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## Dark Side Of 'The Pike': Trafficking In Minors

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June 19, 2011 | Tom Condon

Every couple of years someone submits an essay to this page about the Berlin Turnpike, about its kitsch, history, diners and bowling alleys, its "messy vitality." All of that is true, it just isn't the whole truth. The Pike, beloved of classic car cruisers, bowlers and shoppers, is also home to one of the most vile of crimes — sex trafficking of minors.

A couple of major federal prosecutions, and coverage of them in Raymond Bechard's new book "The Berlin Turnpike — A True Story of Trafficking in America" as well as recent articles in Vanity Fair and The Hartford Advocate, have begun to turn over the rock. What is under it should turn your stomach. Girls as young as 12 are being coerced or seduced into the sex industry, and hooked on drugs or beaten violently so they remain. It happens in the low-end motels on the Berlin Turnpike, and places like it across the country.



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Bechard's book is idiosyncratically structured. He intersperses a history of the Pike, plus a pastiche of other local historical tales in some way connected to traditional slavery or statements from early reformers on "white slavery," with extensive day-by-day coverage of the 2007 federal trial of a brutal pimp named Dennis Paris, who was convicted on 21 charges connected to sex trafficking of minors and sentenced to 30 years in prison. Paris plied his gruesome trade on the Pike.

Bechard presents the Pike and similar corridors as symbols of the nation's culture and heritage, the "very best and worst of who we are and have been." I don't know that I'd go this far; roads connect us, to be sure, but the best and worst of our culture is found in cities (though you might argue that what was in cities bled out to places like the Pike). Not that it wasn't interesting to learn that George M. Cohan and his daughter were badly injured when his speeding car struck a horse in 1913, or that Babe Ruth's car broke down on the Pike in 1923, or that — this is somehow fitting — radio personality Howard Stern lived there for a time in 1978.

But whether this makes it a metaphor for America I'm not sure and I don't want to dwell on it. Because when Bechard focuses on trafficking, he is clear and persuasive.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children or underage adolescents is one genre of human trafficking, a house of horrors that includes forced labor, domestic servitude, child soldiering, forced marriage and organ harvesting. Vanity Fair estimates that there are 300,000 girls in the commercial sex industry; the Advocate cites an estimate of more than 250,000 youths ages 10-17 being exploited in pornography or prostitution. Bechard says, I think honestly, that the number is very hard to pin down. But he quotes law enforcement officials who say it is a rampant problem.

In addition to the young women being forced to work on the Pike and other places, there are older women working the streets of Hartford and other cities. Superior Court Judge Raymond Norko, the outstanding jurist who runs Hartford's Community Court, said the average age of prostitutes he sees is about 44, and said many suffer from addiction, mental illness, AIDS and other ailments.

Why is prostitution thriving? One expert in Vanity Fair cited the "anti-intellectual, consumerist, hyper-violent, and super-eroticized" content of movies, reality TV, video games rap and cyber sites. Tipper Gore was right? Bechard and others think this is pushed along by common myths; that hookers are happy, that they are prostitutes by choice and make a lot of money, that this is a victimless crime, that trafficking happens elsewhere, that the best little whorehouse in Connecticut is a fun place.

So the customers, the "johns," don't understand they are doing something wrong, making a very bad situation worse, and perhaps killing themselves to boot. They are, if I may borrow Judge Norko's technical description, "dumb bastards." He puts them through an educational program or protocol, on first arrest. There's also a protocol for prostitutes. Perhaps there needs to be a protocol for society.

The Pike went seedy in a hurry in the two decades after I-91 opened in 1965, but then started to make a comeback, as big-box retailers noticed that it was easily accessible and could carry a lot of traffic. But if Stew Leonard's drives out the No-Tell

Motel, the business will find another rock to crawl under (the Internet!) and, as Bechard says, won't slow until demand is decreased.

That's the challenge, and will take more tough laws — though there are some — and a massive change in attitude and understanding, that women are not chattel and have the same claim to humanity that men do. It will happen when the pimps and johns, the "men who buy and sell girls," determine that the crime is either too risky or too morally reprehensible to commit. Sadly, we are a long way from that blessed day.

On June 7, a federal judge sentenced Jarell Sanderson, 31, a violent pimp from New Britain, to nearly 26 years in prison for sex trafficking two 14-year-old girls.

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