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What Works

The Oldest Profession: How a German nonprofit is repurposing sex workers' skills By John Laurenson

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what works

Strategies, Approaches, Developments

The Oldest Profession

How a German nonprofit is repurposing sex workers' skills *by John Laurenson*

Katrina looks down into her glass of fizzy mineral water. It's not easy for her to talk about this.

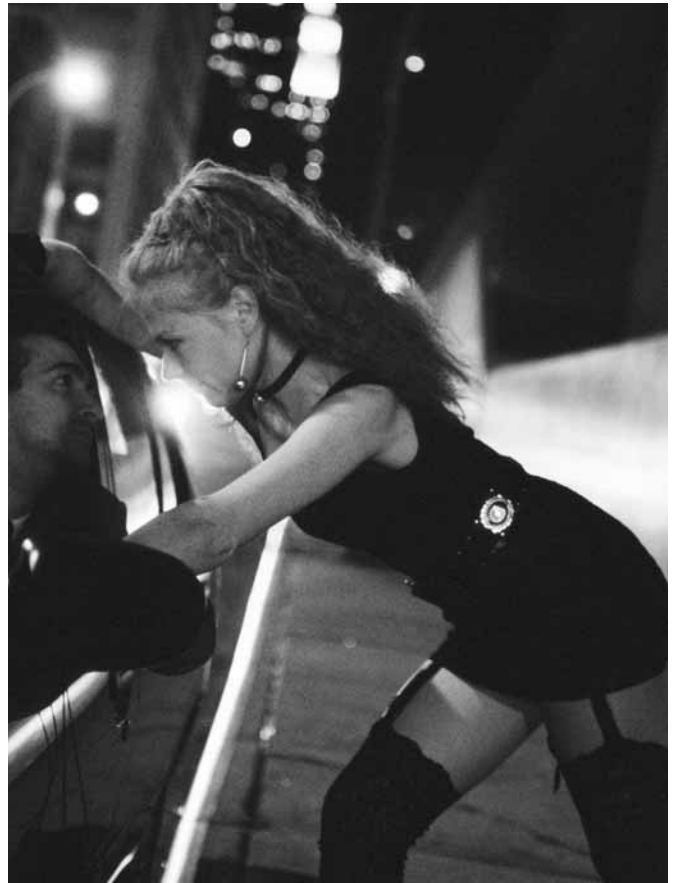
Until a few weeks ago she called herself Tanya. She worked at a sex club in Essen, a city in the German state of North Rhine-Westfalia. Although Katrina was a prostitute for eight years, and although she lives in a country where prostitution is more acceptable than in America (200,000 German prostitutes are licensed, pay taxes, and get public health insurance), she was never comfortable with what she did.

"I used to wake up in the morning, think about the day ahead, and shudder," Katrina says. "And with my children growing up, it was becoming more and more difficult to hide what I did for a living."

Now, Katrina is one of 30 prostitutes between the ages of 19 and 40 who are building themselves new careers – and new identities. They're starting a two-year course that will retrain them as geriatric nurses, thanks to a program called ProFridA, which in German stands for "prostitutes into the job market." ProFridA is organized and partly funded by Diakonie Westfalen, the social action branch of Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) – the German Evangelical Church. (The meaning of the German word "Evangelische" is closer to the English word "Protestant" than to "evangelical.") Katrina and the other women began a basic business skills course in April. In August they will start their specialized training at a college in the nearby town of Bochum.

Katrina reckons she's just right for the job. "I had some older customers who'd talk to me about their worries and pains," she says. "I really want to give these people a good time and make them happy ... to find out their needs and ways to fulfill them." At last she looks up and there's a lot of determination in her clear blue eyes.

Rita Kuhn, the founder of ProFridA and Diakonie Westfalen's special consultant for women's projects, agrees with Katrina. Former prostitutes "are not afraid of physical intimacy, they react sensitively to other people, and are good listeners," she says. That's why experience in prostitution should qualify people for a "normal" job like geriatric care, rather than disqualify them as it has in the past, Kuhn explains.



Sex workers are plentiful in Germany, but geriatric nurses are in short supply. ProFridA, an NGO, retrains prostitutes to meet the demand for eldercare nurses in this graying nation.

The Church's Blessing

Kuhn has been working with prostitutes and victims of domestic violence for 10 years. In her current position, she first had to persuade prostitutes, priests, and pen pushers that ProFridA was good for them all. Here she was helped by the EKD, which is very liberal by American standards. The EKD provided \$600,000, half of ProFridA's start-up funding.

