

Part 1: Inside the World of the 'Dasen Girls'

When the police arrested Kalispell businessman Dick Dasen on prostitution charges last year, it seemed there had to be more to the story than a wealthy man paying for sex. There was more. A lot more.

by Hal Herring

In the days since Angela Guzman-Rogers' friend Ryan had been released from the Flathead County Jail, they'd celebrated his new freedom by keeping the methamphetamine buzz at fever pitch. Nothing really compares to the rush of that first shot of crystal meth when you're just out of jail - but like everything good, that rush is impossible to hold on to. After a couple days of mainlining, the rush isn't coming back, and at four in the morning on the third day you're scraping the bottom of your bag with a razor so hard that the plastic comes curling away with the last residue of the dope.



After the crash

Angela and Ryan were ready to get out of Kalispell. Between them and two friends they were holding \$5,000, and Angela had her mother's car, a reliable red Subaru Legacy. They all got high again and headed for Colville, Washington, to meet a cooker and

get some more dope. An unidentified young man rode with Angela into the cold predawn of October 13th, 2003. Ryan rode in the lead car, to show them all which way to go.

The road west is Highway 2, which leaves the Flathead Valley and winds through an endless dark timber country of low mountains and thicketed river bottoms. But Angela would never get to see that road again. The lead car sailed through the flashing red light at the intersection of Highway 2 and Reserve Street, still in Kalispell, and Angela followed without a pause. A massive self-loading logging truck heading out for the first run of the day slammed into the driver's side of the Subaru at an estimated 45 miles per hour.

Angela was killed instantly, thrown, still hanging in her seatbelt, into the passenger side of the car. For her passenger it must have been like being inside a detonated bomb, but he survived. He staggered from the wreck, bleeding from a head wound, and disappeared into the dawn.

Outside of town, in a secluded and comfortable home at 400 West Valley Drive, Richard A. "Dick" Dasen would have been just getting ready for work. At 62, Dasen was among the most prominent businessmen in the

valley, an award-winning developer of commercial properties such as the thriving Outlaw Inn convention center. He was a partner in Peak Development Corporation, one of the valley's most successful development firms, and the owner of Budget Finance, a business that, among many other ventures, was an investor in Winter Sports Inc., the ski resort on Big Mountain that had transformed Whitefish, Montana into an international luxury resort destination. He contributed to the community tirelessly—as a church elder, in various charitable groups, and as a volunteer at Christian Financial Counseling, where he helped people struggling with debt. Many of those who showed up at Christian Financial Counseling were young women with children, like 25-year-old Angela Guzman-Rogers. And many of them, like Angela, were single mothers struggling with addiction, swept up in the plague of cheap methamphetamine that was inundating the Flathead Valley.

And Dick Dasen, for all his success, was struggling in the mire of a consuming addiction of his own. Sometime during his years as a volunteer credit counselor, the help for many of the women who came to him, or were sent to him by charitable organizations, became an arrangement where he would exchange cash and checks for sex. These arrangements became part of life for many of the women, and were referred to as "appointments" with the businessman they called "Mr. D." In statements made to police after his arrest, Dasen has said there were too many of these women to count, but law enforcement officials have estimated the figure in the hundreds.



Richard A. "Dick" Dasen

At some point in the last few years, the appointments had gotten out of hand. Huge sums of money— estimated between \$1 and \$5 million total — were flowing out. Dasen told police that he had paid some women as much as \$100,000. The women involved referred to themselves as “Dasen girls,” and they recruited among their friends, taking payments of as much as \$2,000 just for bringing in anyone new who was young, thin, reasonably good-looking, and down on their luck. Since methamphetamine is perhaps the greatest luck-destroyer on earth, many of the girls came into the circle by way of using the drug. So much of the cash flowed directly back into the methamphetamine trade, law enforcement officials say, that Kalispell, population 15,000, experienced a big-city style epidemic of addiction and all that goes with it -- crime, domestic abuse and violent conflicts over drug deals and money.

For years the local police paid little mind to the occasional rumors that floated around about Dick Dasen. But the car crash that killed Angela Guzman helped set in a motion a series of events that eventually ended the bizarre underground world of Dasen and his girls. Guzman’s mother, Connie, a sturdy survivor who had freed herself from an alcoholic husband and a lot of bad luck to build a successful rock business in the Flathead Valley, had been trying for years to get her daughter and her daughter’s friends out of the meth death-spiral. After Angela died, Connie finally took the girls’ stories and some photocopied Dasen checks and went to the FBI and the Kalispell police.

Kalispell Police Chief Frank Garner pondered his options. “I had a hard time categorizing these women as victims, or suspects,” he said. But as more information came in from his detectives, he made a decision. “I had to make the decision whether to be the Chief of Police who knew about this and let it go because of the prominence of the offender, or act, and take the

consequences. I had to act, even though there were a lot of people who thought I shouldn’t. As more of this story has come out, more of them are starting to agree with what I did, but not at first.”

Dasen has amassed an impressive array of charges, including one misdemeanor and nine felony counts of prostitution, felony charges of promotion of prostitution, aggravated promotion of prostitution, sexual intercourse without consent and sexual abuse of children. The charges relating to alleged sexual escapades with underage girls are by far the most serious, and Dasen – who has pleaded innocent - faces 300 years in jail if he’s found guilty of all charges. The trial, twice-postponed, is now scheduled for April.

Yet the Dasen story isn’t ultimately about prostitution, or at least not the simple sex-for-money transaction that people associate with the word. Rather it’s about the hunger of addiction - the meth user shooting up more often, with larger doses, trying dope made with different precursor chemicals, always hoping to duplicate that first wonderful rush. Or the businessman run off the rails by a raging obsession, by a need for power, or sex, or a combination of both - always looking for more girls, and eventually, it’s alleged, for girls who would do it with each other, and then for younger girls, and finally for most any girl, even though he had to have known how easily he could be caught.



Angela Guzman-Rogers

And the Dasen story is about a world that most business people and most of the New West migrants in the booming Flathead Valley -- the dotcomers, trustfunders, the ski and trout fanatics and the nature-loving urban transplants -- see only for brief moments, if at all. It’s a low-wage, no-wage world, inhabited by the children who grew up in the death throes of the old economy.

Their parents worked in the aluminum mill in Columbia Falls, or in the big sawmills that ran three shifts a day. They cut the timber or ran the skidders that jerked it from the forests, or drove the trucks that hauled it to the mills.

Those were good jobs and they paid for simple houses and cars and fed families with food supplemented by gardens and by hunting in the spectacular wildlands that surround Kalispell. But those jobs are gone now, and the children of those families, all grown up, are marooned in a new economy, kicking for scraps cleaning hotel rooms, punching a till, serving coffee, hammering nails in the condo developments, or doing nothing at all.

There are no lattes here, no Patagonia fleece or Sage flyrods. It’s a place where home-cooked methamphetamine is king and queen, and blasting the woods with a Chinese-made assault rifle is a far more popular recreation than snowboarding or hiking. People from that world don’t go skiing at Big Mountain on Saturdays. They meet in front of the Flathead County Jail, smoking cigarettes and talking about who’s locked up, and who’s getting out. And you can see them there, the impoverished young women, many of them with children and worthless boyfriends or runaway or imprisoned husbands, pale from meth use or from serving endless hours behind a cash register. They are always in bad need of cash.

Rarely do they happen on a source like Dick Dasen.