

## PROSTITUTE

Hardy Williams' efforts to have the word "illegitimate" removed from legal documents demonstrates that he knew the power of a single word. As a second-year law student, I have a great appreciation for the power of words. The omission of one word in a legal document can prove fatal to its meaning and purpose—from a statutory provision, to a will or a contract. However, as Mr. Williams understood, a word—a label—can also classify, stigmatize, and marginalize. One word in a legal document can reflect a popular perspective and perpetuate a stereotype about a particular person or group. Eradicating the use of words that carry stigmatic harm is a crucial step in redirecting the cultural narrative about a labeled group.

If I could have one word removed from legal documents, it would be the word "prostitute." "Prostitute," like "illegitimate," perpetuates a stereotype that largely misses the truth. Being a "prostitute" carries with it the connotation that prostitution is a freely chosen lifestyle and set of behaviors. It is commonly believed that women enter prostitution to support their drug habits and make loads of cash. Whether "Pretty Woman" or pop culture's image of a Vegas "hooker" comes to mind, the word "prostitute" conjures up false assumptions and time-worn misconceptions.

The term "prostitute" does not capture the truth that most women in a life of prostitution are victims of complex abuse and sexual exploitation that began at a young age. Many women who share their stories speak of early sexual trauma that ultimately shaped their understanding of themselves, their value, and their concept of what was normal. Many girls are caught up in prostitution prior to age 18 (which, by way of legal definition, makes them *per se* victims of human trafficking). In shopping malls, outside of schools, on the streets, and online, girls are lured in by the promises of pimps who appeal to a girl's need for attention, affection, and

security. Pimps skillfully use coercion and manipulation to instill false hopes in a “stable” of girls who they can sell again and again. They will groom girls to turn many tricks a day and use violence, drugs, sleep deprivation, and hunger to ensure their compliance and dependence. It is common for these women and girls to be trauma-bonded with their pimps; and it is that bond that will keep them on the street, never leaving or looking to escape. Pimp-controlled prostitution is not an anomaly. It is the defining mark of prostitution in America.

No girl grows up hoping that one day she will become a prostitute. Some advocates of “sex work” argue that those in prostitution are exercising their agency in a legitimate business enterprise. Perhaps some adults do make an independent choice to perform sex acts on multiple strangers per day for money. By doing so, they are also choosing to do whatever they are told, no matter how unpleasant. They are choosing to increase their risk of rape, disease, addiction, injury from violence, and even early death. Women making free choices to empower themselves in sex work may exist, but it is not the story of the majority. The majority of women do not choose this life as much as it chose them—usually at a young age.

As I began to volunteer at a drop-in center in Kensington for women who are being commercially sexually exploited, my heart began to break as I saw what prostitution does to human beings. Bruises, black eyes, and open sores are common, as is being high and exhausted. I have met girls who have been drugged senseless, raped, and beaten by pimps and sex-purchasers alike. I also began to recognize the gender inequality, the misunderstanding, and the stereotyping that surround these women and girls both in society and in the law. Women are generally afraid of police for fear of mistreatment and criminal prosecution, so they do not report the violence done to them. They also are generally hesitant to seek medical attention because of the fear and stigma they carry with them.

This is prostitution in America. It is a human rights abuse occurring in every major city, including Philadelphia and the five counties. “Prostitute” is a label that fails to capture the truth that these women and girls (and also boys and transgender individuals) are victims, not criminals. These are prostituted persons, victims of human trafficking, sexually exploited human beings. I am passionate that the laws and policies that affect these victims reflect the truth about their situations. With the passage of Act 105 in 2014, the legislative tides are turning, but more change, more awareness, and more understanding are still needed.

Why should I receive the Hardy Williams Education Fund Scholarship? The simple answer is that I am passionate about championing the cause of the voiceless, the misunderstood, and the marginalized. This passion extends back to my years before law school. During college I was a mentor, tutor and camp counselor for underprivileged children and youth. After college, I spent time as a teacher in Tanzania, as a child advocate (CASA), and as a girls’ basketball coach. This summer I will be volunteering in Ghana as a legal intern for an international non-profit organization. My primary job will be assisting their legal department with cases of forced child labor. I look forward to the opportunity to work on behalf of another population who is unseen and unheard.

I believe—like Mr. Williams—that “[w]e need to respond, in a comprehensive way, to the growing plight of the underprivileged in our society.” For me, law school is a means to that end. I look forward to becoming a strong and excellent advocate for those whose struggles are rooted in their vulnerability and exploitation. The world needs all of us to give of our gifts, talents and skills. The world needed Mr. Williams, and he did not shy away. I hope and pray that one day, I will leave that same kind of legacy.