

A Bronx Elementary School, Surrounded by Prostitutes



Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

A woman who called herself Virgin Sanabria said that she was ashamed of practicing prostitution near a school, but that drugs numbed her.

By **YARDENA SCHWARTZ**

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When Nicole Murray's 10-year-old daughter, Diamond, first started going to West Farms elementary school three years ago, she asked her mother why one woman they passed was barely dressed.

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Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times
Mario Pagan, 34, and Nicole Murray, 37, escort their daughter Diamond Pagan to West Farms school in the Bronx.

At all hours of the day, prostitutes roam the streets around the school, waiting for cars entering and leaving the Cross Bronx Expressway. They bend over car windows and climb inside, in plain view of students walking to and from the school.

Listening to her daughter, who is now in the fourth grade, ask about prostitutes was hard, Ms. Murray, 37, said. "I felt a big weight in my chest," she said.

The prostitutes also have sex inside a tent on top of a boulder directly below the school's playground. Students, from prekindergartners to fifth graders, can see mattresses, cushions and sheets strewn about the rock. Custodians often have to sweep condoms and hypodermic needles from the school grounds before students arrive in the morning.

The illicit sex trade surrounding the school, at the corner of East Tremont and Bryant Avenues, has been a distasteful reality for years, according to teachers and parents who express both frustration and resignation at a problem that the police say they cannot

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fully stamp out.

"It hurts that we have to be going through this right in front of the school," said Tamika Salichs, 28, whose 9-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter are students at West Farms.

The principal of West Farms, Darlene McWhales, refused several requests to talk about the issue, referring questions to the superintendent of the local community school district.

The superintendent, Myrna Rodriguez, said, "We schools are powerful in doing a lot of things, but there are some things in which we have no power." She added, "The best thing we can do is make sure our kids learn well."

The police say that they have put a dent in the number of prostitutes working near the school, but that eradicating the problem is no easy task.

"We can't pick them up for just standing on the street," said Officer Tony DiGiovanna, who has worked on prostitution cases in the 48th Precinct in the South Bronx, which patrols the neighborhood around West Farms. "A lot of times we bring them in, they get a slap on the wrist, and they're back on the street the next day."

Some efforts to combat prostitution have actually pushed more prostitutes close to the school.

Eight years ago, the nearby Alps Hotel on Boston Road, a favorite haunt of sex workers, shut its doors after a concerted campaign by local elected leaders and neighborhood groups. It was replaced by a Howard Johnson's, which has been more vigilant in keeping prostitutes out. Four years ago, in an empty lot around the corner from the school where prostitutes once congregated, an apartment building went up. Another popular spot was a grassy stretch along the Bronx River that is now being refurbished into a greenway.

With fewer places to take their customers, prostitutes started using the rock next to the West Farms playground to have sex for as little as \$25.

Not surprisingly, some of the prostitutes said in interviews that they were selling their bodies to pay for drugs.

One petite blonde who is often spotted walking around the school, and who identified herself as Linda, said she was addicted to heroin. "It's a vicious cycle," she said. "Every two hours I need another fix, so it's another trick."

Some of the prostitutes are mothers with children in the same age group as the youngsters who attend West Farms. One woman, who gave her name as Virgin Sanabria, has a 10-year-old son who lives with his grandmother. As for doing what she does near children who are studying and playing, Ms. Sanabria, who said she was 29, said, "I feel ashamed, but a lot of times once we get high, it numbs our memory, so we don't really think about it."

Some teachers have come to accept the blatant prostitution with a dose of resignation. "After a while, you get accustomed to certain things," said Yvette Gascot, 41, an assistant teacher. "You kind of become immune to it."

But teachers do worry about their students and what kind of message they may be absorbing from what is happening outside their classrooms. "If they see that happening right in front of school, they could see that as a possible career," said Maria Lugo, 46, a teacher at West Farms. "They might think it's an easy way out."

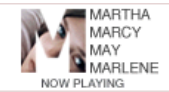
Some parents said they had no choice but to send their children to West Farms. "This is the kind of school you send your kids to when you can't get them into a better school," said Bonnie Alexander, 30, the mother of two children at West Farms.

As another parent, Mario Pagan, the father of Diamond, the fourth grader, put it: "These

kids are being exposed to things they shouldn't be exposed to. She's growing up too fast because of it."

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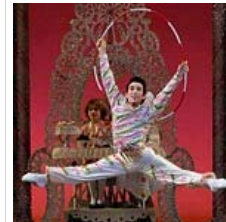
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