

**“PRO-FAMILY, PRO-PROSTITUTION:”
DISCOURSES OF GENDER, SEXUALITY & LEGALIZED PROSTITUTION
IN A NEVADA TOWN**

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**Barbara G. Brents
Kathryn M. Hausbeck
University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

“...the Lord did not call us to Ely to enter into the great debate on prostitution, but he called us to administer love, hope and grace to needy, hurting people in the city of Ely. The bible is very clear regarding the hope that is available to us through a relationship with the Lord Jesus. There is a hope for the prostitutes, the pimps, the john and the madam and we are here for the express purpose to reach out and love to those that have no hope. Whenever Jesus was teaching, you could see prostitutes, and poor people, all running to him. Not afraid that he would turn away. We at the Baptist church do not condone prostitution, but are concerned for those that are trapped in the system.”

-Testimony read by Jean Kneese from a letter sent to the City Council by the local Baptist Church

“I am married and have been married to the same man for 11 years and have two children that we are raising in White Pine County...My family and I serve the Lord and I'm a born again Christian and believe in Jesus as my personal savior, and I can respect your point of view...I believe all the churches, all the leaders of God, we need to stand in unity. But as much as I believe in Jesus, with all my heart, I thank God each day I have freedom on religion and I am an American and proud to be one. And that we have the opportunity in this great nation of ours to pray for all those who have never accepted the Lord and for those who have backslid. I thank God for my founding fathers for the separation of church and state and allowing us choices. You can never come to know the Father unless you have chosen to follow Jesus, and that's a choice. It's not the role of government to make that choice for us.” - Testimony: Denise

INTRODUCTION

“Why professor, you're spending too much time on your knees! That's what I like about you two docs!” boomed the director of the Nevada Brothel Association from the far corner of the hotel suite. We had just driven more than four hours North of Las Vegas through high desert open highways to Ely, Nevada. One of us was in shorts and a baseball cap, the other in the comfy ripped jeans that elicited our teasing welcome, as we strolled into a meeting in what was quickly dubbed, “sex central.”

We were in the refurbished top floor Kennecott Suite at the Historic Hotel Nevada. Erected in 1929, at six stories it was the tallest building in the state of Nevada until after WWII. We were there as invited observers and guests of Mayor Bob Miller and Stardust brothel owner, Stephanie Pleasants, who had gathered a cadre of locals and statewide supporters of Nevada's legal brothels for a strategy meeting just hours before the August 26th, 1999, Ely City Council meeting. This wasn't the usual pre-council meeting routine, but this wasn't going to be the usual city council meeting either. That night Ely would hold

a public hearing for citizens to voice their opinions on a proposed ordinance before the City Council—#407— which would, if it passed, revoke Ely's three existing brothel licenses and bring 112 year history of brothel prostitution in this community to an end. As is often true when community traditions are subject to new legislation or demise, passions were ignited by this proposed ordinance and families, friends, neighbors and co-workers throughout the community of Ely had been divided on the question of their brothels' future.

With us in the Kennecott Suite, or 'sex central,' were a local businessman, two Las Vegas lawyers, an event promoter and tourist expert with dual residence in Las Vegas and Ely, the boisterous head of the Nevada Brothel Association, the Stardust brothel owner, and the Mayor of Ely. Though the Suite was comfortable and the company lively, there was a fervor in the room as stories, analyses, and strategies for dealing with and countering the anti-prostitution, anti-brothel advocates were bantered about the room.

All of the controversy began June 2nd, 1999, in a small public meeting room at the local fire hall. Stephanie Pleasants, owner of the only currently operating brothel in Ely, sat dignified and quiet in the back of the room of folding chairs. Fire hall memorabilia, trophies, old photos, flags and mounted animal heads and small game decorated the wooden walls, and the Ely City Council sat at long tables at the front of the half empty room. This meeting had drawn slightly more attention and onlookers than was typical because it was rumored that a new, young, Mormon councilman named Stuart Tracy would propose Ordinance #407 rescinding legally regulated brothel prostitution in Ely. The Ordinance was read, and not long after it was decided that it should go to a vote at the August meeting following a public hearing on this contentious topic. We were witnessing a small but important piece of Nevada history.

