their role in prostitution is benign, Parker explains how they are employing pimps as their violent subcontractors. "I tell them 'He's done all the compelling and beating on your behalf.' " The Portland Prostitution Offender Program, launched in August, is the Multnomah County court system's second go-around with the "john school" concept. Six years ago, a similar program fizzled after a two-year run because of concerns from deputy district attorneys and judges that presenters, including former prostitutes, used the class as a 17-hour forum for feminist politics and male-bashing.

By contrast, the new john school offered through Community Court is shorter and less confrontational, even as it deals with some of the same subjects and features accounts from a former prostitute. It is put on by the Lola Greene Baldwin Foundation, a Portland-based community education organization dedicated to helping women leave

prostitution. Parker, 56, is its director, and his low-key style is a major reason court officials think the new program will avoid old traps.

"His whole manner is nonjudgmental," said Heidi Grant, social service coordinator for Multnomah County Community Court. And while presenters may use the rough language of prostitution to make some points, yelling or political propagandizing aren't permitted, she said. "No one learns when they are yelled at."

"We don't discuss political theory of any kind," Parker said. "We don't need it."

Unlike some other john schools around the country, the Portland Prostitution Offender Program is not a diversion program: Offenders who attend continue to have a prostitution conviction on their records -- a record prosecutors and police want because it triggers a one-year civil exclusion ! from Portland's prostitution-free zones.

However, as offenders complete the \$82.50 course, which they pay for themselves, their community service requirement drops to 16 hours from the standard 24, said Judge Steve Todd, who presides over Community Court. All offenders must also write an essay about the behavior that landed them before the judge.

Most wind up in the class after being netted in a Portland police sting. Over the past two years, nearly 80 men have appeared in Community Court on prostitution-related charges, and in recent weeks, about 20 have attended the classes.

Though some criminal justice officials were wary of the proposal for a new john school given its controversial predecessor, Community Court's citizen advisers pressed for it, in part as a matter of fairness, Todd said. "They thought it was unfair that we were prosecuting women and men for the same crime, but we were sending women to classes and services and not the men."

Even Garrett Richardson, a public defender who was initially lukewarm to the idea, says he's heard positive feedback from clients who have gone to the class. "I was thinking they would hate it, but they didn't seem to think it was that bad -- some thought it was helpful."

Senior Neighborhood Officer Todd Teats of Southeast Precinct thinks residents living near prostitution hot spots will appreciate the new

effort. "People don't want their kids to see sex in their neighborhoods," he said.

In developing the program, organizers say, they heeded the warnings of a 1999 report written by a group of Portland prosecutors and civic leaders who traveled to San Francisco to observe that city's nationally recognized john school, one of the first such diversion programs.

While the Portland evaluators saw some merit in the program, they also questioned San Francisco's purported near-zero recidivism rate. And they were uncomfortable with angry presentations by former prostitutes.

The new Multnomah County program doesn't claim lower recidivism as a goal, just consciousness-raising and education. Officials say essays written by participants indicate at least some of the information is sinking in.

"Some of them have been really telling -- saying things like, 'I didn't know I was hurting someone,' " Grant said.

Court officials plan to track class participants to see how many wind up back in court. They also hope to create a Spanish-language version.

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