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As a reporter, I set out to explore the awful reality of child sexual exploitation in Atlanta. As a 62-year-old grandmother, I encountered a world that broke my heart.

I first heard about the abomination over dinner with friends. Stephanie Davis, the founding director of the Atlanta Women's Foundation and an intrepid advocate for her gender, was detailing her new job as policy advisor on women's issues to Mayor Shirley Franklin. As she outlined the explosion of child sexual exploitation plaguing Atlanta, I sat transfixed.

She rattled off statistics. Ninety percent of runaways become part of the city's sex trade industry. Most fail to graduate from high school and have few marketable job skills. They develop clinical depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, drug dependency, malnutrition and dental problems. And they give birth to another generation of at-risk children.

Child sexual exploitation is so prevalent in Atlanta, she said, that during a 10-week period last year, 172 boys and girls age 8 to 17 were identified as victims. Two-thirds were under the age of 12.

No community is immune. A&E's Investigative Reports found that there are more than 600,000 child prostitutes working in the United States and Canada in an industry that generates \$5 billion worldwide. A landmark 2001 study on the commercial sexual exploitation of children by the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Work found that 20 percent were being trafficked nationally by organized crime. It has become their third-largest moneymaker behind drugs and guns.

"Along with the sex trade come drugs, organized crime, guns and other criminal activity making our city unsafe," Davis said angrily. "The ultimate cost is borne by the community."

As I took notes, Davis named agency heads, social workers, psychiatrists, law enforcement officers and judges I could contact if I became interested in the story. If? Although my first instinct was to recoil from the subject, I found my heart was already involved.

Over the next few months, I set out to explore Atlanta's appalling epidemic of child sexual exploitation, trying to find the individual stories behind the stats. I sat glued to a bench in a courtroom as a parade of children confronted justice. I walked the streets of Atlanta where girls and boys as young as 10 are prostituted. I visited the only therapeutic shelter in the Southeast specifically for sexually exploited girls. I watched, morbidly fascinated, as a Peachtree City officer went online posing as a teenager and garnered a plethora of potential pedophiles. I talked to countless experts frustrated by the lack of resources to help children at risk.

As a former schoolteacher, mother of three and grandmother of six small girls and a baby boy, I plodded ahead, and for the first time in my life, I felt murder in my heart.

My first foray into this bleak, unfamiliar world was inside the courtroom of Chief Judge Sanford Jones at the Fulton County Juvenile Court. An endless parade of troubled teens, their guardians and attorneys entered, one case at a time. Some teens wore street clothes; others, shackles and the "scrub suit" uniform of the Fulton County Metro Regional Youth Detention Center. Most listened respectfully. Some turned on the tears. Others slumped defiantly in their chairs.

Fifteen-year-old "Samantha" reminded me of a high-school friend who was always in hot water. Tearfully, she read a note to Judge Jones and her mother begging for another chance. Clearly at wit's end, her exasperated mother recited a litany of transgressions including repeated truancies, drug use and running away. There was also a question of prostitution. In the end, Jones released Samantha to the custody of her mother, but also signed an order for

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a 60- to 90-day short-term treatment program that a judge might execute should she be picked up again. The Fulton County Juvenile Court adjudicated more than 400 sexually abused and exploited children last year, and Judge Jones is well aware that a runaway like Samantha could easily be corralled by a pimp, becoming just one more statistic. “Along with New York, Atlanta is considered a national and international distribution hub for the sexual exploitation of children,” he told me.

The proximity of Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport to the city allows easy access to the city’s adult entertainment industry, which boasts more strip clubs per capita than Las Vegas. Totally nude dancing is permitted, and establishments like Magic City and Tattletales are known internationally. The proliferation of lingerie and sex shops, escort services and massage parlors attracts male conventioners.

Child exploitation is not necessarily linked to adult businesses. Key recruitment areas are the same locations that attract tourists and upscale Atlantans—Underground Atlanta, The World of Coca-Cola and professional sporting events. MARTA stations, shopping malls, middle-school campuses and even school bus stops are far from exempt.

A recent phenomenon is the increase of sexually exploited young boys passing through Jones’ courtroom. The faces of pimps are also changing.

“There may be a man behind the scenes, but lately I’ve seen more women [pimps] than men,” he says.

