

'Ain't no Prince Charming out there'

Video profiles prostitutes' lives of sex and drugs

TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD Tonya is a crack whore. I'm not supposed to be that blunt about it, of course. I'm supposed to say she's a sex-trade worker with a drug addiction, which is a fancier way of coming to the same truth.

This intelligent, educated woman performs sex acts in cars and back lanes in order to feed her crack habit. She has a little girl she professes to love but rarely sees because, when mommy is busy whoring, it's a little hard to handle the bedtime story beat.

Home is now the McLaren Hotel, that charmless Main Street institution with spittle-proof glass protecting the front desk clerk.

Tonya says she's not a victim. She's making a choice, and she'll tell you that straight and true. Her early life was a nightmare of abuse, to be sure, but when she began dancing with the devil crack, she set herself on a certain path. She's had several chances to become clean but has never been able to follow through.

Tonya's not looking for your pity. She's one of several prostitutes featured in *Trying To Exit*, a video project that documents experiences on the street. It's rough and gritty and damned tough to watch, alternately filled with the bravado of a transgendered hooker screaming obscenities and the heartbreak of Tonya using a little doll with blond braids to demonstrate how she was betrayed as a toddler.

But that's not her excuse. She hasn't got one, doesn't need one, shouldn't have to give one. Tonya, once a promising nursing student, says life is just too hard when she's straight. So while her little girl stays with her grandmother, she smokes crack and allows men to pay her 20 or 40 bucks for a little bit of her time.

"Most of us want to quit and reunite with our families," she says. Lightning,



Lindor Reynolds



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'There's days when I just wish a john would kill me,' says I-lay-a, a 22-year-old transgendered prostitute, during release of video about life on the street.

by some miracle, doesn't strike her dead and take me with her. Her one steadfast rule is no soliciting in school zones.

"I kind of agree with the hooker sweeps in the residential areas," she says. "I don't want my daughter walking to school past junked-out hookers."

There is no sense of irony in this mother's earnest testimonial.

Yesterday afternoon, Tonya was joined at the McDermot Avenue offices of Crossing Communities Art Project, the co-ordinators of the video, by a transgendered prostitute named I-lay-a, once a Sandy Bay resident named Elijah.

The strapping 22-year-old tells much the same story — drugs, sex to pay for the drugs, more drugs.

"The crack gets me through the sex.

"There's days when I just wish a john would kill me."

That may still happen. One of her friends, also a transgendered prostitute, was killed last year.

"It was fun when I started," she says. "It really was. I loved dressing up, the boots, the PVC outfits. It was fun for about the first two years."

Then came crack and a relentless series of tricks and abuse. Yesterday, shaking, she estimated she'd been up for three straight days, drugging and whoring.

There are standards, even in this foul world, she's quick to note. Like Tonya, she's picky about where she does business.

"I only work in industrial areas," she says, blinking pink-shadowed lids. "I don't want to set a bad example for young girls. It ain't no *Pretty Woman*, ain't no Prince Charming out there waiting to take you home."

I-lay-a also wants to make it clear

she's not looking for pity.

"I don't want anybody to feel sorry for me. I want people to look at me and see what I'm all about. My choice is to sell my ass on the streets. Honest to God, that's it. I'm not afraid to die."

If there's a message in *Trying To Exit* — other than all these women are damn lucky to still be alive — it's that this is a world where working girls are seen as sub-human. The prostitutes talk of the things that are thrown at them every night — garbage, rocks, beer bottles, words — and of the men who try to rip them off or hurt them.

It's stressful and degrading, they say, but the drugs keep them coming back.

I-lay-a dreams of meeting the right man, adopting a baby and settling down. Alexis, also transgendered, considers Oprah a role model. Sandra, a recovered crack addict and a rare suc-

cess story, wants to finish school, buy a house and feel safe. She's 18.

They may not want your pity but, oh Lord help us, these women deserve it.

Edith Regier, the gentle soul who is creative director of the outfit that put together the video, says the project taught her compassion.

"In so many ways, we want the same things," she says. "We want to belong. We want to feel safe. We want an education. We want people to understand us."

And while will it may seem well-nigh impossible to understand a man dressed as a woman offering himself up for sex so she can buy drugs, compassion is something we should all have inside us.

If not for this sad lot, then for whom?

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