



Covenant House: A First-Hand Report

By Lawrence Kurmis

Nothing Sacred From My Dining Room Window

Lawrence Kurmis is a Rochesterian who has worked at Covenant House in New York City for more than a year. He attended St. John Fisher College and Becket Hall for two years. He will be moving to Toronto to help open a crisis center there, as part of Covenant House. His twin, James, also works at the New York City center.

First of a three-part series

Times Square breathes hard with all the people moving through it. People going to a Broadway show. People hoping to get into to see a new movie. People racing to a good restaurant before an evening of dancing. All these attractions serve to make Times Square the social and cultural hub of Manhattan.

However, the area does not limit itself to these establishments. Another kind of entertainment has found a home in Times Square. The sex industry is alive and growing in our nation's largest city.

Father Bruce Ritter, the founder of Covenant House, says, "The sex industry has become like prohibition in the 20s and 30s when thousands of speak-easies flourished because Americans wanted to drink, and corrupt politicians let it go on. The same thing is happening today. There are millions who want the sex industry."

My own experience confirms Father Ritter's view. A tour of my neighborhood revealed more than 70 thriving, sex-related businesses. Massage parlors, porno bookstores, porno movie theaters, topless bars and prostitution hotels have grown like weeds in an untended field.

Financially, the sex industry is booming. In the ten blocks on Eighth Avenue and 43rd Street where our crisis center is, the sex industry is estimated to bring in at least a billion dollars a year.

From my dining room window it is easy to see where the money comes from. Across the street, the porno movie theater is doing a brisk business. Young men in jeans, businessmen in finely tailored suits, and dapper-looking men in wide-brimmed hats and gold chains quickly exchange \$1.99 to see movies such as "Blonde Runaway," "Hot Child" and "Inside Baby Sister."

These titles suggest that children, not consenting adults, are being forced to perform sexual acts. Yet the same children would not be allowed to see their own movies because they are too young.

And where does the money go? It goes into the pockets and bank accounts of the organized crime figures who maintain a low profile but exert considerable influence in New York City. This influence begins with the 1,000 pimps that police have identified in the area and ends with the politicians and judges that have allowed the sex industry to bloom.

Father Ritter says, "In New York City, the five New York crime families make so much money that they have declared Times Square open territory, meaning that all the crime families are there — they have just divided up the business."

And the merchandise this business peddles is our children. One Eighth Avenue sex shop offers: "Live Sex Acts," "Infinite Pleasure," "All Male Revue," and "Boy and Girl." Next door, a porno bookstore sells books on how to seduce children. Further down the block, in a seedy bar, boys streetwise and hardened, strip off their clothes and dignity for \$3.

Less visible to the untrained eye are the thousands of young boys and girls who search the streets for customers or "johns" — people willing to pay \$10, \$20 or more for sex. The backseats of cars and cheap hotel rooms compose the classrooms for these kids.



Where do these children come from? From all parts of the country — runaways from incestuous relationships and physical and emotional abuse. Other children are kicked out of their homes by unloving parents. Still others leave because they rebel against parental authority. It is estimated that 20,000 children flock to New York City every year.

They converge in the Port Authority Bus Terminal at Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street, emotionally and physically shattered. There, eager pimps come on like kind uncles, offering food, friendship and a place to stay. Later, the pimp will command the child to go out and earn some money.

Or as one pimp, who came to Covenant House looking for his girl, said, "I put clothes on her back and now she better make me some money."

That girl had the courage to leave her pimp. Many do not, for fear of being beaten or even killed. They come to expect this because the pimp conditions them before sending them on the street. The pimp drugs, beats, rapes and abuses the child to prepare him or her for prostitution.

A group of us was crossing Eighth Avenue about 10:30 one Saturday night when a man approached us and asked if we were interested in some girls. Later, from my dining room window, I counted 17 girls on street corners. This scenario is repeated every weekend.

Tourists walk by, trying not to notice. Of course, those people looking for this form of entertainment find it, but most people keep on walking. The shows and movies were over. Their patrons were heading home or to a favorite nightspot. Only the girls and their countless brothers and sisters in Times Square were still working.

Some of the kids who come to Covenant House are involved in prostitution. "We get more boys than girls," Father Ritter said. "We've gotten kids as young as nine but that's rare. The largest percentage are between 16 and 20."

Since the sex industry puts a premium on youth, kids are considered over the hill at 20. With no job skills, no education and no friends, these kids wander the streets, trying to forget about yesterday and not thinking about tomorrow.

NEXT WEEK: A working shift in the Under-21 Crisis Center.

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