

## CHILDREN AND PROSTITUTION

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Part One: May 20, 5 pm

Part Two: May 27, 5 pm

Youth Menace, CJSR 88.5 FM

Edmonton's 118 Ave is one of the city's most notorious thoroughfares. Hookers, johns, drunks, drug dealers and police are familiar sights in this area, which has seven schools within a two-block radius. Young girls on their way home from school are often approached for sex, mistaken for the school-aged prostitutes who work those same streets.

A couple of years ago, a group of angry girls between the ages of twelve and seventeen blew a fuse, initiating a vicious attack on a woman who they perceived to be a hooker.

The woman was walking down the street at around midnight, dazed, shoes in hand. One member of a group of girls hanging out decided to punch the lady and knock her to the ground. Group mentality led to more of the girls getting involved, kicking the woman and at one point even dancing on her face.

The woman was, in fact, the dazed victim of a recent sexual assault. But had she been a prostitute, it would hardly have mitigated the crime. So how should the girls' crime be addressed?

The three main offenders, all under the age of sixteen, were handed a unique sentence, which the victim of their crime had a hand in determining. Through the Youth Restorative Action Project (YRAP), the consequence was constructed to foster a little empathy for the prostitutes that the girls claimed to hate.

YRAP is a justice committee unique to our city. It was formed by the inspiration of Yasmina Semanac, a teenaged Serbian/Canadian who managed to escape her war-ravaged country. The YRAP panel is run by youth who work with the courts to determine sentences for young people involved in "hate crimes and crimes of significant social issues."

In this case, the panel called on Mark Cherrington, a youth worker involved in YRAP and with *Youth Menace*, a radio show on CJSR about young offenders and the criminal justice system. *Youth Menace* is hosted by youth and exists to give voice to the often silenced young offender population — Cherrington often takes these kids straight from the Law Courts to CJSR where they can answer questions and discuss their situations, unedited and on air. "Somebody described [the show] as either 'brilliantly wonderful or a wonderful disaster depending on what show you turn on,'" laughs Cherrington.

The radio show and YRAP are partners in crime fighting. "YRAP is an amazing project that really intertwines with *Youth Menace*. It shows a certain level of youth justice being developed and delivered by youth. The only requirement [to be a member] is that you're below your twenty-fifth birthday and that you affirm a belief in the declaration of universal human rights."

The girls were instructed to make a two-hour radio documentary about child prostitution in their own backyards. The documentary, *Children and Prostitution: Victims, All of Us*, is as interesting and honest a portrait of the situation as you're ever going to get, kind of like when Harmony Korine, a youth himself, made the movie *Kids*, though here there is not an ounce of fiction or conjecture.

The voices represented in *Victims* are all children and all girls. We meet a sixteen-year-old pimp who chews unendingly on candy because she's trying to get off crystal meth; and a child prostitute who met her pimp by naively waving at him across the street from the public library because she thought he was cute, two days later finding herself working the streets for drug money; and the girls who claim to hate prostitutes.

"This piece is the first piece from the perspective of the child," says Cherrington. "It's not a ministerial statement, it's not mid- to low-level bureaucrats talking about 'we need to' or 'we should' or 'this is adequate or inadequate.'"

On the contrary, the documentary is peppered with original urban music, explicit songs all written by street kids from ihuman, an inner city arts studio. The piece is well-executed, though the voices of the girls couldn't be more raw and uncut.

"It's a testament, not a message," says Cherrington. "At the end it goes back to the philosophy of *Youth Menace*: you may agree or disagree with what's being said, but the bottom line is that you certainly have to respect it, and it needs to be listened to."