



Photo by Michael Wilhelm

Prostitution

The human element in this controversial and age-old profession

BY JOLAYNE HOUTZ

Sally" was 17 when she started walking the streets in Eugene, looking desperately for money.

She had been out of her home for three years, going through foster homes like water through a sieve. But when her first "john," or customer, handed her \$20 after they had sex, she discovered a steady source of income that kept her afloat for the next 10 years.

Prostitution is a big business, a bastion of organized crime that involves 1 million women nationwide and up to \$25 billion a year, although prostitution is illegal in every state except Nevada.

Many see prostitution as a feminist issue, an institution that should be decriminalized to allow women to earn money without having to fear arrest. But others say prostitutes are the victims of the men who use them and of a society that rejects them.

Prostitutes are a pervasive part of almost any sizable community, used by corporations to attract clients, hotels to attract guests and university athletic

departments to attract athletes.

In Eugene, a former vice narcotics supervisor with the Eugene Police Department says no more than a dozen prostitutes work in the area. But several prostitutes who have worked in the Eugene/Springfield area say that although there may be only a handful of streetwalkers, there are many more who are in the business part time, earning \$20 to \$100 for each "trick" or sex act.

Sally says after her first experience with prostitution in the early 1970s, she worked almost every night for the next 10 years, seeing one to seven men each night. "I knew in society's eyes I was doing something wrong, but I didn't feel bad. I figured it was better than a soup line."

Sally joined other prostitutes on "the stroll," Eighth Avenue and Willamette Street. "The cops would joke with us then. I remember one time I gave a cop \$2 to get me a Twinkie and some orange juice while I was out working. That was all before the trouble started."

A police crackdown forced her and many other Eugene prostitutes to seek safer territory in Portland, but not before an undercover policeman arrested her for solicitation after she offered him sex for money. Sally spent the weekend in jail.

After she moved to Portland, she

was arrested six times in two months and ended up with a six-month jail term.

When she got out, she found a "sugar daddy," a man who was willing to pay for her food and housing in return for her companionship, although he was impotent. Their relationship lasted seven years.

Although she has been off the streets since she got out of jail, Sally does occasionally prostitute to help support herself and her family. "Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't still be doing it if I hadn't gone to jail."

But in most cases, arrest does little to deter prostitutes, many of whom are supporting drug habits or their pimps' drug habits, says Sgt. Tim McCarthy, director of community affairs with the EPD.

"Most prostitution in Eugene is pretty sophisticated. I imagine there are call girls with regular clients," McCarthy says. Some area hotels also may have resident prostitutes, usually without the knowledge of the management, "although there is a certain amount of looking the other way," he says.

Many of the traditional Eugene streetwalkers now are what Sally calls "mall rats," kids aged 14 to 20 who hang around the Eugene Mall downtown and sell sex for \$5 to \$10 to

buy drugs. "They have nowhere to go. They're hooked on drugs. There needs to be a place for them to go, but there's not," Sally says.

Although prostitution activity varies, police attention in recent years has turned to more pressing problems than Eugene's negligible prostitution problem.

In 1984, there was only one arrest for prostitution in Eugene, and in 1985 there were four arrests because of the breakup of a stripper organization that doubled as a prostitution ring for some of the strip dancers. In comparison, there were 800 arrests for assault in 1985 and 410 arrests for drug abuse.

But prostitution is an undercurrent at almost any university, says Marion Goldman, a University associate sociology professor who has researched prostitution and has written a book on the subject.

Sometimes fraternities employ prostitutes at their parties, and some fraternities make it a yearly tradition to go to Nevada and use the brothels, she says.

Portland seems to have a problem with prostitution unmatched by any other city in the region as many prostitutes have moved closer to where the money is.

Portland's estimated 2,000 prostitutes can earn from \$20 to \$200 for each trick. In 1985, there were about

Jolayne Houtz spent months researching and developing sources to write this story about an important and sensitive issue. Houtz is community editor for the Oregon Daily Emerald.