



SAFE, NOT 'SOLD'

Documentary-style play educates teens on dangers of sex trade

By TENLEY WOODMAN

An older guy approaches you on a Boston shopping trip. He seems sweet and nice, and tells you how pretty you are.

Is he a player? Or something much worse?

Last month the Herald reported how two DSS workers rescued a Dorchester teen from her pimp in New York City. She is just one of many who have been lured into the sex trade.

Playwright and actor Deborah Lake Fortson and members of the Boston community hope to send that point

home with local youths during a performance of "Body & Sold" at ROCA in Chelsea Thursday night.

"Body & Sold," written by Lake Fortson and produced by Tempest Productions, is a documentary-style play based on interviews with young women who have been recruited into the sex trade.

A post-performance discussion aims to help the audience process the information.

"It gives kids a heads-up about what an abusive relationship looks like," said Lake Fortson, who staged a performance of "Body & Sold" earlier this month in Roxbury. "They are psycho-

logically terrorized."

According to a recent U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report, the average age of prostitutes is 14, with some as young as 9. There are more than 400,000 prostitutes in America, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, though other agencies believe the number is closer to 800,000.

"We've noticed an enormous increase of sexual exploitation ages getting younger," said Olinka Briceno, program director of A Way Back, a center for teen prostitutes.

"A lot of the girls we were working with were in (their mid- to late teens). It's an 11-year-old, 13-year-old now.

"When they reach 17 or 18 they are too old for the trade. It is easier to manipulate a younger girl. You have a girl who looks 17 in her body, (but considering) the trauma in her developmental stages, you are seeing a 9-year-old or a 6-year-old," she said.

Briceno and Mi-Haita Almeida, Boston regional placement coordinator for the Department of Social Services, are working with Lake Fortson to raise local awareness.

"I see the play as a big tool on education about sexual exploitation because it's real," Briceno said. "It's opening a can of worms. Some people may be ready to see it, some may not, but it is reality."

The play illustrates the techniques pimps use to lure girls into the trade. Briceno said while discussing these situations with teens one girl recalled how she was approached in Downtown Crossing, unaware that the

sweet-talking guy she was interacting with was a pimp.

"What I do know, I don't know exactly how pimps know who they are going to approach, but they are very savvy about approaching girls that are isolated. They are very, very savvy about approaching girls who are looking for an adult figure in their life," Almeida said.

Lake Fortson said most girls are runaways and at least 85 percent of them have a history of sexual abuse from their childhood. This becomes a coercive tool for pimps to use against the girls, Briceno said.

"I see it with these girls even after they come into placement. You hear these girls not knowing what a healthy relationship is," Briceno said.

"This is a business that is run by men, and as long as men have power and money, women, girls, babies are going to continue to be victimized," Briceno said.

"Body & Sold" at ROCA, 101 Park St., Chelsea. Thursday, 7 p.m. Free. www.rocainc.org



STAFF PHOTOS BY LISA HORNAK

EMOTIONAL CHARACTERS: Chantel Bibb, above, and Emilia Richeson, top, rehearse the compelling play 'Body & Sold.'

Call to action

Continue the discussion about teen prostitution, sexual exploitation and child trafficking at a community response meeting tonight, 6-9, at New Boston Pilot Middle School, 270 Columbia Road, Dorchester. Call 617-905-1937 or e-mail info@tvosnetwork.org