

Part 6: Crime and Punishment

Kim Neise is already in jail for procuring underage girls for Dick Dasen, and a number of other ‘Dasen Girls’ now have prostitution convictions on their records. Yet for all his sordid behavior, it’s not clear whether Dasen himself will land in prison.

by Hal Herring

For the past ten months, Kim Neise has been an inmate at the Flathead County Jail, waiting for a slot in a meth treatment program. She is serving ten years, with five suspended, for forgery and aggravated promotion of prostitution. Without the meth, she’s a lot heavier now, a bit pale and jail-worn. The tattoo on her forearm that says “Legalize Freedom” echoes from a different life. She says she’s glad to be in jail, that sometimes you have to wreck everything in order to start over.



Kim Neise testifies. Photo by the Daily Inter Lake

Back in the spring of 2003 she was living in her car, after having been arrested and jailed for forging checks she’d stolen from her grandmother. Kim grew up in Columbia Falls, a mill town just up the road from Kalispell. Her father had worked most of his life in the aluminum plant there, but he was retired and could not offer her much help. She was twenty-three years

old, had been using methamphetamine since she was thirteen. For the past three years she’d been an intravenous user and considered herself an addict. She was down to about 95 pounds.

Kim had, according to a Flathead County prosecutor, been in some “pretty awful places” in her life, but she had never been a prostitute. “In fact,” she said, “I’d never even heard about prostitutes in Kalispell before. I never considered myself one, either.”

Kim was introduced to Dick Dasen by her friend Leah Marshall, and for the first time in her life, she found herself flush with cash. Leah had set up an appointment for her to meet Dasen at Kalispell’s Aero Inn, the first of six sexual meetings she would have with him. The money was simply too good to turn down. Within a month, Kim had moved out of her car and rented a three-bedroom townhouse for \$775 dollars a month, just down the road from the offices of Peak Development. Over the course of that month, she said, Dasen would give her \$35,000 in checks, and about \$15,000 in cash. Much of the money was for referring other girls, among them a young mother named Holli Rose, who was just getting into the Kalispell meth scene, and who became a favorite of Dasen’s, and who would eventually set him up in a sting

operation. The usual deal was that the new girl would take \$2,000, and split it down the middle with Kim. It was the same deal Kim had followed with Leah.

Kim and her friends moved in a slightly different constellation than many of the other girls and young women who received money from Dick Dasen, though in a small town most of them they knew each other through the common bond of meth and the many drugs associated with trying to come down from it -- the downers and opiates, the Oxycontin and the Lortabs, Klonopin, Xanax, the marijuana. Kim would see Angela Guzman only once, in Dasen’s office at Peak Development Corporation, just before the logging truck killed her. Angela was sick with meth addiction, and out of control, threatening Dasen, telling him she was going to tell the cops about him. In more ways than one, Angela was on her way out, and Kim was on her way in. Kim never thought about it much, she says. It was certainly nothing out of the ordinary to meet other girls at Dasen’s office. “Sometimes you’d go in there and they’d be lined up waiting to see him.”



Richard A. Dasen (right) with his attorney, George Best. Photo by the Daily Inter Lake

The new townhouse saw a lot of traffic, too. For awhile, according to Neise’s testimony, Misty Gibbs Yeates, who was also seeing Dasen, lived there. Kim’s boyfriend made meth, dry-cooking the cut-rate variety they call “lith dope,” using the strips of lithium torn from the batteries that power high

end flashlights. ("That dope tastes funny," Kim said, "and it messes with your head really bad.") Everybody liked to get really high and drive out to Tally Lake late at night and unload on the woods with 9mms and SKS rifles. People in the meth and party world came and went from the house at all hours during the summer of 2003. Among them were two high school girls, identified in police documents only by the initials T.F. and M.M., who, Kim says, acted as if they were in a lesbian relationship. Knowing pure gold when she saw it, Kim urged them to set up an appointment with Dick Dasen.

Kim would testify that the deal she agreed on with M.M. and T.F. was simply that they would make out with each other, and have no physical contact with Dasen, and for this they would receive \$1,000. In late July, the two girls came to the townhouse to close that deal. M.M. was fifteen years old that summer, T.F. sixteen.

It went badly for them. Not only did the sexual encounter with Dasen go much further than they had been told to expect, the pay was only \$500 because either Kim or her roommate decided to keep the rest. Police documents say that the girls "did not talk much to each other about what had happened until some time after the incident." They eventually went together to Dasen's office at Southfield Towers and asked for their money. Dasen, they said, immediately wrote them a check for \$2,000. The girls declined his offer to meet again. In December, T.F. confided to her mother about what had happened with Dasen, and her grandmother called Kalispell Police Chief Frank Garner.

There is another dark element that enters the story that summer of 2003, another current of disequilibrium. In February of that year, a woman named Darlene Wilcock was found strangled to death on a bed at the local Motel 6. DNA from Dick Dasen was found on the bed beneath the victim, but Dasen was never, according to Chief Frank

Garner, a suspect in the murder.

