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## Profile

Continued from Page 1A

the sure thing. What I enjoy is figuring out what that is, and providing it so they leave me fulfilled."

Melanie tries not to swear. She didn't call them Johns. She tried to be professional. For \$200 an hour, Melanie did right by her clients, and it wasn't just sex, something she thinks most people do not understand about prostitution. She calls it her work, her job, sometimes her hustle.

Now it's her old hustle, one that she is leaving: Melanie is on her way to prison. Her slide toward exploitation, violence and addiction was set in motion long before 16, the age when she crossed paths with the man at the Ballard bus stop. Now, after about five years sidling around the margins of Bremerton, providing a service for the lonely and lost, where does that leave her?

"I've mostly only felt as good as I've made other people feel," she says. "If I can make somebody else feel good, I feel like it's worth it."

Prostitution is not glamorous, she says, but for Melanie it was not only survival but survival on her own terms. She earned her own way, she didn't have to mooch off others. She reclaimed part of her life and some control over her body, even if the life she found for herself is unrecognizable to most and, in the end, her old hustle landed her body right back under the thumb of the state.

Her story is not over, however. The way she tells it, there is a ray of hope on the other side of prison: her son.

"It's all new, things have really changed in my heart and my head lately," Melanie says.

She's expressed a desire to change before only to return to drugs and prostitution. In September 2015, wearing the same jail uniform and appearing in Kitsap County Superior Court for a different case, Melanie pleaded guilty, hoping to get on with her life.

"I've got kids," she said to the judge, exasperated.

Now, she says the desire to change is real, but at the same time, she admits to doubting herself.

"The other side of me says I'm not good enough," she says. "This is all I'm good for."

A Bremerton pimp once sent two teens to Melanie for training, telling them she was a "real prostitute." Law enforcement knew her well, too. Bremerton cops recognized her on sight. Those who patronize prostitutes around here might have seen her online ad. Social media photos show her posed provocatively — high cheekbones, dark eyes.

She is recognizable from her photos, but she looks different in jail. No make-up, hair undone. The jail infirmary has had to pull six teeth. Her gums ache from past meth use, maybe more teeth need to be pulled. There's the scar, the one on her belly, an injury that still hurts nearly 20 years later.

"I feel worn," she says. Bremerton and Kitsap County have long been demand centers for the sex trade. As to what came first, it's the men, said Bremerton Police Sgt. Billy Renfro, a veteran officer who can recall when prostitutes walked downtown looking for dates. Now services are sold on websites using smartphones.

"It supply and demand, and it is the demand that is driving the supply," he says.

Many of the women who work in Bremerton don't live here and often travel from Tacoma and Seattle. However, when law enforcement conducts stings for clients — and they have no problem luring clients, another indicator of strong demand — the men are often local. That is about all they have in common with each other.

"It's wide-ranging, you can never categorize it, it's not just white, just black, young or old. It's everything and everybody," Renfro says of the clients. "I think that speaks volumes about the demand."

About four years ago, law enforcement in Kitsap County began shifting focus away from the women engaged in prostitution, a change in approach officials said recognizes women and girls as victims of the men who buy and sell them. However, police continue to conduct stings targeting prostitutes. Prosecutors continue to charge women with prostitution.

The demand kept Melanie busy. "There is a lot of Navy, but there is a mix," she says. "There's also Department of Defense."

Typically she saw one or two regulars a day, five or six days a week. When Melanie got busy or had a new client, she hired help: drivers, bodyguards, secretaries. She's traded sex to get high, but she tried to at least get half in money, half in drugs.

"It's not the 1600s when these women were lavished with gifts and money, with guys coming in and courting them left and right," Melanie says. "It's not easy, it's dangerous and scary."

Melanie doesn't want to say when she officially stopped working. She talks

about her hustle in the present tense, then corrects herself and calls it her "old" hustle. It's part of her past, but while locked up she can't help but continue living it.

"A girl's got to eat," she says. "Considering my history, that's the most effective, efficient way I know of to get my basic needs met. And that's all I've consistently been good for my whole life, it seems. Even when I haven't been doing that, I've had boyfriends use me for that, had people manipulating me for that, and just walk out."