In this paper we examine a rural Nevada community, the city of Ely, as a case study of contemporary debates surrounding prostitution policy and the ways in which it intersects with broad cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and family. To best understand the merit of this case, let us first briefly consider the origins and history of America's only system of legalized prostitution: the Nevada brothels.

Nevada Brothel Prostitution

Nevada is unique in that the State has never made prostitution illegal. In 1970, Storey County—just outside Reno, NV—passed the first brothel licensing ordinance which formally recognized regulated brothels as legitimate businesses. Under pressure from casino interests and politicians in Las Vegas who wanted nothing to do with legalized prostitution for fear that it would cast a shadow of impropriety or immorality on Vegas and draw undue attention and inspection of their gaming industry, and in an effort to please the federal government who had pressured officials to eliminate overt prostitution in Las Vegas beginning in the early 1940s, the Nevada State Legislature passed a law in 1971 that made prostitution illegal in counties with a population over 200,000. Since then the population limit has been increased to 400,000 in order to ensure that legal brothels never exist in Clark County where Las Vegas is located. This state law, however, made it acceptable for the majority of small rural and frontier counties in Nevada to decide for themselves whether or not to legalize prostitution. In 1978 the Nevada Supreme Court ruled that this was indeed the case and today 10 of 17 Nevada's counties have legalized and regulated brothel prostitution. In these 10 counties there are a total of 36 possible brothel licenses and approximately 27-30 are typically open and operating at any given time.

Why has legalized brothel prostitution persisted in Nevada while every other state and municipality in the country has criminalized the world's oldest profession? Most historical studies on Nevada's brothels

argue that prostitution's roots in this mining economy flourished in combination with a libertarian political culture that persisted in Nevada more than other western states (Rocha 1975; Symanski 1974; Reynolds 1986.). Others have argued that the economic needs of declining rural economies in the post war years allowed prostitution to survive its Old West past (Gallagher and Cross 1983). These studies all point to three dimensions that help explain the existence and persistence of the brothels: first, a migrant economy of mostly male miners, ranchers, railroad workers, truckers and laborers; second, a particular set of sexual values and politics which define male sexuality as an uncontrollable desire that must be satisfied somehow, regardless of age, marital status, or how near or far he is from home; and third, an old-West "cowboy" libertarian, anti-urban, anti-federal culture.

Today, the Old West is changing in response to new economic imperatives and a changing culture. Mining, ranching, and other traditional economies are giving way to a more service industry oriented economic base and the expansion of the tourist industry to support the service sectors. These economic shifts are accompanied by similar shifts in demographics (for example massive population growth in Southern Nevada in and around Las Vegas, and population decline in some of the frontier and rural communities that had relied more heavily on mining to provide jobs and sustain their economies), and the emergence of a New West culture tied to outdoors activities, tourism, and modernization. At these historical crossroads between Old and New West sit the Nevada brothels. Remnants of cowboy culture and a bygone wild west era, in appearance, organization, and structure, they are an anachronistic social institution whose future will surely be determined by the way in which Old and New West meet, merge, or conflict in legislation, policy, and community culture. The summer 1999 challenge to the legalized brothels in Ely provides important insight into the sentiments and discourses that are likely to shape the seemingly inevitable future debates over the future of America's only legalized prostitution. Moreover, Ely's great brothel debate of 1999 offers unprecedented access to contemporary ideas about gender, sexuality, morality and prostitution from community members in a real, historic brothel town.

Sitting at the juncture of US Highways 50, 93, and 6, Ely Nevada is the seat of White Pine County. Established in 1878 and designated county seat in 1887 after which the population grew to 200 residents, Ely has long been a mining town. Up to the early 1900s gold mining established and sustained the small Western town; from 1906 until just months ago, rich copper deposits have been responsible for Ely's growth as well as her sporadic economic downturns as mines opened, boomed, waned and closed repeatedly. In recent years a maximum security prison has been located outside of Ely and an outdoor-oriented tourist economy has been cultivated since Ely is a gateway to Great Basin Park. All the while, brothels have operated quietly on the West side of town along High St. This region used to be called 'Bronc Alley' and in the last several decades there have been 3 licensed brothels opening and closing in response to the ebb and flow of workers, customers, and owners. They are the Big 4—the oldest, dating back to early in the century—the Green Lantern (now owned by the same person who owns the Big 4), and the Stardust Ranch. The former two are not currently open, though the Stardust remains in business.

