

INTERNATIONAL

Escaping boys' town

Vancouver's male sex workers fight to emerge from the street's shadows

BY STEVE SMYSNUIK
 STREET NEWS SERVICE

Addicted and high on drugs, Idris Hudson followed the man offering to pay for sex up to his hotel room. Hudson depended on the money he earned hustling, so he had to take his chances with customers. Unbeknownst to him, a group of five or six other men were waiting for him in the hotel room. Hudson's not sure of the exact number, but he knows they beat him up. They raped him. They tortured him and kicked him out.

Hudson didn't have a home, or any friends, for that matter. He wandered to his temporary shelter—under a tree near the Burrard Street Bridge—and waited for the drugs to wear off. He cried a lot, too, wondering how he ever got to that point.

A lot has changed since that tragic day in September 2007. Hudson exited the sex trade, clean and sober. When we meet, he's well dressed and sips a fruit smoothie at Big News Coffee on Granville Street. He speaks candidly about his 15 years in the sex trade, which came very close to killing him.

"My life consisted of nothing," says the 32-year-old. "I was just wandering around, existing ... barely."

Male sex trade workers face high rates of violence, usually by customers conflicted with their own sexuality. Sue McIntyre's seminal 2005 study of the male sex trade, "Under the Radar: The Sexual Exploitation of Young Men," sheds light on the experiences of 157 male sex workers across B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Her study revealed that more than 80 percent had experienced some form of violence during their time in the trade. Over 90 percent identified their work as "dangerous," something Hudson's experience attests to.

According to Hudson, violence often occurs when customers are unsure of themselves or angry about cheating on their spouses. This aggression is then taken out

on the escort.

"This is something that's rarely discussed," he says. "It happens to a lot of guys. I would say in the male trade more than the female trade, but it's not reported. No man is ever going to walk into a police station and say, 'I was raped, I was willingly raped because I was picked up by a bad date.'"

Hudson chalks this up to shame, which he feels is near universal in the male sex trade. "To say that they're overpowered by somebody, or raped, is not something that most males would dare to talk about," he says. "It takes a lot of people down really quickly. You want to die after something like that."

Because so little is known about the male sex trade, people are often unaware of the dangers faced by male sex trade workers.

McIntyre says that homophobia and ignorance are inextricably linked to this—people are often stunned to learn that men work in the sex trade at all. The term "male prostitute" subverts the image of alpha masculinity that society has endorsed for so long and forces people to reassess their notions of sexuality and gender roles—something McIntyre says makes most people uncomfortable. Sex work already is an uncomfortable issue for most, but when mixed with society's homophobic tendencies, not many will address it. This displaces the men even further.

Tragically Typical

There's no singular reason why men enter the sex trade, but there certainly are constants. According to McIntyre's British Columbia findings, 95 per cent of male sex workers in the province have a history of running away. Close to 70 per cent had a history, prior to working the street, of being sexually violated.

Nearly three-quarters have witnessed or

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— IDRIS HUDSON
 FORMER SEX WORKER