What's driving Melanie now is her youngest, a 6-year-old boy with autism, who was recently removed from his father's care and is now bouncing around the foster care system.

Her first two, girls, have Native American heritage and live with relatives in their tribe. She knows they are in good hands.

Her son, though, is now in the same system she was placed in.

This time Melanie says she is motivated to leave the sex trade, to get clean, not because what she did was illegal, or because she sees her clients as deviant. She is dismissive of moralizing about prostitution and thinks it should be legal, but now her focus is on her son, and she will do what it takes to take him home.

"Now that's my goal, that's what I am focused on right now," she says. "I need to be there for my kid."

Back to the question: What is it like being a prostitute? Answer: It's scary.

"You don't know when a cop's going to try to bust you," Melanie says. "You don't know when somebody is going to try to rip you off, you don't know what to expect, if somebody is going to try to get forceful with you."

The reason Melanie is sitting in jail, and about to head to prison, is that she pleaded guilty to twice selling small amounts of meth to a police informant. The judge sentenced her to 20 months and one day.

## Police continue to conduct stings targeting prostitutes. Prosecutors continue to charge women with prostitution.

It's not the first time the state of Washington has taken possession of her body. The first time was when she was 4, when social workers discovered her stepfather had been molesting her. Child welfare workers removed Melanie and her sister, Shannon, who was a baby at the time.

The girls landed in a couple foster homes, then a foster-to-adopt home, where they were kept from their birth mother. At about age 8, when the adoption was finalized, Melanie started acting out.

"I thought she was choosing to not come see me," Melanie says of her birth mother.

Shannon now lives out of state, and when they talk on the phone Melanie praises her. Shannon is single, working, going to school and raising her child.

"You're doing it!" Melanie tells her. Shannon isn't comfortable with the praise.

"I try to remind her that I'm not perfect," Shannon says. "I make mistakes."

When Shannon thinks about their divergent paths in life, Shannon — also not her real name — believes it has something to do with Melanie's age: She was old enough to realize she was being taken from their mother and was struck by the trauma. Shannon has struggled, but not in the same way.

"She never recovered," said Shannon, describing their adoptive mother with the same word Melanie used to describe her: cruel.

Melanie was Shannon's protector. In the midst of the chaos of their home life, Shannon relied on Melanie to keep her safe but she knew that Melanie wanted out.

"When we were kids she said she wanted to live in the woods by herself," Shannon says of her big sister.

It's hard for Shannon to say for sure, she wants to believe that everything happens for a reason, but she thinks they would have been better off if Child Protective Services had never gotten involved.

"Overall I think it would have been better for the both of us," Shannon says.

Although she dodged the addiction and crime that have marked Melanie's life, Shannon contended with self-harm and an eating disorder and was in and out of hospitals and group homes until she aged out of the system at 18.

"A lot of time I feel lonely in the world, I feel different from others, I feel unwanted," Shannon says.

She has built a life for herself and her son and assembled a support system from people who have provided her guidance, but it's not the same as having a family.



## Seattle Sounders denied MLS Cup repeat triumph

SPORTS, 1B

# Kitsap Sun

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2017 ■ KITSAPSUN.COM R1

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## VACATION HOME RULES ON PAUSE



Kimberly King is the innkeeper and owner of the Green Cat Guest House Bed & Breakfast in Poulsbo.

LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN

### County working on permitting, regulations

Josh Farley and Nathan Pilling  
Kitsap Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Inside Green Cat Guest House, a cozy bed and breakfast tucked away off a forested lane a few miles north of Poulsbo, beds are made and rooms are ready for new guests. The kitchen sits clean, ready for the next round of food prep. Outside, appropriately, a bushy-haired cat scampers through the shaded yard. It's a quiet place of rest for visitors.

Back in the office, owners Kimberly King and Kenneth Grantham have been trying to wrap their minds around updated business codes that Kitsap County officials proposed for homes like theirs — and subsequently backed away from in recent weeks.

King and other owners of short-term vacation rental locations have been confused. They're scrambling to understand the regulations, which would require a county review of their establishment and a fee.

County officials recently announced that they would put a "pause" on implementing new regulations on short-term rentals and bed and breakfasts, but the conversation has worried some local business owners. They cite a lack of communication from the county.

