

A disparate group of men ordered to the St. Paul program hears from police, a health worker and women who have escaped the lifestyle.

By [PAT PHEIFER](#), Star Tribune

John Penland was part prosecutor and part preacher as he stood among 10 men, mostly slouched in their chairs, as they gathered in a conference room on a recent Saturday morning.

"Everybody's pissed off to be here, right? Right?" Penland asked. "Everybody feels they were framed, right? Right?"

Each of the men had been caught in a john sting in St. Paul for soliciting prostitution. As part of their sentence, all were required to pay \$400 tuition and attend the day-long Offenders Prostitution Program, held at the St. Paul Police Department. It's better known as john school.

The men could be anybody's father, brother or son. Although each was arrested in St. Paul, none lives there. They came from Minneapolis, Maplewood, Eagan, Fridley and Hudson, Wis. Their ages ranged from 38 to 61. A mail carrier, a computer analyst, a college instructor, a film student sat among them.

Breaking Free, a St. Paul organization that helps women escape prostitution and its accompanying lifestyle, runs the monthly john school. In the past three years about 700 men came to the school. Only three have re-offended in St. Paul, said Vednita Carter, executive director of Breaking Free.

Penland, an assistant St. Paul city attorney, explained to the men the legal ramifications of their crime and asked them to "open your mind."

"Nobody's here to judge anybody," he said. "Nobody's here to call you a deviant, pervert or weirdo."

But it's not a victimless crime, stressed Penland and Sgt. John Bandemer of the St. Paul police vice unit. Bandemer said the youngest girl he's come across in his four-plus years in the vice unit was 12.

"She was walking the streets in St. Paul, approaching men at stoplights, [a] liquor store parking lot, asking if they wanted any company. Where does a 12-year-old learn that? She learned it from her older sister, who taught her the ways. We were able to intervene in her life early enough. ... We didn't lock her up right away. We chased her around for probably six, eight months.

"Two years later, on Halloween night, she knocked on my door trick-or-treating with other 14-year-old girls. Acting like a 14-year-old instead of prostituting. For me, that was just some personal validation that what we're doing is the right thing," he said.

Goal is to 'stop the demand'

Bandemer asked how many of the men had gone looking for prostitution for the first time. Five raised their hands.

"That's getting better," Bandemer said. "Used to be nobody would admit it. Half of you admit it wasn't your first time. Hopefully it was your last. Our goal with this program ... is to eventually stop the demand for sexual services on the street, in hotels or online. Then our daughters and our neighbors' daughters won't be out there having to provide it."

The men squirmed as Penland and Bandemer spoke. The show was just starting.

Chris Waller, coordinator of the Health Education Risk Reduction program at Hennepin County Medical Center, talked for almost an hour about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) ranging from HIV to hepatitis, syphilis, gonorrhea and HPV, the virus that causes genital warts.

"Barrier protection is what we have right now that's going to keep you safe," Waller said as she brought out condoms for males and females. Many of the men wanted nothing to do with the female condom and quickly tossed it down the line.

Then Joy Friedman, a staff member at Breaking Free who facilitated the program, showed stomach-turning slides of diseased sex organs and untreated STIs.

Friedman is a survivor of prostitution. She cringed whenever anyone used the word "prostitute."

"When do we stop being called 'prostitute?'" she asked. "I am not a prostitute. I was prostituted. My name is Joy. I'm a woman. I'm a mother. I'm a grandmother. When I hear that word, it's like I'm right back there."

One woman's story

When Tari Lauer, 42, began speaking, the men in the room sat up a little straighter. The Duluth woman is blond, tan and fit. Her appearance belies the life she led for decades.

Lauer said she grew up in a dysfunctional family -- her stepfather's idea of a Sunday drive was to take his wife and kids cruising for prostituted women. By 15, she was running away from home, a lot.

"I learned that sex would get you what you needed," she said. "A roof over your head, clothes." By 17, she had been kidnapped by a pimp. Although she escaped from that man, her family had given up. She tried working at a cafe on E. Lake Street in Minneapolis, but walking the few blocks home, she was solicited day after day by pimps and johns alike.

"The first time I got in that car, it was too easy. Why have sex for free? It got out of control so fast."

She was beaten. She was stabbed. She had a gun pointed at her head more times than she could count. She worked on the street, in hotels, for escort services and in massage parlors. She said she turned upwards of 100 tricks a day.

Crack cocaine became her escape. She said she has lost track of the number of her prostitution arrests. The drug abuse led to arrests for check forgery and identity theft. She said she has had "multiple abortions because I shacked up with my drug dealer."

She was 27 when she married one of her johns, thinking it was the only way to keep her children and keep herself out of prison. "The day I said, 'I do,' I cringed inside," she said. "He controlled everything I did. I was only a crackhead whore [to him]."

Lauer, who is in the midst of "the nastiest divorce ever," said she's been clean and sober for 17 months.

Only first-time offenders are eligible to attend john school. If they complete the class within a year and comply with conditions of their one- or two-year probations, their record is wiped clean.

In Minneapolis, first-time offenders are court-ordered to attend john school *and* the Restorative Justice Program, a citizens panel. But prosecutors seek a conviction that will stay on a perpetrator's record, said City Attorney Susan Segal.

The men had little to say through the day. Before the program began, they filled out two surveys, one to track demographics. The other asked if they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "There is nothing wrong with prostitution," "Prostitutes enjoy their work," "It would be okay if my son went to a prostitute."

They filled out the same survey at the end of the program. Many who had checked "agree" the first time revised their answers to "disagree" the second time.

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7TH ANNUAL CANDLELIGHT VIGIL

Breaking Free will hold its annual event to end prostitution and remember the women and girls who have been killed while involved in prostitution.

WHEN: 6 p.m. today.

WHERE: Begins at Breaking Free, 770 University Av., St. Paul. Participants can join a short walk down University Avenue to protest the violence. The event also will honor the late Sgt. Jerry Vick, who worked to help the women and eradicate the trade.

MORE INFORMATION: Go to www.breakingfree.net or call 651-645-6557.