



On the Cover: From student to stripper to prostitute

by Matt Stone
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Straight, blond hair. Slender. Medium height. All in all, Summer looks like thousands of other ASU students.

But during the past two semesters, the 24-year-old Summer has taken time off from her communications studies at ASU.

Summer became a prostitute.

"I just think that a lot of people are just so conservative now," says Summer, who requested her name not be used because of legal consequences. "I guess I'm just more open-minded."

Summer is one of likely thousands of Americans who sell themselves for sex. Though Summer says that prostitution was just "a good fit," a number of cultural and societal factors influence women and men to become escorts — and influence how the rest of society views them.

Becoming an escort

Summer had thought about becoming an escort and having sex for money for a while but never tried it until about a year ago, she says.

"I liked meeting new people," she says. "[It was] a lot better than dancing."

Prostitution offered job freedom and good money, Summer says.

If she sees about three or four clients in a night, she can make anywhere between \$750 and \$1,250, she adds.

When she began escorting, Summer found an Internet-based agency to work for who would call her and tell her where to go when she was needed, she says.

But while she enjoys her work, Summer has kept it secret, she says. While she has divulged her secret to some family members, others remain in the dark, she says. And the boyfriends Summer has had along the way haven't known, she adds.

"People would think that I'm weird," she says. "I guess they just think that something is wrong with a person who can go and sleep with random strangers."

Because prostitution in the U.S. is illegal for the most part, statistics on the number of prostitutes are unreliable. The San Francisco-area pro-legalized prostitution group Prostitutes' Education Network estimates the number of people who have worked as prostitutes to be as high as 1 million. Earlier estimates, such as a 1990 Journal of Sex Research study, put the number much lower, at about 84,000 women during the 1980s.

From stripping to prostitution

Before escorting, Summer worked as a stripper, a profession she says she plans to get back into.

Before starting to strip as a 21-year-old, Summer worked more traditional jobs including at a movie theater. But her work as a stripper and prostitute provided more free rein, she says.

"With a regular job, you actually have a schedule," Summer says. "With dancing, you can go in whatever day you feel like. There's no schedule, [and] there's nobody telling you what to do."

And the money wasn't bad either, she says. As a stripper during peak season between October and May, Summer could make anywhere from \$500 to \$800 in one night, she says. Out of season, the number drops by about half, she adds.

Summer says she never had any apprehensions about stripping, especially after seeing movie portrayals that make the job look glamorous.

"I think it's fun," she says. "I always joked it was like clubbing naked. You're pretty much getting paid for being pretty."

But eventually stripping began to sour for Summer, not because of the work, but because of a new city of Scottsdale ordinance passed in late 2005. The ordinance implemented a distance requirement between a stripper and the patron.

The ordinance was later defeated when placed on a ballot, but the threat of a mandatory four-foot distance from strip club patrons worried Summer about how much money she might make, she says. This helped push Summer to pursue prostitution, she says.

Like her escort job, Summer says she has tried to keep quiet about her stripping job. The one time she told a classmate about her stripping, the reaction was upsetting, Summer says.

"She told her friends that she was actually shocked," she says. "She told her friends that I wasn't normal and she was disgusted with what I did. I just thought she was a conservative bitch."

Cultural confusion

But a conservative nature is just one of many factors that go into the often negative cultural perception of sex workers, says Yasmina Katsulis, an assistant women and gender studies professor.

"In our culture, sex work can be thought of in positive terms," Katsulis says in an e-mail. "It is likely that some people think it's OK to strip to put yourself through college. I would say that other forms of sex work are still seen as immoral."

Movies have also had an effect on how some people view different types of sex workers, Katsulis says. The films that made stripping attractive to Summer helped glamorize it in the public eye, Katsulis says.

"And [now] there are now stripper aerobics classes for 'regular people,'" she says.

While prostitution isn't as acceptable, there are also movies that put the industry in a more positive light, like the 1990 film, "Pretty Woman," Katsulis says.



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This movie portrayed women as socially respectable if they were willing to cast aside their sex work for religion or love, she says.

Perception of sex can be confusing, especially in the United States, says Richard Fey, a social and family dynamics professor.

"We're fascinated by it," he says of sex. "We use it to sell, but at the same time, we want it hidden."

In some other countries, sex is more featured and accepted, Fey says.

"It's labeled as destroying the fabric of America," he says. "We morally condemn people who work in that industry. It's a real kind of mind twist sometimes."

In the U.S., the attitude toward prostitution can change, Fey says, like when the military would offer brothels for soldiers overseas, a practice traceable back to the Korean War.

"They would make use of the legalities of that country," he says of the U.S. military. "Other times it has been so morally condemned that prostitutes have been put to death. It's kind of gone back and forth. It's that unwritten tolerance that has wavered according to whatever moral scale that we're operating on as a society at that given time."

And there is also a bit of hypocrisy for some situations, Fey adds.

"It's perfectly OK for a woman to get married for money ... and, in a sense, to become a trophy wife, but the trade is still sexuality for cash," he says. "When on the street, when it's in our face ... we find that morally detrimental to society. In theory, what is the huge difference?"

Factors involved in sex work

Summer says stripping was a job that offered good money and a lot of freedom. But for many strippers, there can be underlying factors that contribute to the choice, Katsulis says.

"Sex work is one of the only professions where women can make more money than men," she says. "[There's also] no educational requirements, and more autonomy than other kinds of work."

A lack of self-esteem can also be a major factor, Fey says.

"Their looks are part of their bargaining chip in the world," he says. "There are some who are just pulled in by the excitement of the lifestyle."