A casual perusal of web-based or print materials advertising Ely, a slow drive down the one main road of town, a visit to the Historic Ghost Train or the Historical Museum, and you will never see mention and probably not hear much said, about the brothels. They are all but invisible, known only to regulars, locals, and those who have either done intentional research or who have heard by word of mouth. But for the three brothels, Ely is not unlike most other small communities scattered across the country. There is a small park, a duck pond, baseball diamonds, two schools, churches, restaurants, small local bars, and lots of tradition. In this quiet community where everyone knows one another, it seems an unlikely test site and data rich resource for investigating the ideologies and discourses that sustain Nevada's brothels as well as those that threaten to finally end this unusual history.

METHODOLOGY

After a year of controversy and conflict within Ely's three licensed brothels, a proposal to eradicate legalized houses of prostitution came before the city council in August, 1999. The ensuing public debate was loud, contentious, and divided the otherwise close-knit community. The culmination was a three hour public hearing on the proposed law which ended with the council voting to revoke the tradition of legalized brothels, followed quickly by a public veto by the newly elected mayor. With too few votes to override, prostitution continues to be legal in licensed brothels in Ely, NV. In the process, however, the usually inaccessible and unspoken community beliefs and attitudes toward prostitutes, their customers, and the brothel tradition in general were made public. The vast amount of civic debate and rhetoric generated by this issue—through public testimony, between individual citizens, and in the pages of the daily paper—provides a rich, and heretofore unavailable source of data from which to analyze discourses on prostitution as accepted tradition and prostitution as social problem.

To conduct this analysis we have triangulated our data: we have used ethnographic observation over the course of four research trips to Ely; we have conducted face-to-face and phone interviews with approximately a dozen community leaders, legislators, and brothel industry personnel; and, we have content analyzed the public testimony presented in the over 3 hour, August 26th public hearing on Ely City Council Ordinance #407. Using a combination of field notes, interviews, and hearing transcripts we have used an inductive thematic coding system in order to elucidate the central rhetorical devices used by those in support of the brothels (therefore opposed to Ordinance 407) and those opposed to ongoing legalized brothels in Ely (and, therefore, supportive of the Ordinance). In this paper we will present our findings on the rhetorical devices used by pro and anti-prostitution advocates.

--See Overhead/Hand Out for Summary--

FINDINGS

The City Counsel had moved out of their usual meeting space at the Fire Hall and into the largest community space available at a town hall. The room was noisy and packed with people: it is estimated that over 300 local residents appeared to testify or observe this historic hearing. Families with children in tow, men in work clothes, city leaders and official, clergy members, senior citizens, and a radio station airing the event live filled the space. The Sheriff's deputy stood at the back of the hall chatting and occasionally quieting members of the restless crowd. A woman with her family—including children-in tow held a hand painted sign that read: "Pro-Family, Pro-Prostitution." Thus began the Ely brothel hearings. Over the course of the long evening, our inductive qualitative content analysis evidenced several themes that were invoked during the course of the hearing on behalf of preservation and elimination of the brothels. Here is what we found.

PRO-PROSTITUTION RHETORIC:

Libertarian Morality And Community

There were approximately 37 references to the notion of community—the sense of shared belonging, shared culture, and shared morality.

Community

We coded references to a shared sense of place, belonging, family as community. Almost all persons who spoke made some reference to either their pride in being a community member of Ely, or that their sense of family was rooted in the town, brothels and all.

#7 female: We have lots of good people here that have brought up their families and are proud to call Ely their home.

#15 female: It's a great community to raise children in, and that's over 80 years of being in this community raising children, making a living, and knowing that the houses on High Street exist, which was and is a very insignificant part of my life.

Libertarian Morality

In our coding we immediately noticed the use of the term morality. Most instances were accompanied by ideas of tolerance, thoughts that morality is shifting, or a libertarian ideal of not forcing one's own personal beliefs on others. A few referred to the right to 'do as you please' without using the term "morals" but the notion of individual choice and personal privacy surround moral issues was still evident. Interestingly, many folks recognized that anti-prostitution, anti-brothel interests were invoking morality as a primary reason to close the brothels; as a result, several pro-brothel testimonies used a notion of libertarian morality as being more moral than forcing one's beliefs on a community. Similarly, several people noted that not having regulated brothels would bring more heinous immorality to the community than leaving the system in place. This libertarian morality argument was often linked to a notion that the history and culture of Nevada has a long standing tradition of not just brothels, but of a libertarian, 'live and let live' commitment to freedom.