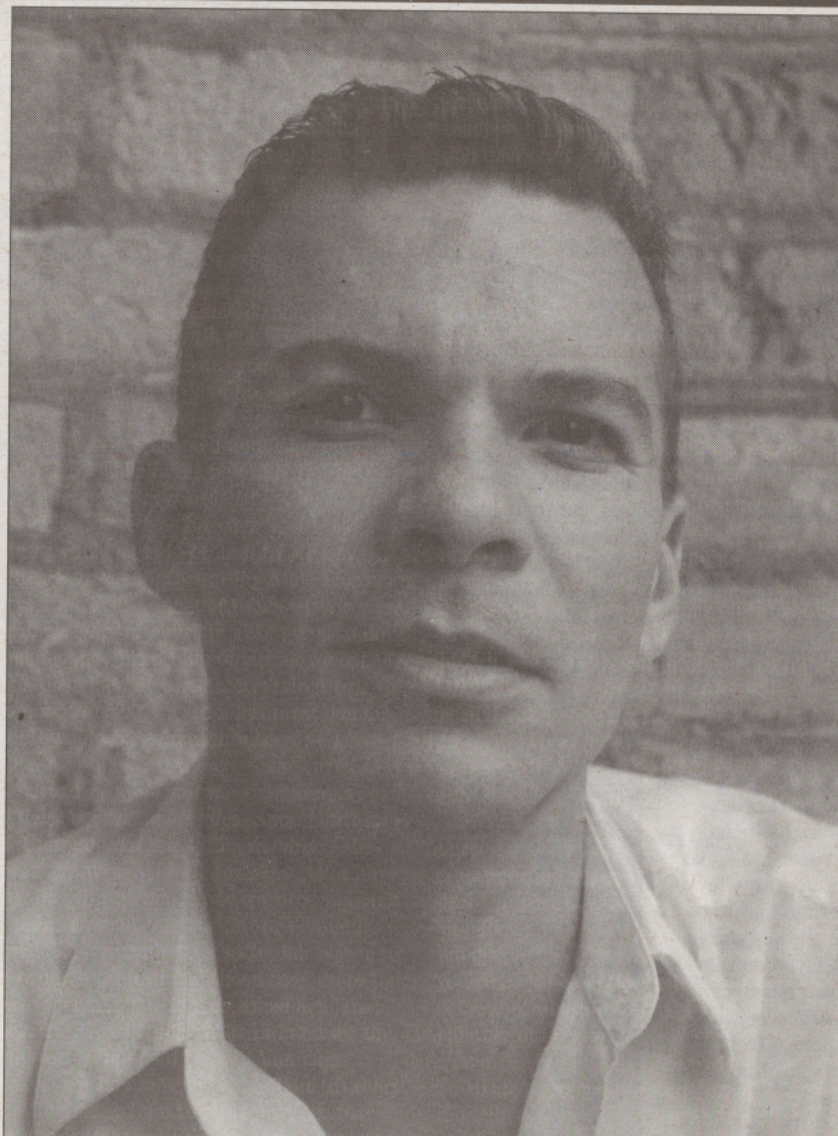


PHOTO BY DARREN FLEET

Idris Hudson says his 15 years in the sex trade very nearly killed him.

experienced physical violence in the home while growing up. Over half had involvement in child welfare services. Forty per cent are of Aboriginal heritage.

"Under the Radar" also found that close to three-quarters of those that enter the sex trade are younger than 18 (a much higher percentage than women), making Hudson's case unfortunately typical.

Hudson left his home of Cranbrook at age 15 because the small B.C. town wasn't accepting of young gay males. He fled with only a backpack and went to Calgary, where he knew he could explore his sexuality without fear. Unable to get into the gay clubs, he would wait outside with kids in the same situation.

Older men would pay them for sex. Hudson said it was a logical choice—he was homeless and broke. It seemed romantic too—his first trick was also the first guy he ever kissed.

"And it was easy cash," he says. "For an irresponsible teenager, it was amazing."

His boyish facial features, slim figure and olive skin quickly earned Hudson a steady stream of male customers, who eventually became his only lasting relationships toward the end of his 15 years in the trade. Because he had little education and "virtually no work ethic," the sex trade became his occupation. He couldn't fathom

selling retail for minimum wage when he would make \$200 to \$300 per customer, and he'd see maybe three, four or five customers per night.

"Now that I've grown, I've realized at what cost that comes," he says.

Hustle to Survive

Hudson ended up in the Downtown Eastside for about six months, addicted to cocaine, booze and assorted party drugs before he was assaulted. He says by that point, he was on the verge of disappearing into the back alleys when HUSTLE found him.

HUSTLE, the first peer support organization in Canada designed specifically to assist males in the sex trade, helped Hudson exit the trade and get off drugs one year later. He exited on his first try because he was motivated, but at least half the men McIntyre interviewed for "Under the Radar" were in and out of the trade at least once. Hudson himself has known a lot of people who never made it out—they disappear or they die.

Matthew Taylor and Don Presland, both former sex workers, saw the need for more support in the male sex trade, and together

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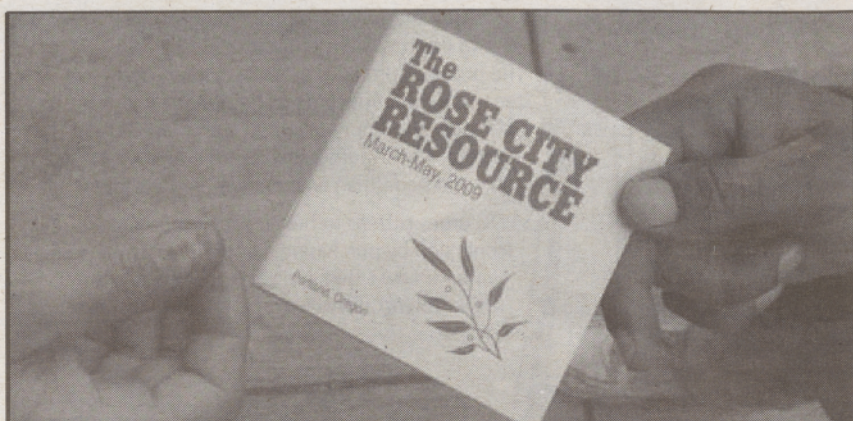
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