"We and our colleagues had absolutely no idea that the rules had been changed, reformatted, reinstated, and adopted as of the summer of 2016 and who they apply to," King said.

Officials in June 2016 established regulations to govern an increasing number of vacation rentals in unincorporated Kitsap County. But efforts to bring greater compliance have hit a snag, as county planners have yet to find a policy that can cast an appropriately-sized net to reign in Internet-based rentals versus longstanding bed and breakfasts.

Problems with some vacation rentals surfaced in 2016 as the county updated its comprehensive plan, a roadmap for zoning and growth patterns. Kitsap County Commissioner Rob Gelder, who represents the north end of the county, cited the example of a private street in his district where a homeowner who lived elsewhere created a vacation rental.

Neighbors began to notice random cars parked outside and on the road; house parties involving strangers sometimes appeared, and even "the septic system was overwhelmed, to put it mildly," Gelder said.

"What recourse did the neighbors have?" Gelder said.

Kitsap County established a regulatory frame-

See RENTALS, Page 9A

## A profile of prostitution in Kitsap County

Andrew Binion  
Kitsap Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Sixteen, living in foster care and waiting at a bus stop in the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle, Melanie met the man who would force her into prostitution.

It begins like this: He climbs aboard the Metro bus ahead of her and as they walk to the back he drops a \$100 bill. Melanie picks it up.

"Hey, you dropped this."

He looks at the bill then throws his eyes around to Melanie: "Oh, thanks, girl, but (tsk) that's basically pocket change."

That's how he hounded her.

"You remember what it's like when you are 16? It's always love," says Melanie — not her real name — incarcerated and wearing the green uniform of a Kitsap County Jail inmate. "It's always good to be The One. I mean, he introduced me to his mom."

After dating for a month or so it started.

"He started giving me to people," Melanie says, now 32. First to a friend, then to an uncle. "Then it was to the point that he was basically beating my a\*\* if I didn't do what he said. So I did what he said."

He went to jail for a traffic infraction and Melanie took her chance to escape. To make sure he couldn't find her, she ran away from her foster home, never to return. She didn't so much as age out of the system; she evacuated. And for good measure she has avoided Ballard ever since.

What is it like to be a prostitute?

"First off, can I tell you my favorite part?" Melanie asks.

It isn't the fear that she wants to talk about first.

It's not the heroin to numb herself so she could work but which then left her dope sick and still having to work.

Before she talks about the desolation during the holidays when clients get busy with their families, Melanie talks about what she liked about the job: Her favorite part of being a prostitute was feeling like she was helping.

"When somebody comes to me, there is a void," Melanie says. "Usually it's the need for companionship. A lot of times it's the need to be treated with respect, treated like a man. Or to be able to just be themselves and not be ridiculed or laughed at, or fear of either of those things. A lot of times it is low self-esteem. They don't think they are capable of picking up a girl. They go for

See PROFILE, Page 6A

## How Candy Cane Lane arrived in Bremerton

Josh Farley  
Kitsap Sun  
USA TODAY NETWORK

EAST BREMERTON — Six years ago in the heat of summer, as Rex-zane Rudee moved into his new View Crest Drive NE home, he spotted what appeared to be two candy canes, industrial-sized, hanging from the ceiling of an unfinished basement.

He was puzzled at first; then, it hit him: "Oh!" he thought. "I've just moved to Candy Cane Lane."

Though he grew up in Poulsbo, the road has been known for generations as

one of — if not the — most decoratively lit and festive streets on the peninsula. And now Rudee, who'd never been one to adorn his home's exterior, was thrust into an exclusive club. He knew he had to do his part.

"No one said anything," he noted. "But who wants to be the only dark house on the street?"

Each Thanksgiving since, not long after the turkey's carved, the work for the Rudees and their neighbors begins, as thousands of lights go up along shrubs, gutters, fences and of course,

See CANDY, Page 8A



Characters from "A Christmas Story" stand behind the decorated fence at a home in the Viewcrest Drive NE neighborhood on Thursday.

MEEGAN M. REID / KITSAP SUN

USA TODAY

Fighting sexual harassment in Congress holds pitfalls for both parties. 3A

'Firefighting at Christmas'

California high fire risk expected to last into January. 4A

Weather

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