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Prosecutor aims to erase human trafficking

By **Brian Rogers** | March 30, 2013 | Updated: March 31, 2013 4:14pm



The runaway was 15 years old when pimp Mark Anthony Kentish was forcing her to earn \$300 a day prostituting herself on Houston's streets.

After a jury this month heard about the teen's quota, her brutal beatings and the trading of girls among pimps, they deliberated just 20 minutes before convicting Kentish, then sentenced him to 45 years in prison.

Seeking justice against the 39-year-

old was the first order of business for Harris County's newly hired human trafficking prosecutor Ann Johnson.

"Houston's a hub for trafficking. We have a significant issue that needs to be cleaned up," Johnson said.

"You've got to have every piece to the puzzle and prosecuting the pimps and the johns is that piece."

Language of street

Johnson, a 39-year-old juvenile law attorney, is fluent in the language of the street, rattling off facts about Houston's tracks, where pimps take prostitutes to pick up "tricks" or dates with johns.

She talks about "gorilla pimps" who control prostitutes with violence and "mack pimps" who use flattery, safety and the promise of love to lure prostitutes.

After cementing the relationship with sex, the mack asks the prostitute to help the "family" by selling sex.

That fluency means she can talk to minors about what they're going through. And she can also explain that world to a jury.



Photo: Melissa Phillip, Staff



Houston prosecutor Ann Johnson is a human trafficking specialist.



"It's such a foreign world, a hidden world and Ann knows about it," said Jen Falk, a prosecutor who helped put Kentish in prison. "She brings such a unique background, especially in talking to victims who typically just get lost in the system."

The teen in that case was with Kentish, a typical mack, just two weeks before a traffic stop gave her the opportunity to get out.

When an inquisitive Metro officer asked her to write her name down, the girl just wrote a circle.

The officer put her in the back of his patrol car where she broke down in tears and told him what was going on.

Kentish and the girl were in the car with another prostitute who later testified against the pimp, corroborating the teen's story. That woman also had been a runaway and a child prostitute and still worked for Kentish, she said in court.

"Ann really showed a concern for what happened to these girls after the case," Falk said. "For these victims, it is a lifelong issue and Ann went out of her way to find resources or groups or aftercare for these girls if they wanted it."

'Important work'

After being licensed in 2001 and hired by the Harris County District Attorney's Office, Johnson worked in the juvenile courts. In 2005, she left the office to go in to private practice defending children, then returned to the DA's office in February.

"I've always thought juvenile law was important work," Johnson said. "If you have the opportunity to help a child to break the cycle so they're not revolving in and out of the criminal justice system, to give them an opportunity to succeed, it's better for everyone in the long run."

Helping children to grow up to be independent, productive people, Johnson said, is one of the most important jobs the criminal justice system has.

Johnson, the youngest of six children born to civil attorney Jake Johnson and former state District Judge Carolyn Marks Johnson, was the only child to follow her parents' career path. Johnson said she "grew up" at her father's firm.

"At dinner at night, before my mother was a judge, they were always talking about cases," Johnson said. "And I would go watch my dad in trial, so it was something I always felt very connected with."

She was working with her father when she took on an appeal for a 13-year-old convicted of prostitution in 2007. Three years later, Johnson and attorney Michael Choyke successfully argued at the Texas Supreme Court that minors forced into prostitution are victims, not criminals. The case changed the law in Texas.

"In the past, kids would be prosecuted and that would be the end of the case," Johnson said. "Now because of many people's efforts, you're seeing the turning of a massive ship that says we're no longer going to view these children as offenders."

The landmark decision also changed the legal community, said state District Juvenile Judge Michael Schneider.

"It was revolutionary," Schneider said. "It really brought a lot of people together to shift the culture to treat kids like the victims they are instead of perpetrators."

Although domestic child prostitution is not typically considered human trafficking, prosecuting those cases is a top priority and part of a three-pronged attack for newly elected District Attorney Mike Anderson.

"Houston is one of the top five cities in the world for human trafficking," Anderson said. "We're going to be busting the people who see this as their business and the mid-management, which are the pimps, and the johns as well."

Houston sex slaves

Anderson said he expects to see more cases filed against Houston's cantinas and massage

parlors where men and women are brought to Houston from all over the world to work as sex slaves.

"Just as sad, there are runaways here that are recruited with promises of a job or safety and they're made to be prostitutes," Anderson said.

After he decided to make trafficking one of his administration's top priorities, Anderson set out to recruit Johnson. He hired her at a typical chief's salary of \$110,000 a year and said she may soon be creating an entire new trafficking division at the office.

"She's extremely well respected in that area, she's passionate about it, and she's very good at what she does," Anderson said. "She has a reputation at the courthouse."

She is also well-known after an unsuccessful campaign last year to unseat incumbent Republican Sarah Davis for House District 134. A Democrat, Johnson lost the race but was widely supported by courthouse insiders, including Chris Tritico, president of the Harris County Criminal Lawyers Association.

"Every dealing I've had with her, when she was a prosecutor before and as a private practitioner has been very positive," Tritico said. "I think the world of her."

He said he was surprised the office hired a "human trafficking specialist" because not many cases have traditionally been filed.

"But there must be a need," he said. "Otherwise, I don't know why Mike Anderson would have hired a Democrat to run that division."

Johnson said her run was spurred in part by legislative action during the 2011 session. Two years ago, child prostitution and trafficking became a statewide priority, reflected by new laws raising the penalty for forcing a minor into prostitution to a possible life sentence.

"In the last session the Legislature made sure that this is a significant issue," Johnson said. "There are a number of agencies, nonprofits and groups involved in trying to bring


awareness to this issue. Our community clearly does not approve of it."



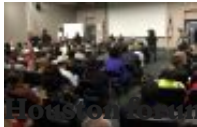
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