

Retired librarian's book details lives of local sex workers



A retired Connecticut College librarian who spent 10 years paying women not for sex but to tell their stories has published a revised version of the book he wrote about the experience.

Called “Good Girls on Bad Drugs,” Mark Mathew Braunstein’s book features 22 women who, for the most part, were sex workers in New London, Norwich or Willimantic between 1997 and 2007.

An exception is Olivia Roark, a 17-year-old Internet escort who was the

youngest person to fatally overdose in Connecticut in 2016. Notably, Braunstein tells her story — the Griswold native fatally overdosed in the Flagship Motel in Groton in May 2016 — through two other women instead of her.

Most of the book's stories end tragically. Some of the women die by AIDS, hepatitis C, overdose or murder. Others are serving lengthy prison sentences.

Braunstein said he became interested in the topic while living in a house in the Connecticut College Arboretum. Set back from the road, the house had a windy driveway where sexual activity in cars was rampant.

Braunstein initially thought the people in the cars were high school students, but later learned they were sex workers with "johns."

Paraplegic because of an early 1990s diving accident, Braunstein made it his goal to talk to as many New London sex workers as he could. He later expanded to Norwich and Willimantic. Once the women learned of his plight, most talked to him freely, Braunstein said.

He said he recorded hundreds of women and talked to several multiple times. He corroborated their stories using public documents whenever possible.

"Sometimes I would come away with a sense of joy in my own life," he admitted. "They're chemically crippled; I'm physically crippled. In some ways, I would feel like Superman when I heard about their lives."

But Braunstein said he also hopes people who read his book realize many of the women wouldn't be dead or in prison if they could better address their underlying mental health issues.

"The book is about sex and drugs, that's the text," he said. "But I wrote it for

the subtext, which is drug law reform. These girls are not monsters — they're human beings. ... Drug addiction shouldn't be a crime, it should be considered a disease."

Braunstein said the rush of him doing something that seemed illegal — apparently soliciting a prostitute — also compelled him to keep talking to the women.

"There's a certain risk," he said. "That was part of the thrill."

Braunstein's book includes the stories of Heather Brown, a woman who robbed six banks in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island in six days, and Elizabeth "Liz" Gagne, a woman serving 13 years to life in prison in Vermont for her role in a double murder.

Braunstein said though some of the women weren't thrilled with his portrayal, none disputed it.

Indeed, New London resident Trisha Rios, who hasn't yet read the new version, said Braunstein's 2017 book was fair. Now [a recovery coach](#) for the city — she tells people who are addicted to drugs about the steps they can take — the 41-year-old has been sober for more than nine years. Rios is included in the chapter about Gagne and figures Braunstein picked her up and talked to her at least 20 times.

"His goal is to help someone else," she said. "If I had read his book when I was 15 or 16, maybe my life would be different."

"Yes, I chose to try heroin," Rios said. "But did I choose the life that happened after? I don't think so."

In the book, Braunstein uses some brash language. In one sentence, for example, he calls "geeking" a "crackhead" slang for smoking crack. Medical

professionals caution against using terms like “addict” and “crack head” to describe people struggling with addiction. When informed of such, Braunstein said he always is learning. Prominently, the phrase “Unhappy Hookers,” which appeared on the cover of his first edition, is missing from the newest. He also removed many uses of the word “junkie.”

When Braunstein revisited his recordings years after he made them, he realized he needed an update that included how the internet has changed sex work. He also included in his book that, while Willimantic used to be the go-to for drug users, “now every town is a heroin town.”

Importantly, Braunstein photographed and published photos of many of the women he interviewed. The photos are powerful and, for a woman like Rios, serve as a reminder of how far a person can come.

“He’s watched me grow up,” she said. “I’m glad I had that experience with him. ... I couldn’t see anybody else doing what he does.”

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