

Combating Prostitution

Susana Medina

Rachel Durchslag's office is about the size of a college dorm room. She sits cross-legged on her roll-around office chair, surrounded by piles of data from her latest project. Behind her are framed pictures of family and friends. Rachel is energetic and her smile is warm. I discover that she loves to ride her scooter, cook, explore new teas, swing dance, teach aerobics, read, meditate, journal, and eat sushi. I am reassured that Rachel will be a blast to talk to. And so, immediately after introducing ourselves, Rachel and I dive right into the history of her non-for-profit organization CAASE (Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation).

Durchslag was raised in Chicago. However, she attended Skidmore College in New York and double majored in Women's Studies and Social Work. Later, she attended the University of Chicago for her graduate degree in Social Service Administration, focusing on the harms of pornography and Chicago's lack of response to the problem of prostitution. She realized she was a feminist when she was 18 and heard the music of Kathleen Hannah of Bikini Kill, "I'm the little girl at the picnic/ Who won't stop pulling her dress up/ It doesn't matter who's in control now/ It doesn't matter 'cause this is new radio." Durchslag believes that both "women and men can be afforded choice in every aspect of their lives, can be free from sexual violence and domestic abuse, and can have access to comprehensive health options."

Durchslag became interested in the sex trade in 2002 when she saw a film, "Lana's Rain" about international sex trafficking in Chicago. It haunted her because she thought it wouldn't happen in her hometown. She discovered that Chicago is one of the biggest importers of traffic victims in the United States because of our major international airport and enclosed ethnic communities. In response, she joined an organization called Prostitution Alternatives Round Table, quit her job and flew to Thailand to work with young girls ages 9 to 18 who were kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery.

After returning to the U.S and completing graduate school, she started her own non-profit organization. "I never wanted to start my own non-profit," says Durchslag "but when I graduated I realized that if I was gonna do this work I had to start my own because there was nothing that I could plug into." She took a year to do research, interned and went to India to get a full grasp on the issue. She quickly realized that the problem was the demand, the men that sought to purchase women.

Durchslag experienced a massive support for her organization. The Major's Office on Domestic Violence spent three years investigating prostitution in Chicago. They even interviewed survivors of the sex trade. After three years, the Major's Office on Domestic Violence outlined three recommendations for addressing prostitution in Chicago. The first was to go after the demand. So her non-profit organization was affirmed in 2005.

CAASE's first year focused on establishing the organization. Rachel received a grant from the Chicago Foundation for Women to recruit a research team and interview 110 "Johns" to investigate why there is such a high demand for prostitutes. Were there specific reasons like childhood experiences to provoke these men to seek prostitutes, she wondered? The group of men in question were asked their opinions about prostitutes,

what they look for in a female prostitute and the acts they want serviced. The most interesting question Durchslag asked was, "What are five words that you felt before the sexual service, during and after sex with a prostitute?" Most of the time, the men would answer ashamed, alone, disgusted and so on. Then she would ask the men what they thought the women felt. The men consistently refused to answer. Clearly, the men wanted to totally disregard the fact that prostitutes are humans with emotions. Glancing over her research, Durchslag tell me that one man related prostitution to renting an organ for 10 minutes. Durchslag's most frightening aspect of her research was when she discovered that many of the men know about the damaging affects of prostitution but they deliberately choose to disregard them. Her main focus aside from decreasing the demand for prostitution is to finally give prostitutes a face and to be seen as women and not objects.

Some of the highlights of the first year: Durchslag produced two plays, **Body and Sold** which was about 8 youth from 3 different cities who were a part of the sex trade, and **Becoming Nastasha** which followed the lives of women who were that were trafficked into sexual slavery. On Art for Awareness Day, CAASE held a film festival on sexual exploitation and women in the media. Rachel understands that showing films are one of the best mediums to raise awareness. For example, there is a difference if an individual tells you that the average age for prostitution in Chicago is 14 and a film about a 14-year-old prostitute.

Durchslag also lectures about this issue on any given opportunity across the country and on several different campuses. Of course, a huge chunk of her time has been spent on her research project. She strives to develop both a classroom curriculum and a public awareness campaign for prevention. The curriculum will eventually be taught by a core of activists and teachers in high schools throughout the city.

Lastly, Durchslag looks forward to establishing a John's traffic school for men who have been caught soliciting prostitutes. Since she knows it is much easier to arrest prostitutes than Johns, she would love to distribute report cards to each district so that they can compare the number of arrests made on Johns with that of prostitutes, encouraging each district to get their act together.

Although CAASE is a one-woman act, it is clearly the beginning of a transformed generation. Other countries have gone so far as to legalize prostitution. Durchslag responds, "Should we ever legalize abuse against people?" Together we can answer an unyielding no. Together we can stop the demand for prostitution.