

Former prostitute turned shop owner challenges perceptions

BY ELECIA CHRUNIK
STREET NEWS SERVICE

VANCOUVER, B.C. — Amanda Bonella used to be a prostitute in Vancouver, Canada. After leaving the trade, she decided to open an ice-cream parlor, using the principles of minimal harm by using local, organic ingredients, chemical-free cleaning products and biodegradable packaging. Her ethics go beyond food, however. Bonella only employs former colleagues from the sex trade.

The day we've met Amanda Bonella wasn't her best day, but it certainly wasn't her worst, either, considering the obstacles she's had to overcome. Bonella is the owner of Yogiberry, a nook of an ice cream parlor turned soup and sandwich shop in Vancouver. The day before this interview someone robbed her and stole her rent money while she was locking up shop.

It's really her charm, the way she engages with her customers and carefully chops each vegetable on a custom order gluten-free homemade pizza that has people coming back to enjoy her "delish meets nutrish" food.

Yogiberry is located in a cheerful spot of the Downtown Eastside, in Vancouver, with bright pink walls and iridescent glass tile countertops. But it's not the easiest location from which to run a business. Bonella is constantly cleaning the entrance outside, sweeping it of needles, garbage and whatever other trash had been left behind while the store was closed.

But she's a long-time resident of the area and doesn't want to be anywhere else. The topic of gentrification comes up in conversation and her perspective is as refreshing as her real fruit smoothies. "I don't want the neighbourhood to change, I love this neighbourhood and how colourful it is," she says.

At the same time, though, she feels that the residents have to step up their level of respect for the businesses as much as the businesses are demanded to consider the needs of the people who were living there first. "I don't like this divide, but I don't like it from either side. Everyone has to accept responsibility for the conditions down here."



Amanda Bonella at her shop, Yogiberry, in Vancouver, B.C.

PHOTO BY MATTHEW ZYLSTRA SAWATZKY

It's a meaningful sentiment coming from her. She's open about her life, about the fact that she was raised in foster homes, some of which were abusive, and that she was recruited into the sex trade when she was a young teenager. She avoided drugs so never had to deal with that barrier when she decided to exit the trade in her early twenties after a particularly frightening date. She also had her daughter to consider by then.

Bonella found the support she needed

through PEERS (Prostitutes Empowerment Education Resource Society) in Victoria, a group of former sex trade workers dedicated to helping people exit the trade. She eventually opened Vancouver's PEERS chapter and got involved with public education. She also started a general contracting company which she's still involved with and whose members built the inside of her cheerful shop.

After working as support for people in the sex trade, the emotional challenge started to

take its toll. "I had to leave because it burnt me out. It's emotional on a whole other level because I come from that life and it's very triggering," she says.

Since opening last October, Bonella has endeavoured to employ someone either involved in the sex trade, as she once was, or trying to leave it.

And as she treats her employees without judgment, she does the same with her customers, a necessity in this neighbourhood. The products she serves are not only of high quality, but affordable, too. "You'll have a lawyer and a drug user and a drug dealer in the same lineup, not really knowing how to interact ... and it's really funny," she says.

While having an inclusive business philosophy might produce some mildly amusing situations, it also has its costs. Because Bonella treats everyone equally as customers, she is more susceptible to the unpredictable behaviors that the drug trade unleashes like theft and vandalism. She acknowledges that not everyone feels comfortable sharing space with people who are on drugs or who make a living pushing drugs.

Sudah Williams works at Yogiberry part-time. "What you have to keep in mind here is that a customer is a customer regardless of what they do outside of here," Williams says. "We have to keep that in mind so that we don't fall into treating them a certain way because of what they do."

And of her boss? "She's a great boss. If you need anything she's always here to help with anything at all," Williams says.

Having taught herself how to design websites, Bonella will still take on the occasional contract to make sure that her bills are covered—the winter months have been slow for a shop that began selling ice cream. She's not worried, though. She's got a knack for rolling with the punches.

"I'm not someone who resists change," she says. "I want to be a part of the change, especially when it's for the better."

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Shawn Bytell, 28, sells papers on the street for a living. Bytell is recently homeless and has been working for Street Roots for the last five months.

PHOTO BY SAMANTHA MCCARTY

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I am a junior at Linfield College pursuing a degree in mass communication and possibly a career in photojournalism. Last fall I took a photojournalism class in which I was assigned to complete a photo story. I discovered Street Roots when I was looking for fresh ideas in Portland newspapers to start my project. I was first interested because I thought the paper on its own was a great story. People getting a chance to have jobs and better their lives that might not have those opportunities without an outlet like Street Roots. I knew I would meet lots of people with tales to tell. I just had to figure out how to capture that on camera.

I met Shawn early on a Saturday afternoon. He was standing outside Pastinis on the corner of SW Taylor Street and Ninth Avenue. Shawn normally sells in front of Art Media, the next corner down, but he said that this corner had more traffic during the lunch rush sometimes.

I worked with several different Street Roots vendors before I was partnered with Shawn, whom I used to complete my story. I learned something new with every vendor I worked with and enjoyed hearing all of their stories. In the end I choose to use Bytell for my project because he was in an obvious transition phase in his life.

I would like to thank Bytell and all of the staff at Street Roots, with a special thanks to Street Roots Vendor Coordinator Becky Mullins, for allowing me this opportunity and helping me to complete one of my most meaningful projects in my college career.

If you would like to see my whole story they are posted online at: <https://picasaweb.google.com/sammccarty15/PhotoStory#>