



FAIR TRADE

Author and sex-worker activist Susan Davis is working to protect women who live on the edge of society.

Creepy clients, HIV and life on the street... Vancouver's sex workers are fighting to save their jobs—and their lives.

TEXT: ROBERTA STALEY

Dressed in tight, thigh-high red leather boots, black jeans and a long black leather coat, Susan Davis is surrounded by a crush of people that includes bankers, academics, social activists and sex workers from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. The crowd has gathered at the Lamplighter, a bar in the century-old Dominion Hotel in the heart of Gastown, to celebrate the publication of *History of Sex: Vancouver*, a collection of essays and archival photos created by Davis and other sex-trade workers. The opening essay, penned by Davis, is about Birdie Stewart, Vancouver's first madam, who opened a

says Davis. The trade also includes off-street workers, such as strippers, exotic dancers, porn stars and those who are officially sanctioned through city business licences for work in massage parlours, health-enhancement centres, body-rub parlours, dating services and escort agencies.

Those who can't afford business licences and those who don't meet the physical criteria required to be escorts and strippers end up on the street. These women are involved in what Davis calls "survival sex": homeless, poor or addicted, they receive no education on how to work safely, which leads them into potentially

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brothel in the city in 1867. The book, says contributor Stacey Grayer, 28, is a step toward attaining legitimacy and respectability for sex-trade workers and creating a sex-trade co-operative.

The co-operative would provide a safe building for street sex workers—who comprise an estimated 10 to 20 percent of all sex-trade workers—to conduct business as well as a place to unite as a community and begin to heal,

dangerous situations. A recent study by Tamara O'Doherty, a criminology graduate student at Simon Fraser University, found that one-third of off-street sex-trade workers have experienced violence on the job. What street workers deserve is the right to work in a safe place, says Davis, adding that it's wrong that a woman has to wonder whether getting into this vehicle, this night, will be the last thing she ever does. ▷

This past summer, a group of sex-trade workers supported by the British Columbia Coalition of Experiential Women embarked upon a second round of discussions on the creation of a sex-trade co-operative that would include minimum labour standards for sex workers, health and safety training, a scholarship fund for the children of deceased sex workers, extended medical care as well as an arts collective. A code of conduct would support condom use and include health standards with which both johns and street workers would be expected to comply. In Vancouver, a study by the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and the Women's Information Safe House (WISH), which focused on 200 female street sex workers, showed that 26 percent of the women were HIV positive and used condoms inconsistently.

Whether the group is permitted to create a co-op will depend on amendments to the Criminal Code of Canada. A sex-trade co-op clearly falls under the definition of a bawdy house, which makes it illegal, says Alan Young, a professor at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University in Toronto.

This past spring, Young launched a Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms challenge to oppose sections 210 to 213, which concern the sex trade. These laws, says Young, make it impossible for sex workers to work in safety—something the Charter guarantees all Canadians. Since the Criminal Code prohibits communication in a public place for the purpose of selling or buying sexual services, sex work has been relegated to the

most isolated places where violent men can prey on sex workers with impunity.

John Lowman, a criminology professor at Simon Fraser University, says that until the 1960s, Vancouver's sex trade was conducted in hotels or in strip clubs such as The Penthouse. In 1975, Vancouver police shut down the city's off-street sex-trade venues, which forced sex workers—particularly those with substance-abuse problems—onto the street. That same year saw Vancouver's first recorded homicide of a sex worker since the 1960s. Between 1985 and 1989, 22 sex workers died. From 1990 to 1994, another 24 were slain. From 1995 to 2000, Lowman estimates that 50 to 60 women died in British Columbia. Most recently, the trial of Robert William Pickton, who was convicted late last December of murdering six sex workers in the Downtown Eastside, highlighted the dangers of the street sex trade in dramatic front-page headlines. Pickton faces an additional 20 murder charges.

Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan admits that "status quo is not an option"; nonetheless he is optimistic that two new significant initiatives—an innovative drug-treatment program and housing for the homeless and for those with mental-health challenges and drug addictions—will help provide support for those involved in the street sex trade. Meanwhile, Davis and Grayer are demanding changes that will give them the same rights as fellow Canadians who enjoy safe workplaces. "It's high time we came together and started rescuing each other," says Grayer. □

URBAN WARRIOR

Susan Davis was born in Halifax. As a girl, Davis joined Girl Guides of Canada, ballet and synchronized swimming. She practised piano for hours to prepare for Kiwanis Music Festival competitions and her Royal Conservatory of Music exams. "To be honest, I had a great upbringing," says Davis, her chocolate-brown tresses trailing down to her shoulders.

Unlike many of her teenage peers, Davis waited until she was 18 before losing her virginity. A year later, however, she was immersed in the sex trade, working for an escort agency. "I remember thinking that my sheltered life wasn't real," recalls Davis, 39. "If I was going to be an artist, I had to live a little. I had this romantic notion about the underground." Those romantic notions were dashed to the pavement one night when, while working, she slipped on the ice in her stilettos and dislocated her shoulder. Unable to work, she agreed to sell LSD for a friend for some quick cash. She was caught by the police and spent four months in a women's correctional centre.

After her release, Davis moved to Vancouver. She worked on the street and lived in Downtown Eastside hotels, selling sex to cruising johns. "It was dangerous. Two or three times a day, you'd be assaulted or treated roughly," says Davis, who began smoking crack, then shot heroin and speedballs before she managed to quit cold turkey.

It is this panoply of experience that allows Davis, who currently works as an escort out of her own home, to act as a bridge between the demimonde and mainstream society's policy makers, business people and police. She conducts sensitivity training for new police recruits and has helped rewrite Vancouver bylaws pertaining to the sex trade. She is a lecturer, media liaison and researcher for many organizations.

Articulate, intelligent, quick to joke and fiercely unapologetic, Davis is adamant that sex work remains her career of choice, as it was when she first entered the trade. She considers herself an "über-feminist," fighting to help a minority of women who are sneered at, pitied, ignored and battered take control of their lives and direct their own destinies.