"We want to show these women that God has given them the power to choose how they use their talents," says Pastor Angelika Weigt-Blaytgen, a clergywoman who heads a shelter for battered women and sits on Diakonie Westfalen's advisory board. Her primary hope is not to "lead them out of sin," she says.

Neither does Weigt-Blaytgen believe that the church's refusal to condemn prostitution is going to help this already-

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huge industry grow even larger. Prostitution has been with us since at least biblical times, she says, and so those who try to eradicate it are just deluding themselves.

The Evangelical Church supports not only ProFridA, but also Midnight Mission, the nonprofit that recruits Katrina and the other prostitutes for ProFridA. Based in Dortmund, another town in western Germany, Midnight Mission sends its workers out on the streets to talk to prostitutes and help them when they run into trouble. Many of these workers are themselves former prostitutes. Each year Midnight Mission holds a fundraising service at a big church in the center of Dortmund. A number of former prostitutes take part in this service. The organization also holds an annual fundraising party at a brothel.

Enter the Government

With the church very much on her side, Kuhn then sought the support of the government. She did this by stressing the economic benefits of ProFridA. Prostitutes usually give up “the game” at around 40 (although Midnight Mission’s oldest client is 74). “That leaves most of them living on welfare for 20 years,” says Kuhn.

What’s more, Germany’s aging population is crying out for caretakers. There are some 6,400 vacancies in geriatric nursing nationwide, even though Germany’s unemployment rate tops 12 percent. The ProFridA project is “very coherent,” says Heinz Oberlach of Germany’s Federal Employment Agency.

“Germany doesn’t have much of a reputation for service-with-a-smile,” adds Jutta Geissler-Hehlke, director of the Midnight Mission. “That’s not something we’re usually terribly good at. But former prostitutes are very customer-orientated ... very friendly. ... And in their former jobs they had to deal with physical aspects a lot and to find out how bodies want to be treated.”

Despite the soundness of ProFridA’s concept, neither the German federal government nor the European Union was ready to put money into the organization. But the regional government of North Rhine-Westphalia rose to the occasion, dipping into funds that the E.U. gives to regional governments to spend as they see fit. The regional government matched the EKD’s contribution of \$600,000, so that ProFridA’s 20-month budget now totals \$1.2 million.

Managing Expectations

A possible hitch in ProFridA’s plan is the reaction of the elderly people who will soon find former sex workers at their bedside. The worry, according to Kuhn, is not so much that

clients might object to their new nurses, but that they might have unreasonable expectations about the sort of care they are about to receive. In order to protect the nurses from clients with a glint in their eye, ProFridA thinks that it should keep its trainees’ former professional lives secret. “It will be up to the women whether they tell their new employers,” says Kuhn. “We think they should. But it would be silly for nursing home directors to tell their customers. They are qualified nurses,” she says, “and that is all customers need to know.”

Almost all of the elderly people I spoke with about ProFridA were positive about the idea, but some disliked its lack of openness. “Why hide the truth?” said one elderly gent in a café. “I already read about it in the newspaper. I’m sure the old people will realize it after a while and then they will say, ‘Why weren’t we told the truth?’” Another man said that, from now on, the first question the inhabitants of nursing homes across North Rhine-Westphalia will ask themselves about new nurses will be, “Is this woman a hooker?”

How that all works itself out in the nursing homes won’t be known until the first women are placed in 2008. But the recruitment stage has already been a success. Midnight Mission says ProFridA is oversubscribed, and that demand for retraining will rise still further when more women have heard about the program.

This spike in interest is partly due to the rapidly changing face of prostitution in Germany. Over the past few years, hundreds of thousands of women from the former Soviet Union and its satellites in Central Europe have come to trade sex in the European Union, says Geissler-Hehlke. “Competition is very high, and it is pushing prices down. Now we hear about girls selling sex for seven euros,” she says – the equivalent of \$10.

Because of the booming international sex trade, “[ProFridA] is relevant to all European countries,” says Kuhn. “We hope other regions and other countries will see what we’re doing in North Rhine-Westphalia and want to follow our example.” □

EMPOWERING DEVALUED WORKERS

- View all skills as potential assets
- Be sensitive to stigmatized people’s concerns
- Meet emerging societal needs
- Pursue cross-sector partnerships