

POWERFUL VOICES

Because strong girls become strong women

Powerful Choices

Tina is 13 and attends 8th grade at a Seattle middle school. She was sexually abused at an early age by her stepfather. Tina has a pimp. He is 19 and in a gang. She believes he loves her, and he makes her feel important. He also makes her work and give him all of her earnings. She often has sex for money with five or six adult men a day. Erica loves her pimp, but she is also afraid of him. She knows that if she doesn't obey him, he will beat her up, as he has in the past. She has been arrested for the crime of prostitution, but when she leaves juvenile detention, her pimp is waiting for her.

In 2007, there were an estimated 300-500 youth under the age of 18 involved in prostitution in Seattle (Boyer). And these numbers are steadily increasing. In fact, a new documentary called *Sex & Money, A National Search for Human Worth* calls sex trafficking the fastest growing form of organized crime in the United States.

Facts from the U.S. Department of Justice:

- Young women of color are overrepresented in samples of prostitution-involved youth.
- The average age at which girls first become victims of prostitution is 12-14. The majority tend to be runaway, homeless youth or come from homes where they have been abused/neglected. Once on the street, one out of every three teens will be lured toward prostitution within 48 hours.
- They often become involved in prostitution as a way to support themselves financially or to get the things they want or need.
- Youth are 'sexting', being groomed on line for sexual exploitation, and that social networks are used to bully and shame other youth.
- Others are recruited into these exploitative and often violent relationships through peer pressure, deception, or forced abduction by pimps or gangs.

Based on this information, **and that investing in prevention is the best antidote to this growing problem**, the city of Seattle made available \$183,400 over a 20-month period to develop an innovative program to address the problem. Powerful Voices won this award and will collaborate with Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress and the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian and Gay Survivors of Sexual Abuse prevention program.

We named the program **Powerful Choices**. Powerful Choices is providing 100 truant middle school girls with the skills they need to stay safe. The program includes 30 weekly groups for middle school girls at Asa Mercer, Aki Kurose and Denny International middle schools, 3 12-week community-based groups for lesbian, trans, queer and questioning youth and 2 summer programs. Powerful Choices also includes monthly individual meetings with youth and a mentor, a family engagement component and participation in a youth-led social justice conference.

What Powerful Choices does:

Raises girls' awareness about early warning signs of relationship abuse and promotes feelings of worthiness and belonging.

Gender denigration, personal put downs and verbal aggression--warning signs of emotional abuse--erode a girl's self confidence. Jealousy/possessiveness and isolation are also critical early warning signs of social

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abuse that can reduce the girl's autonomy. Girls particularly lack awareness of the risks associated with jealous/possessive partner behaviors (Murphy & Smith).

Teaches skills for responding to the warning sign behaviors and that promote healthy relationships, safety, pride in identity and activism

Regardless of their level of risk awareness, girls also lack the knowledge of behavioral responses that might discourage continued warning-sign behaviors by their partners for all behaviors except for social restriction tactics (Murphy & Smith). Assertiveness, refusal, being able to identify components of healthy and unhealthy relationships, conflict resolution, media literacy and activism are among the skills youth develop to respond to early warning signs.

Provide real world opportunities for girls to stand up for each other and become active in the community to prevent trafficking

Prostitution-involved teens themselves have also been *used to recruit other girls*. We educate girls about girl-to-girl aggression and create a positive girl culture where girls develop a desire to make it better for, rather than deceive or aggress against other girls. Girls also develop a belief in their power to improve things for other girls through our annual Girlvolution Conference.

Early Results

Powerful Choices is being evaluated for efficacy. During the first 10 months of this pilot project, 62 girls have participated in Powerful Choices. Full evaluation results will be available in January 2013. Preliminary survey data on the 13 youth who have graduated from the program indicates that:

1. 100% of youth increased ability to identify the components of and differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships
2. 100% of youth increased safety strategies to prevent being sexually exploited
3. 100% increased self esteem, self efficacy, pro-social behavior
4. 100% increased knowledge of community resources available

City of Seattle funding for this pilot project ends in December 2012. We need your help now to increase awareness of this horrendous issue and to ensure that girls will continue to get the services they need to stay safe and avoid prostitution.

Citations

Dr. Debra Boyer, "Who Pays the Price? Assessment of Youth Involvement in Prostitution in Seattle, 2008.

United States Department of Justice, Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS). Child Prostitution: Domestic Sex Trafficking of Minors.

K. Murphy, D. Smith, "Adolescent Girls and Signs of Relationship Abuse", Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Volume 25, Number 4, April 2010 626-647