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Guest columnist

Billboards challenge Seattle to help prostituted youth

A 3-year-old study suggests King County has as many as 500 prostituted youth. Guest columnist Melinda A. Giovengo writes that the recent billboard campaign raising awareness about the problem challenges Seattle to help these young people.

By Melinda A. Giovengo

Special to The Times



JUST read the newspaper: Human beings do terrible things to one another. None is more horrifying than the sexual exploitation of children. It lets us off the hook, though, to think that child prostitution is just more bad news from somewhere else. It lets us turn the page — when in reality this atrocity goes on

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right in front of us.

As former U.S. Rep. Linda Smith indicated in a recent Seattle Times article ["Campaign seeks to raise awareness of domestic minor sex trafficking," page one, May 31], well more than 100,000 girls and boys are sexually exploited in this country each year. If you imagine that translates into small numbers here, don't. Seattle bears the shameful distinction of having one of the highest rates of child prostitution in the nation.

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A 2008 study estimated there were 300 to 500 prostituted youth in King County. The most frequent age of entry reported? Around 14 or 15. Some were young as 11.

The youngest are usually kept out of sight, trapped in apartments, houses, motels, hotels — and worse places. Still, we're talking about an industry that doesn't exactly hide its wares. Drive down any known block and you'll see them: children on display.

Overwhelmingly, they come from the ranks of homeless youth. Most of them (almost all, fleeing abuse) are approached by a predator within 48 hours of hitting the street. For traffickers, they're not hard to find. It's a matter of knowing where to look — and then convincing terrified, vulnerable children that you're really a protector.

Meanwhile, Seattle estimates there are up to 1,000 homeless youth here every night. Judging from what we're seeing at YouthCare and its peer organizations, this estimate needs to be raised.

None of this, I say with deep sorrow and rage, is actually news. These are open atrocities — youth homelessness itself, and the victimization it invites.

I therefore thank Smith and the organization she founded, Shared Hope International. By making Seattle confront what goes on right here, in just one of the many places it goes on openly, they have done us a service. It will be a test of this community's heart and soul to see how it responds.

I might hope that the "Do You Know Lucy?" billboards placed by Shared Hope in a notorious section of the Denny Triangle will make every john out there stop in his tracks — but I don't suppose that will happen. I might hope they will help drive every pimp out of this disgusting business — but I know how artful and determined they are.

I'll allow myself to hope this: that they make the rest of us unbearably uncomfortable — mad as hell, even, and ready to join the effort to save these children. I am a realist, but I believe this community can pass that test.

Those billboards are mere blocks from YouthCare's James W. Ray Orion Center. This haven for Seattle's homeless youth is only one front line in a long, desperate struggle. Others include YouthCare's Bridge Program, one of a handful of residential programs in this country dedicated to serving prostituted minors. They include our adolescent shelter, where two beds, equally rare, are also set aside — and always full.

But we are not alone in the struggle. It is carried on by many others, and must be, for it is a struggle against human cruelty of the worst kind — the cruelty visited upon children. It is a struggle against indifference, and every attempt to blame the victim. Above all, it is a struggle against the sense of hopelessness such things instill in young minds.

Those billboards are a challenge to us all to make that struggle our own. Let us rise to meet it.

Melinda A. Giovengo is executive director of YouthCare.