A major problem is the increase in the number of children who are kidnapped. “Many are trafficked across state lines and end up in Atlanta,” he says. “Johns get connected to pimps via the Internet, fly in for the purpose of sex with a young girl or boy who is waiting in a hotel, apartment or office, then fly home in time for dinner.” It’s easier, after all, to fly to Atlanta than to Bangkok.

Judge Jones is a tough straight-talker by nature, but one afternoon, outside the courtroom, I saw his hard veneer crack a little. He was reading from a poem that a 14-year-old female defendant had once given him, and I could have sworn there’d been a hitch in his baritone throat. The poem was called “You Ain’t Been Down My Street,” and it went like this:

*You ain’t been down my street
And seen your mother get brutally beat.
You ain’t never had a gun to your head
Or sexually had to lie in bed
Before you judge me, Judge, read this and see
That you ain’t been down my street.*

Heather Lackey, a 28-year-old, freckle-faced mother of one, is responsible for bringing six local sexual predators to justice in the last two years. I met her in her office at the Peachtree City Police Department, where Detective Lackey spends most of her days online, luring would-be exploiters out into the light.

“I could use five more like her working 16 hours a day,” says Peachtree City’s Chief of Police Jim Murray. “They could make arrest after arrest. It’s like shoveling the tide with a whisk broom.”

The small city department—with only 57 law enforcement officers—has developed a national reputation for its relentless pursuit of pedophiles. They’ve received inquiries from police departments around the country and work hand in hand with the GBI and FBI. “I’d like to see every department in the nation working on this,” Murray says. “If there were a pedophile living in their neighborhood, parents would be appalled. Yet they let children go onto the Internet alone.”

I perched on a chair behind Lackey as she Googled “chat lines” and “teen chat lines” and quickly registered at an adult site as a 21-year-old. Instantly, messages popped on the screen with the rapidity of microwave popcorn.

Lackey’s query, “anyone live near Atlanta?” brought four immediate hits. Two chose to follow her to her e-mail address. When she typed, “i lied a little about my age. do u mind?” one replied, “u r jail bait, I’m out of here.” By this time, she had four others on the hook. Two divulge they’re chatting at work, where, it turns out, most pedophiles seem to operate.

Conversations don’t stop with verbal banter. They exchange photos. Wearing a T-shirt and baseball cap, Lackey looks no more than 15 in the digital snapshot she posts. A Canadian chatter appears much younger than his professed 27 years. A 57-year-old appears older. “He’s probably someone’s grandfather,” Lackey says in disgust.

As often happens, the conversation turns sexual almost immediately.

When the serious talking began, her smile faded. "My mom beat me and her boyfriend raped me," she said without expression. "When I couldn't stand it anymore [at home], I ran away. Got caught and was sent back home. Ran away again." Stalling for time, she was hanging out at a retail store when she was kidnapped. Because she suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the details have escaped her—how the kidnapping occurred, how long she was imprisoned, how many men the pimp forced her to have sex with. But she vividly remembers some of the times he raped and sexually assaulted her, often with a broomstick.

She tried repeatedly to escape. The first time, she was beaten. The second time, the pimp shot her. On the next attempt she made it next door. "I was crying and so sick I looked like a dead person," she explains. The neighbor reluctantly agreed to give her a ride to a friend's house, but her pimp returned home just in time to see her get into the car. He followed them. When the neighbor dropped her off, the police interceded, and following standard protocol, they took her to a hospital for evaluation. When they heard her story, they arrested the pimp for sexually exploiting a juvenile.

Following a hospital stay, Candace was released into the custody of the Division of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) workers who contacted Angela's House. For once, the breaks went Candace's way. But it took her a long time to open up and talk to anyone. Finally, she began journaling her horrific experiences, and little by little she began working with the counselors.

Physically mature, 14-year-old "Pookie" wears a wide smile and happy-go-lucky attitude. Without preamble, she began. "By the time I was 12, I was prostituting and selling drugs," she says with unsettling perkiness. "I joined a gang, 'cause I liked doing bad things like stealing cars, robbing and jumping people for their money, beating kids up at school. That's how I got the pain released out."

