



*Written by Bob Hughes,  
Executive Director of the ASK  
Wellness Centre in July 2007*

Kamloops has never been an idle city. Its geographic location at the hub of numerous connecting highways and train routes combined with an active and diverse population has created a community constantly in flux and debate.

One area of consistent debate has been how, we as a community, address our street level sex trade. Firstly, it is important to note, we are to be commended for even acknowledging that the sex trade exists. Too many communities keep their heads in the sand and deny the presence of something so untoward, so raw, and so sad, that no one will talk about it. Like the proverbial elephant in the living room, members of community and their elected representatives turn a blind eye to this historical dark side of society and pretend it doesn't exist. Not in Kamloops. In fact we have not only acknowledged our sex trade, we as a community have taken the unprecedented step of funding programming to assist those caught in its tight grasp. From 1996 until this

past year, the city has been the exclusive funding source of what has come to be known as the SHOP program.

From the desk of our chief city administrator Randy Diel, came the admirable but nominal sum of \$13,000 per year to support this initiative. One might argue this amounts to tokenism, but lest we forget, the city continues to support this controversial program, now to the tune of 68,000 per year. Originally conceived as a program to assist those in the sex trade to exit its' grasp, the program has bounced from organization, from location to location, never finding a permanent home or host. It might be argued that the reason for this is the minimal dollars attached to such a lofty goal, but I would suggest that other factors have also contributed to this 'transient' program.

Since taking over the ASK Wellness Centre six months ago and as such, responsibility for the overall operation of SHOP, I have been astonished by the level

of energy required to manage the program. From the media's ongoing interest in the workings of the program to the army of distracter's and critics of how we and others have operated the program, SHOP has gained the status equal to a high profile, volatile marriage. So it is no wonder that it was only the ASK Wellness Centre in partnership with the Elizabeth Fry Society that put forth a proposal to operate the program when the additional funds were offered by our city. In the world of Non-Profits jockeying for funding, to have no other competitors vying for a possible three year contract reveals the apprehension in delivering the program.

Nevertheless, this is an important program for our community and I'll be the first to advocate for its future relevance and success. The recent city wide crackdown on women in the sex trade speaks to the need for a program devoted to issues surrounding the sex trade. We as an agency deliberated whether to come out fighting on the merits and the

ethics of this ill conceived and ill implemented strategy. But what would we be defending? And would firing bullets at the RCMP really help the community and therefore the women on the street? I have come to conclude that SHOP can only really be effective if it is seen as a community program, relevant to not only sex trade workers but also the community at large. For is it not true that the business woman with the prostitute outside her store is also a victim of the sex trade? What about the young family trying to explain to their children about the nefarious activity in the back alley? So who really is to blame? Is it the seemingly nameless men who purchase the offerings of the women? Should they be sent to jail or publicly ridiculed? And is it realistic to believe one program is responsible to singly address the cycle.

I would argue that only through some level of community consensus and collaboration can we have any lasting and meaningful results. If we continue to point fingers at each other, blaming the sex trade workers, blaming the john, blaming the RCMP, or blaming SHOP, nothing will be done. I believe SHOP needs to build consensus in our community to act as the lightning rod to bring these troubled street involved women into our community, to quell the angry bat-totting

business person by validating his or her concerns, to demand that appropriate resources be available to make these massive lifestyle changes that are needed.

Fanning the flames of dissent and discord within the community will not help. The no-go zone, while controversial, may well be the catalyst for a change in how we deal with the sex trade. Our challenge as an agency is to invite the Crown and the RCMP to be part of the whole community by directing these women not into the harsh and ineffectual world of the criminal justice system, but to work alongside the social service agencies and the concerned citizen to motivate these women to see there is another way to live. To have any long term benefit, we must also advocate for the education of the men who pay for sex on the impact of their behavior and find ways to deter the men and women who live off the avails of prostitution.

It may well be a cliché, but I'll use it anyway. "It takes a whole community to raise a child", but perhaps this can also be applied to those most marginalized in our community.

To find out more about SHOP and what services are available, please contact Toni Pate or Bob Hughes at ASK Wellness