Typically, it isn't a given that a stripper will eventually cross into prostitution, Fey adds.

"But it does happen, since they find they can make even quicker money," he says. "A former stripper might turn to prostitution later in life because she's no longer viable in the club."

The factors causing a stripper to transition into prostitution also change depending on the country, Katsulis says.

"In our country, stripping can be lucrative enough on its own, [and] there are many sex workers who strip but don't have sex for money and would never see themselves as being willing to do so," she says. "In other countries, dancing or stripping is a way to get customers interested in paying you to have sex."

Dangers involved

Though pay and no educational requirements can make some people, especially women, become a sex worker, a number of factors, including potential violence, STDs or arrests keep others away, and have caused many to publicly speak against prostitution.

Katsulis says many prostitutes, particularly those who work on streets, can be harmed on the job.

"They may face violence more often," she says. "Those who work in the street may be more likely to have [post-traumatic stress disorder], depression, et cetera."

Also, many see a connection between prostitution and the spread of STDs, including HIV/AIDS. For example, The Baltimore Sun reported earlier this month that "prostitution is an important but largely overlooked reason why Baltimore has the nation's second-highest rate of AIDS diagnoses."

For her part, Summer says she always makes a customer wear a condom during sex. Also, if a customer makes requests related to weird fetishes or makes her uncomfortable, she says she can decline to meet with them or not engage in sex.

Because the majority of U.S. prostitutes are women, the issue has sparked debate in the world of feminism as well. Some feminists argue that prostitution is a free choice for women or a legitimate business exchange, while other feminists argue that it is demeaning and reduces women to pieces of merchandise.

Prostitution in Tempe

Prostitution is illegal everywhere in the United States except for Nevada and Rhode Island. In Nevada, the act is illegal in Washoe and Clark counties, which include both Reno and Las Vegas. In Rhode Island, prostitution is only legal if conducted indoors.

In Arizona, punishments vary for prostitution, ranging from a Class 1 misdemeanor to a Class 5 felony, which could entail up to a 1 1/2-year sentence. The factors involved in determining the severity of the crime include whether the person was the prostitute or the buyer and whether they ran or were employed in a house of prostitution, according to Arizona law.

Felonies increase in child prostitution cases.

In Tempe, prostitution is an issue that will likely never go away, says Sgt. Mike Horn of Tempe Police.

"Prostitution, they say it's the oldest profession that's out there. It's been there forever, and it's going to be difficult to go away," Horn says.

And while it's not going away, the industry is changing, Horn adds.

"The prostitution problems that we dealt with 10, 20, 30 years ago are different than they are now," he says. "It used to be you'd walk along the boulevard, up around Apache, ... and historically people knew that's where you could go get prostitutes. That was Tempe's Van Buren."

The major problem area in that past was along Apache Boulevard between Rural Road and the Mesa border, Horn says. But after revitalization efforts from the city of Tempe, prostitution is not as prevalent, he says.

"You can drive up and down Apache now and have a much better chance of seeing a jogger than you do a prostitute down there," he says.

Since 1998, prostitution arrests have varied slightly, staying between 15 and 50 per year, with the exceptions of 2002 and 2006, according to Tempe police statistics. In 2002, there were 136 arrests, mainly due to two sting operations, Horn says. In 2006, there were 92, and there was at least one massage parlor sting, he adds.

Cyber sex trade

Just because the number of prostitutes on the street is down, it doesn't mean they've gone away, Horn says.

"What we see more now is the Internet-type thing," he says.

Web sites like Facebook.com, MySpace.com and Craigslist.com are new havens for prostitution, Horn says. The sites offer places for people to advertise their services and communicate with potential clients.

"We probably do several operations a month on the social networking sites, and sometimes we'll make one contact, or sometimes you'll do a couple. It's just kind of a hit or miss thing," Horn says. "Prostitution is still out there, but it's evolved, and it's different, and how you combat it has changed for law enforcement."

And to catch the prostitutes utilizing the Web, the process is just like purchasing the actual service, he says.

"It's no different than if you or I were doing it on our own," Horn says. "All the motions you go through are pretty much the same. You set up the meeting with someone who's really there for sex, and they're waiting for an arrest. Each case is a little bit different, but there are certain criteria that they meet to get to the point where they can truly establish that there is a crime."

While Horn wouldn't specify what the criteria were, he says the officers are thorough.

"There are some steps we go through to ensure that a crime has been committed," he says.

Though the police have their methods of finding the prostitutes, Summer says she has her own way of avoiding them.

"You're supposed to screen so you don't run into law enforcement," she says.

Screening consists of requiring various information when booking a meeting, Summer says.

"You either ask for two references, or you ask for their work information, like their work number, their first and last name," she says.

But even after catching prostitutes, it doesn't mean they're done for good, Horn says, since like a lot of crime, many times cracking down will just push it to a different location.

And while Horn says the industry is going to be difficult — or impossible — to eliminate, police have to keep an eye on it.

"That's one of those areas that if you don't keep it in check, it spins out of control," he says.

Looking ahead

Though escorting is currently a steady income stream for Summer, she says she doesn't plan to strip or escort forever. In the spring, Summer says she hopes to return to ASU and, in the future, go into sales or own her own business.

But more recently, Summer says she has left her agency and gone solo as an escort.

"[The agency was] making me see people when I was sick, and they didn't always give me the right amount from the credit card money," Summer says.

Setting up her own Web site, Summer says she made her own rules, serving out-call clients and renting an apartment for in-call requests.

"I can keep more of the money and be extremely picky about who I see," she says. "It's a lot better [on my own]."

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