

A massage-parlor sting in tony Green Hills leaves three possible victims of sex trafficking stranded in limbo | City Limits

by Kay West

On Feb. 10, teams of detectives from the Metro Nashville Police Department's Specialized Investigations Division — the unit formerly known as Vice — simultaneously entered four Nashville establishments scattered across the city. Led by Capt. Mike Alexander, they carried search warrants obtained after undercover investigations indicated that prostitution was taking place on the premises.

The operation, sprung with swift efficiency on a subfreezing winter day, resulted in felony charges against three women for promoting prostitution and trafficking for commercial sex. It also brought misdemeanor counts against seven more for prostitution. (Several male "clients" on site received citations for purchasing sex.)

Three of the four establishments — Acupressure Treatment Center on Fourth Avenue South, Daily Massage on Gallatin Pike, and ABC Massage on Franklin Pike — were low-profile addresses relatively out of the public eye. But Golden Massage was operating smack in the heart of the commercial district of tony Green Hills. It was hiding in plain sight in a small strip center on Abbott Martin Road — home also to The Wine Shoppe of Green Hills, Domino's Pizza and Office Depot.

Detectives say Golden Massage was offering illicit services through Backpage ads for "massages by pretty Asian girls" and "table showers" (code for manual stimulation, according to police).

"It always looked sketchy," said an employee from another nearby business. "There was a lot of traffic in and out." Said another with a shake of her head, "There were lots of old men going in there. A woman came into our store one day after leaving that place, and she told us that it was the worst massage she ever had."

Within the shuttered business, cheap plastic blinds cover the plate-glass windows from floor to ceiling on either side of the glass door. Inside, atop dingy carpet, four large red pleather chairs sit side by side. These were for foot massages. Two massage chairs similar to those seen in airports are the only other furnishings in the main room, aside from the reception desk. Its contents include a framed list of services (one-hour table massage for \$72, one-hour foot massage for \$50, 30-minute chair massage for \$25), a calculator, a notebook and a bowl of Dum-Dum lollipops.

It was behind the closed doors of four little rooms partitioned by plywood that the "table showers" purportedly took place. When Golden Massage was raided, detectives found a small massage table in each room, flanked by a small side table that held oils and lotions. In one room, a pair of men's underwear lay on the floor. A UV light showed "fluid splatter" on the walls and floors.

But police went on to make a far more disturbing discovery: three female employees of Asian descent who spoke no English and had no identification. Not only didn't they know their address, they could not identify the name of the town where they were living. It turned out to be Franklin.

To communicate with them about what was happening, police showed them a printed sheet with 30 languages and asked them to point to theirs. In Mandarin Chinese, the women read they were being arrested.

"The judge in this case asked me why we charged the women at the Green Hills store with prostitution," says

Assistant DA Antoinette Welch, who accompanied officers to Golden Massage the day of the raid. "We had no idea of the full story at that time. There was a serious communication issue. During the investigation we began to suspect these women had been brought in, which is why an FBI agent was also on hand."

The owner of Golden Massage, Peng He, was not on site the day of the raid. According to police, either he or a receptionist drove the three women to work every day from his home at 109 Valor Court in Franklin.

SID detectives raided the He home on March 13. In addition to Mr. He, they found computers and cash totaling about \$25,000. They also found the three women taken into custody at Golden Massage, ages 26, 28 and 50. They were sleeping on mattresses on the floor in the house's lower level.

"He had bonded them out," Welch says. "Mr. He had their passports, they had no money and we had confiscated their cellphones as evidence the day of the raid. They had no access to transportation. We have no idea what they were told to get them here or what they thought they would be doing here."

Peng He has been charged with trafficking for commercial sex. While he sits jailed on \$500,000 bond, the three women remain at the home on Valor Court in Franklin, living in limbo.

But Welch is trying to help them find a way out. On March 21, they were among nearly three dozen women who participated in a half-day program created by Welch in 2011 and facilitated by the District Attorney's Office. Held in the auditorium of the Lentz Public Health Center, The Hannah Project intends to educate and empower women engaged in prostitution, as well as to expunge their records of first or even second offenses.

"Johns had the opportunity to have their records expunged through the John School, started by Magdalene," says Welch, who spent 14 years as a Nashville police officer, eight of them doing undercover street investigations. "Women charged with prostitution were not getting that break, and I didn't think that was fair. So I created this program."

Those who believe prostitution is a victimless crime need invest only five hours with Welch to debunk that notion.

"I have had over 750 women come through this class over two-and-a-half years from every type and level of prostitution, from the street to escorts," Welch says. "I have never met a happy prostitute."

The day begins at 8 a.m. with breakfast and an overview of STDs — how to recognize, prevent and treat them. "Sex education in Tennessee schools is sorely lacking," Welch observes wryly.

If the early sessions are merely awkward, what follows is gut-wrenching: displayed crime photos of women who were murdered while working as prostitutes. One particularly horrifying set is of the nude body of a 25-year-old victim of convicted smurderer Bruce Mendenhall, a trucker who targeted prostitutes. The photos, gruesome and graphic, cause many to turn away. Others shed tears.

"Women involved with prostitution are more likely to be murdered, stabbed, shot, beaten and raped than anyone else," Welch says. "Prostitutes make the perfect victim because they think they can't go to the police if they are assaulted, and they distrust the judicial system. We want to empower them to know they can and should call the police."

That message is reinforced by two representatives from the Nashville Sexual Assault Center, who offer free counseling to victims of sexual assault. According to Welch and Becca Stevens, founder of the two-year Magdalene program for recovering street prostitutes, abuse victims make up 100 percent of women working as prostitutes. "Every one of the women I meet," Welch says firmly, "was sexually abused before the age of 18."

That is true of Sheila Simpkins McClain, a Magdalene graduate and employee of Magdalene. McClain has become an intervention specialist with End Slavery Tennessee, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting human

trafficking. She and her fellow graduate Gwen Cockrell are the final speakers of the day.

"Antoinette knows the women can relate to us because of our life experience," McClain says. "We can make a connection with them."

When McClain looks at her audience that afternoon, she sees women exhausted by their work, beaten down by assault and addiction, trapped by their traffickers and pimps, hopeless that things can get better. "I see myself," she says.

"If I can show them that someone like me can do it, they can too. They just have to ask for help. It is always my goal to take someone with me; if not today, then maybe they'll call me, or they'll come the next time."

At the end of the session, papers are filled out that will dismiss charges. Some of the women linger to talk to Welch. At least one walks out to the lobby where her pimp is waiting. One woman, a second-time participant, leaves with McClain.

"I remember her from before," McClain says. "She wasn't ready then. She is ready now."

Meanwhile, huddled in a corner with their interpreter are the three women arrested at Golden Massage. They wait for Welch to take them to retrieve their passports. Though charges have been dismissed against them, their fate is unclear. Welch is unable to return their cellphones or computers, which are considered evidence against He. Furthermore, the house they are living in under the supervision of He's wife will soon be seized, and Mrs. He will likely be arrested. McClain is clearly worried.

"I don't think they understand they are victims," she says. "They don't know that they can get help. But we're keeping an eye on them and following the situation. We'll be here for them."

That's more than can be said for their former employers and clients.

Email editor@nashvillescene.com.