But the unsolved murder of Darlene Wilcock came to serve another purpose. Kim Neise would testify that Dasen and Leah Marshall both told her that what happened to Wilcock was "what happened to people who threaten to go to the cops." Neise told M.M. and T.F. the same story.

Kim Neise said that she and her friends were "a little scared of Dasen," now. "But I've been around a lot scarier people than Dick." She added that Dasen "thought he had it all under control. I know he never thought it would end up this way."

Dasen's house, perched in the fir trees and juniper of a sunny bench on the outskirts of Kalispell, is for sale now. The life-sized bronze statue of a moose, painted in rich and surreal colors, gazes over a swimming pool drained for the winter, and an empty yard that has been well-used by grandchildren. Dasen is out on \$150,000 bail, and he and his wife Susan have been living at their vacation home in southern Arizona. He has pled innocent to all charges, and the trial has been postponed twice.

Civil lawsuits are piling up as well. Rhonda "Nikki" Hawk, 26, is charged with prostitution in the case, and she's filed suit against Dasen and Budget Finance, asserting that Dasen used the company to trap her in debt. She claims that she posed for nude photos in exchange for mortgage payments, but by December of 2003, the photos were no longer enough for him. She's seeking compensation for negligence, emotional distress, conspiracy, sexual assault and battery.

Another lawsuit has been filed against Dasen and Kim Neise by one of the minors in the case, named by the initials T.E.F., and her mother, initials D.G., for damages resulting from an alleged assault and rape.

Southgate Mall Associates, LLP,

a development company based in Missoula, is suing Dasen for more than \$1 million, alleging unpaid debts and malicious misuse of funds in their business partnership with him.

Investigators at the Montana Department of Health and Human Services are still trying to determine what happened to about \$500,000 that remained in a trust for Chad Emery, who was awarded a product liability settlement after choking on a marshmallow as a child and being rendered brain damaged. Dasen was the conservator of the trust, and in 2000 filed a one-sentence report saying that the money was all gone.

For all the mountains of evidence in the case, and the months of effort, Kalispell prosecutors are surprisingly nervous about the upcoming trial. Witnesses like Kim Neise -- pleading with a reporter not to write anything bad about her, since so many people already think so badly of her -- do not generally inspire sympathy from a jury. Poor young women, rendered sickly and angry and dangerous by addictions they can't control, are much easier to despise than wealthy, seemingly genial men like Dick Dasen.



Deana Dimler

Deana Dimler, finishing up a jail term for meth-related charges at a Butte pre-release center, offers one line of defense. She freely admits that, some years ago, she had a sexual relationship with him in return for his financial help. "You know, everybody's talking about Dick, how he gave us all this money

and made us victims, like we can't take any responsibility for ourselves. I don't buy that. I'm a grown woman and I'm responsible for what I do, and for what I did with the money. You ask if I'm pro-Dick Dasen, and yes, I am. Dick for Mayor! I notice nobody is asking if just maybe Dick is a victim of all of us. How come nobody's asking that?"

The prosecution's case rests heavily on the allegations relating to underage girls; take those away, and what's left is series of felony promotion of prostitution charges (involving 16 women) that can carry up to 10 years, but could also result in little or no time. On the charges involving minors, Dasen is likely to claim that he didn't know the girls were underage, which under Montana law can be a defense on the rape charge (relating to 15-year-old M.M.), and on the charge of sexual abuse of children (relating to sexual photographs of two minors seized from Dasen's computer). Still, when it comes to the aggravated promotion of prostitution charges, which involve five different minors, ignorance is not a defense - though it could elicit sympathy from a jury if they believed it. Dasen has also claimed that he has a "sex addiction" and that may play in the defense as well.

Dasen's attorney, George Best, has twice asked for a change of venue for the trial, and complains that prosecutors are trying the case in the press. He even commissioned a survey that showed that a majority of registered voters in the area already believed Dasen was guilty. Best has declined to comment on the case or make Dasen available for interviews.

Assuming the case does go to trial, the jury will have some complicated judgments to make. The legal penalties for sex crimes with underage girls are fairly clear, and severe. But what should be the sanction, legal or otherwise, for enabling addiction, for feeding the meth economy, for taking advantage of weak, desperate people for your own

gratification, for abusing a position of trust? And what's the lesson of a case in which a long series of "victimless" crimes somehow resulted in a lot of victims? In another age -- not so long ago in a place like the Flathead Valley -- Dasen's involvement with so many young women would have brought forth a storm of infuriated brothers, cousins, fathers or grandfathers. But now it's up to the mothers and grandmothers and the inelegant mechanics of the legal system to bring about some kind of justice.

The wreckage left behind in Kalispell is the aftermath of a collision between two universes of perverse desire, one feeding the other to produce a variety of unsustainable and destructive energies. It asks questions about the hungers that at some level are common to us all, the impacts they have on others, the deals we make to satisfy them and the beliefs we cultivate to blunt their power. Like a spectacular car crash, the story holds the fascination of the familiar -- there are people, caught inside, people who are mostly just like us. It offers no simple truths.

Dick Dasen's trial is set to begin on April 25. Jury selection is set for March 30.