The pain was homegrown. After her father died, her mother married a man who beat his wife repeatedly. "He didn't mess with me," she says proudly, "but when he started beating my mama real bad I jumped him." Hearing the altercation, a neighbor called the police and Pookie, well known to area police for her gang and prostituting escapades, was taken to Metro. "I was just defending my mama, but I was locked up and [my stepdad] was out," she says angrily.

The ride to Angela's House was traumatic and interminable for her. "The country got to me," she says. "I was scared. I thought the police were taking me to the woods to rape me."

After a rocky beginning, she has adjusted to living in the sometimes chaotic atmosphere of the group home. "I like it best when the staff helps me with my anger problems," she says.

To curb that anger, she wears a baby pacifier on a cord around her neck. "It helps me keep my mouth shut," she says, popping it into her mouth.

It took awhile but she's grown comfortable at Angela's House. "It feels safe to be away from the gangs. They could kill me when I get back 'cause I got caught and talked," she says. But her mother has remarried and Pookie likes the new husband. "He calls me 'his baby,'" she says, flashing that wide smile. "They're finding a new place to live so I won't be around the gangs."

More reserved, "Cindy" spoke only when questioned. She ran away because of her mom's boyfriend. "I told her I didn't like him," she says angrily. "My mama said, 'Deal with it.'" Three times she ran and each time she was picked up on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive for prostituting. "When I first came here, I was so bottled up it took me a real long time to open up," she says. "I hated being so far out in the country. I thought if I killed myself, my problems would go away."

Six months later, she's learned to talk out her anger and frustration with therapists. "They helped me find my talents like playing basketball," she says. It's nearing the time when she'll re-enter the outside world and she's reticent. "I can sleep at night here. No one breaks in," she says. Cindy's mother is still unwilling to give up her abusive boyfriend, but an aunt has agreed to take Cindy when she's released. She worries about adjusting to a new environment and wonders if it will be better than living at home.

While reporting this story, I learned that [Angela's House](#) is not the only ray of light brightening the lives of sexually exploited and abused children. A variety of other organizations and agencies are doing what they can to help these kids. The Juvenile Justice Fund has taken a strong stand on their behalf—whether on the street or in homes, where 90 percent of the abuse occurs. The JJF documents the need for new programs, funds projects and develops exit strategies. Executive Director Cathey Steinberg points to successful projects like Angela's House, which became a reality under the auspices of the Atlanta Women's Foundation and CEASE.

Patty Crone, project coordinator of the Juvenile Justice Fund, is managing a \$1 million grant

from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), an arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. Provided to just two U.S. cities—Atlanta and New York—the demonstration project is designed to combat the rise in the sexual abuse of minors. Atlanta was chosen based on the success of the 2002 pimp prosecutions. It includes training professionals to recognize victims and sharing information on available services. The United Way has also become involved, and the JJJ is also seeking corporate funding and volunteers for a public awareness campaign. COPS (Community Oriented Policing), an arm of the Fulton County Police Department, works with children in the classroom to promote making better choices. Officers also work with parents to alert them to the dangers.

Using a \$600,000 grant from the Department of Justice Office of Human Trafficking (including \$150,000 from the city of Atlanta), the Atlanta Police Department has hired three undercover investigators to locate and charge perpetrators of child sexual exploitation.

Mayor Franklin's office has commissioned a \$40,000 demographics study at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University to pinpoint the key locations for child exploitation. It is expected to be completed and released in early fall.

The Fulton County Child Advocacy Center has created a database to track sexually exploited kids and pimps across county lines.

On the legal side, the four-year-old Senate Bill 33 makes pimping and pandering of children under 18 a felony in Georgia, and it has become much easier to prosecute pimps. The highest-profile recent prosecution of Atlanta pimps took place in 2002, when a dozen predators were dealt prison sentences ranging from three to six years. After reading the following excerpt from the transcript of an interview for a film entitled *The Selling of Innocence*, by New York documentarian Meghan McCleary of Cowgirl Productions, I only wish their sentences were harsher:

"See, my definition of a pimp is a professor in minor psychology, so it's all about manipulation. Selling dreams is like making promises. You find out what that person needs or wants—even a girl that has the Lexus and a home—and you cater to that. I'm their man, their father, so my title is always 'daddy.' I'm always interested in gorgeous females, black, white, candy-striped, it doesn't matter. But she's going to render me a lot of service.

