

BOB HERBERT

Bought And Sold

ATLANTA

When Mayor Shirley Franklin recently announced that the city would be cracking down on the pimps and johns who prey on under-age prostitutes, she also disclosed publicly for the first time that she had been molested when she was a young girl.

Speaking at a gathering of reporters, local officials and civic leaders, the mayor spoke frankly about the incident, in which she was abused at the age of 10 by the father of a girlfriend. She then asked how many of the women in attendance had endured similar experiences. Several women in the room raised their hands.

One of the most tightly kept secrets in the U.S. is the extent to which children are sexually exploited, not just by child pornographers and compulsive pedophiles, but by men who are viewed by their relatives, friends and neighbors as quintessentially solid citizens.

In an interview on Friday, Ms. Franklin told me: "It seemed appropriate to reveal my story in that setting, because what we were trying to do is demonstrate that this can happen to anyone. Not only can it happen; it *does* happen to a lot of children."

Atlanta has become a major hub of commercial sex in the U.S. It's a full-fledged sex-tourism destination, with thousands of strippers, prostitutes and other sex workers accommodating an endless stream of johns from around the country. Under-age girls (some as young as 10 and 11) are a significant part of that trade. Many of them were already carrying the scars of sexual molestation when they got into prostitution.

A study of the commercial sexual exploitation of girls in Atlanta, released a year ago by the Atlanta Women's Agenda, an advisory group formed at the mayor's request, said:

"Atlanta, being a convention and sports event center, has a thriving 'adult entertainment' industry: strip clubs, lingerie and sex shops, escort services, massage parlors. At the same time, Atlanta generates its own lost battalions of emotionally and physically abandoned children and is a magnet for such children from outlying areas. These children are vulnerable to the pimps and their recruiters, but the pimp would have no interest in the children if there were no demand."

Ms. Franklin, who is 61, is trying to jump-start a cultural change that will expand awareness of the widespread sexual exploitation of children in Atlanta and foster an attitude

Atlanta works to stop the exploitation of children.

throughout the city that it is not to be tolerated.

It is beyond unusual for a mayor, especially the mayor of a city that depends as heavily on tourism as Atlanta, to shine a spotlight on a problem as repellent as child prostitution. I asked the mayor why she went ahead with such a high-profile campaign, which includes a "Dear John" initiative that has flooded the city with posters and public service announcements declaring that the men who "buy sex from our kids" will no longer be tolerated.

"We take the position in my administration that the best way to solve a problem is to face the facts," she said, adding: "We know the problem is here. It's happening on our watch. It's unacceptable behavior, and we are not going to stand for it. So look for us to do everything in our power to change it."

It won't be easy. Law enforcement agencies have a notoriously poor record when it comes to prosecuting and putting away the pimps, traffickers and johns in the child sex trade. And there are very few resources, financial and otherwise, to help the kids once they are identified.

The mayor acknowledged the heavy lift that will be required: "Normally, by the time girls become prostitutes, there are a lot of other experiences that they've had, and you can't turn that around with a pat on the back and a new set of clothes. There's a great deal of psychological damage. They've lost trust in adults. They've lost self-confidence. Many of them have lost the will to do anything differently. They're demoralized.

"So we're just getting started. And we'll be asking for a lot of help."

The last time I was in Atlanta, about a month ago, I rode with the police as, among other things, they looked for a 15-year-old girl who had become a prostitute and was being used by her pimp to recruit other young girls. I remember looking at a circular with a picture of the child. She had the saddest expression on her face.

Over the weekend I checked with the cops to see if they had found her. "We never did," said Lt. Keith Meadows, who heads the city's vice unit. "We have reason to believe that she might have been trafficked out of the state." □

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