

Pahrump Valley Times

October 8, 2008

Former Madam Details Business

By MARK WAITE

Laraine Russo Harper began her book "Legal Tender" with the words, "Growing up in a small town on the Jersey Shore, I never thought I would wind up running a brothel".

But as the madam for Sheri's Ranch Brothel in Pahrump for six years from 2001 to 2007, Harper oversaw the transformation of the brothel from three trailers to a multi-million dollar resort.

"Your children dream of becoming firemen and policemen and nurses and teachers," she wrote. "But a madam?"

How did she ultimately get to be what she called "the madam of the new millennium?"

Harper moved to Las Vegas in 1976 where she witnessed prostitution in the casinos. She eventually became a casino host.

After tiring of the long hours of casino work, she opened a manicurist business where she met an old friend who told her he bought a "ranch" and asked her to run it.

Harper recalled she was the only madam in the brothel industry who hadn't been a working girl. But she took the job, driving down to the end of Homestead Road, a road that seemed to go nowhere.

Harper painted a bleak picture of the brothel before the renovation, three doublewide trailers that were too dirty inside to put her purse down. Ladies were crude and tough looking, food was poor and prostitutes were expected to have sex with the owner.

"In the years to come I would learn that this was quite a common practice in the brothel industry. Owners, who were primarily men, would force the ladies to have sex with them routinely," Harper wrote.

Lori Shaner's book "Just Call Me Madam," dealt more with stories of the prostitutes and their different customers. Harper's book deals more with the business angle of running a legal brothel.

Editor Geoff Schumacher, director of community publications for Stephens Media, parent company of the PVT, lauded the book as a good guide to business management and customer service.

Harper does have a chapter with descriptions of some of the working girls. Many of them were married, often single mothers, she wrote. Some of the prostitutes had pimps.

Pahrump residents who have lived in town since 2001 witnessed the changes in the brothel described in Harper's book.

She wrote, "the transformation was something to behold. It was like going from the Bad News Bears to the New York Yankees; from the state pen to Penn State."

"We almost had it all: gorgeous brothel, stunning ladies and guys with money," Harper wrote.

Readers can learn about some of the unique rules and the lingo in the brothel industry like "dirty hustling," a "walk," a "DC" and "choosey Suzies."

Prostitutes were formerly hired at an outside location. Harper began hiring them herself.

She began shakedowns of the rooms, checking even padded bras, instituting a zero tolerance policy for drugs.

Harper held customer service training while construction was under way on the new resort. Wardrobes were ordered for brothel staff.

Big bucks followed the major upgrade. The specialty villas fetched customers paying \$40,000 up to \$90,000 for one night. One customer landed in a helicopter, paying a lady \$80,000.

Harper was referred to as "mom" by the working girls.

"These ladies were my children, regardless of how old they are," she wrote, describing herself as the only stable figure in some of their lives.

Women came from all over the world: Australia, Brazil, Thailand, Russia. The brothel became so popular, women would book their two-week stay a year in advance, Harper wrote.

"As years went by, I realized that the parallels between gaming and prostitution were numerous," Harper wrote. Those included the 24/7 business, limo service, catering to a customer's every desire and making money on time.

But in a brothel, customers knew they'd get lucky.

Many working girls made good money, Harper said. One prostitute who came to work at the brothel at age 21, made \$10,000 per week on average. Another prostitute in five years owned a \$3 million home in one state, a \$2 million condominium in another and a \$1 million loft in another state, retiring at 27 years old.

There's a description of the customers in one chapter, like the Good Humor Man and the lumberjack ballerina. There were elderly widowers who just wanted female company, not sex; couples who wanted a fantasy experience; masochists using the dungeon, including a couple who were married there.

Groups began taking tours, and the brothel also started its annual community party, Harper said, describing the importance of the public relations campaign.

One group, the Red Hat Society eventually came to their rescue, persuading Nye County Commissioner Henry Neth to abandon a request to put a question on the ballot about legalized prostitution in 2004. (Neth isn't identified by name in the book, nor, for that matter, is Sheri's.)

"We were making history. The brothel industry had come a long way from those small, dark, dingy trailers," Harper wrote.

In those days, before the law was changed last year, allowing brothels to advertise, about 80 percent of the customers heard about the brothel through the Internet. Harper set up a booth at the Adult Video News convention in Las Vegas. She also made appearances at conferences, talking about legal prostitution.

Harper espouses the benefits of legal prostitution, making the working girls taxpaying members of society. The licensing fees paid for ambulances for the Pahrump Valley and Fire Rescue Service.

Harper concludes: "Prostitution is everywhere. So why not control it and keep it clean and safe?"

Eventually the brothel organization became too big for her and Harper became involved in internal, corporate politics. The company built a pair of adult businesses in Las Vegas.

Competition from illegal prostitution began to flourish when word got out prostitution busts weren't a priority any more in Las Vegas, Harper wrote. The Internet also provided competition, she wrote.

Harper said she left the business at the top of her game.

She plans to donate proceeds from the book to her Symphony Animal Foundation, to build a no-kill animal shelter.

Harper has held book signings at the Las Vegas Library, the Plaza Hotel and the Erotic Arts Museum in Las Vegas.

Asked to sum up the life of a brothel madam during a book signing at a Pahrump residence, Harper said, "It's like running an X-rated day care."

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