"I've seen girls getting tranked [shoved into the trunk of a car and driven around to degrade her], get knocked down, stomped and cut. [A girl is] supposed to be enjoying her 16th birthday and instead she's with 16 men and she don't even know their names. She gets into a car with a trick never knowing that this might be her last ride. She could get raped, killed, beat up, gang raped, tortured, there's just so many unmentionable things that could happen to a female."

Most girls dream of getting their driver's license on their 16th birthday. But in the temporary harbor of Angela's House, the dreams are very different. Candace longs to be adopted into a family. She also wants to reconnect with her younger brother, who is in foster care, and her older sisters in Florida. She dreams about attending college and using her artistic ability to become a fashion designer and entrepreneur. "My mom, dad and stepdad always put me down. I want to prove them wrong," she says. Looking directly at me, she recites her mantra: "I have to believe in myself. If I have wisdom, courage and power, I can conquer anything."

If I learned anything during my exploration of child sexual exploitation, it's that this is a problem not easily conquered. There is an increasing demand for "corn-fed" girls with blond hair and blue eyes from nearby suburban counties like Douglas, which has seen a marked rise in the sexual exploitation of kids from middle- and upper-income backgrounds. "Exploitation cuts across economic and racial lines," says Judge Peggy Walker of the Douglas County Juvenile Court. "Any child who is feeling lonely and isolated is at risk." Walker is often incensed at the attitudes of suburban parents. "Kids run away to the city and sell their bodies for drugs or alcohol or a place to stay," she says. "Their parents are generally stunned, believing that sexual exploitation is something that happens to someone else's child."

I think about my grandchildren and I think about Candace. I think about how similar they are in their dreams and aspirations, and about how differently life has treated them. Then I don't want to think about anything at all.

Unfortunately, if we are going to conquer this abomination, not thinking about it is one luxury we can't afford.

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CEASE

The Center to End Adolescent Sexual Exploitation (CEASE) advocates on behalf of adolescent girls identified in Juvenile Court proceedings as being victims of sexual exploitation.

CEASE achieves its' mission by:

1. Offering immediate intervention on behalf of child victims involved in juvenile court proceedings; alternatives to detention facilities
2. Making appropriate recommendations for treatment and other services after reviewing court ordered psychological evaluations, family assessments and child interviews;
3. Offering workshops and seminars regarding child sexual exploitation and developing gender competent programs.

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Angela's House

In an average month, the Court sees 12 girls who are victims of sexual exploitation, usually in the age range of 10-14. Until the Fund was established, no services existed to address their need for protection and special therapy.

The alarming rise of child sexual exploitation in Metro Atlanta came to light through Fulton County Juvenile Court, which recognized that many girls seen in Court for curfew violations, loitering and similar charges were actually being sexually exploited by adults. A task force was convened in 1999 that discovered a local child prostitution industry far more extensive than anyone had realized. Some girls had been kidnapped and brought in from out of state. Others lived in deprivation and neglect and were easy prey for perpetrators. These girls endured a brutalized existence, constantly subject to pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease and threat of violent death. Even when removed from the streets, they suffered severe emotional trauma.

As an outgrowth of the task force's work, one of the Fund's first initiatives in 2001 was to establish Angela's House. An anonymous donor gave a residence that was transformed into a safe house where girls live securely, away from the threats of the perpetrators. They receive emergency therapy, medical and psychological assessments, and a long-range plan of care and treatment.

A stay at Angela's House lasts 120 days, followed by placement in a safe setting where follow-up services can be readily administered. The house can accommodate six girls at a time. As space is available, referrals are accepted from throughout Georgia.

With sexual exploitation a continuing problem, the need is acute for a continuum of care for additional treatment services for girls beyond their stay in Angela's House.

As part of our ongoing commitment to providing emotional and behavioral treatment for children who have been sexually exploited, the Juvenile Justice Fund selected Inner Harbour, a well-respected treatment facility, to provide the day-to-day operations and therapeutic treatment for the residents of Angela's House. The Juvenile Justice Fund continues to provide the financial resources, strategic directions and oversight for this program.

[Click here](#) for more information regarding Inner Harbour

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