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Memphis mom crusades against sex trade in city

BY DAVID WATERS
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Carolyn McKenzie has learned to follow faith's footprints.

Faith led her as an Army nurse through the emotional land mines of Vietnam. Years later, faith guided her in a hospital as her baby son nearly died of bacterial meningitis. Now, at age 48, faith leads her out of her safe suburban home into the seamy corners of Memphis, where she seeks to rescue young women from topless dance halls.

"Faith is not something you can see, but we are given clues all the time that it works," said the former Army brat, Memphis mother and crusader against sexually oriented businesses. "God has his people all over."

For the past three years, McKenzie has applied her Christian beliefs as founder, director, chief investigator and primary funder of Citizens for Community Values. Her targets are the peep shows, topless nightclubs and so-called adult bookstores that continue to pop up around Memphis. McKenzie claims these businesses are threats to public health and to community decency and morality.

McKenzie and a small band of fellow citizens have successfully lobbied city hall for anti-nudity ordinances, and the state legislature for a number of laws, including a 1995 bill that outlaws doors on peep show booths.

"She's my conscience," said Jim Beasley, an assistant district attorney who prosecutes state obscenity cases in Shelby County.

"I've been fooling with this stuff for 15 years, and whenever I get to where I don't want to work with it anymore and I feel like nobody really cares, she has been the one to keep me from losing interest."

But McKenzie knows her efforts are more nuisance than hindrance to these businesses. She can't shut them down, but she can help women who work there get out.

"It breaks your heart to see what this industry is doing to women in this community," said McKenzie, the mother of four boys.

McKenzie's crusade began four years ago. Her 10-year-old son, John, was listening to the radio when an ad promoted "amateur night" at a topless club. John didn't seem to notice, but his mother did.

She was brushed off by the radio station at first and began making calls to find out more about the city's sex clubs.

When a former vice-squad commander told her about some of the activities that go on there - prostitution, drug use, and the like - "red lights (were) flashing in my mind," she said.

The more calls she made to the Health Department, police and prosecutors, the more she learned, and the more alarmed she became.

"Carolyn was brought up at West Point," her husband, Mark, explained, "with duty, honor and country, where right is right and wrong is wrong."

McKenzie's rescue mission began in early 1994 when she was a guest on a local radio talk show.

The mother of a topless dancer called and said her daughter wanted to get out but didn't know how. Besides, the girl had bills to pay and a baby to feed.

"She wanted to know, who was I to judge someone else,"

McKenzie recalled. "I thought about that a lot and I realized that I wasn't being very Christian in that regard. Jesus told us to help the least of these."

McKenzie called the mother back and later met with her daughter. She promised the young woman she would do everything she could to help. All the daughter had to do was quit her job as a topless dancer.

The young woman quit. The next day, the ex-dancer went looking for a new job while McKenzie paid her bills. Two weeks later, the young woman was managing an apartment complex.

Since then, McKenzie has helped 11 other young women get out of the business. McKenzie raises money to support the women and their families while they make the transition. She also babysits their

kids, finds them temporary living quarters, and gives them as much moral and emotional support as she can muster.

"I didn't think there was such a thing as a decent Christian," said Angela Harris, a 23-year-old former

topless dancer who was pregnant when she met McKenzie a year ago.

"Carolyn was the first one I met. At first, I thought she was just an East Memphis do-gooder who felt sorry for me. When she was done talking I hugged her. I was numb for two days. I couldn't believe someone I didn't know could love me so much."

Harris started dancing to make money. She dropped out of Arkansas State University after two close friends died in separate accidents. She held low-paying part-time jobs until she saw a newspaper want ad for dancers and waitresses promising \$1,000 a week.

"I was desperate to get out of my aunt's house, so I took it," Harris said. "I made some money, but I hated it. How much money you made depended on how far you were willing to go for the customers. I wasn't as willing as they were."

McKenzie brought Harris a small Christmas tree and a jumper for her unborn baby. Then she helped Harris find another job, a place to live and prenatal care.

Jeremy Harris was born April 4. His mother now is the office manager for a small electronics firm.

"I'm calling my life perfect because of Jeremy," said Harris, who grew up across the river in Marked Tree, Arkansas.

"When I was dancing, I had a lot of stuff but I wasn't happy. Now I don't have hardly anything but I'm as happy as I've ever been."

McKenzie said she's frustrated that she hadn't been able to get churches to sponsor young women trying to leave the industry. Most of the money she raises comes from family and a small group of friends.

But she won't quit.

"I used to ask God why I didn't have any little girls," McKenzie said. "Little did I know he'd bring me a passel of them." 