#15 female: I would say that the fact that there is legalized prostitution in Ely, Nevada has never affected the way I was raised or the way that I am raising my child, or our family values or morals. And I pay very much offense to that statement, I'll have you know. [applauds]

#27 male: Let's talk about gaming, 24-hour availability of liquor, quickie divorces, all the things we do here in Nevada. We have been very successful at this because we recognize one overriding issue, and that is that one man's morality is another man's pleasure. That what's immoral today, is accepted practice tomorrow. And that it's up to each individual to decide what he wants to be moral in life. And we do recognize in this state, as all states do, that there are such a thing called vices. We recognize that you cannot legislate them out of existence, and the best that you can hope to do is to bring them into regulation and control them. And that's what we do in Nevada.

#22 female: It seems to me that the reason that my family has decided to come back to Nevada is because they have been barred and bartered with the radical right on one side and PC on the other side and there is very little common sense except for a place like Nevada, where we have hoped to have tolerance and to live at peace in a very diverse culture. To me, it's the diversity of the culture and the tolerance, are the most important things we have. I don't like paying my taxes to support Pleasant Valley schools where bigamy is practiced, but I do it, because I live in a community. I don't like paying my taxes to stand behind a parochial school, but I do it. It seems to me that the most important thing that we are addressing here is ... what Nevada is

#42 male.: You have another choice, live and let live, do unto others, cast the first stone if you're not a sinner.

Bunny: but I don't want your morals shoved down my throat and I'm not going to shove mine down yours.

#7 female: As a taxpayer and citizen, I am one that does not believe in pushing my morals and beliefs and religion off on others. I will not stand in judgement of someone else who may have different views from me. But give these so-called "good doers" the right to stand in judgement of me, because I don't care whether or not we have a brothel here. As far as I'm concerned, this is bar and what goes on behind closed doors at this establishment is no one's business. But don't call me, my family, or my ancestors immoral because we don't feel there is a problem with having brothels open.

Outsider/Insider

We initially began coding separate references to the sense of outsiders coming in and disrupting the balance of the town. But it quickly became apparent that the construction of morality was very much wrapped up in the shared sense of belonging to a community. A significant element of the "don't tell me what I can and can't do" is an accusation against those who are doing the telling. Many perceive that locals and insiders abide by this unspoken cultural norm and that it is only outsiders—either from other places or people with different ideological inclinations—that challenge this sacred tradition. The defense of brothels is not just about a libertarian morality, but about a threat to community and its history.

#15 female: Speaking for myself and my family, I feel more threatened by you and your people in this endeavor than those houses on High Street have ever affected me.

#2 female: Is there certain people that move into town and they think they're better? Well we don't mind people at all.... we want as much people here in Ely as we can. But they just can't come in and say, "We don't want this and we don't want that."

Hidden Agenda

Likewise, there were enough separate instances of accusations that somebody stands to personally gain by the closing of the brothels that we created a separate category. But we feel it is very much an element of this creation of community and a perceived threat to it.

#15 female: What do you gain, Mr. Tracy, and your people, if those buildings are empty. [applause]

Safety

Second to the notion of community was the rhetoric of safety. References to the brothels as preventing crime, curtailing disease, and offering a safe outlet for commercial sex were very common. But there was a very gendered discourse underlying these notions. For example, the women and men who partake in illegal, unregulated prostitution were frequently portrayed as disease ridden criminals who will threaten the community if brothels are outlawed.

#15 female: Being raised here in such a diverse ethnic melting pot, I was always aware of the fact that people I have known and loved my whole life...They needed a safe place to go to fulfill their very natural wants and needs....they informed me it was the absolute safest place for them to be. They didn't have to go to bars to pick up women with God knows what disease. They knew they could go to a brothel and be protected because of the state laws for testing prostitutes for STDs and have their needs fulfilled. They weren't out preying on women and women were protected.

Male Outlet

One of the most significant element of the rhetoric of safety was the protection provided to men and women from men's "natural" sex drive.

#24 male: The people that go there, need to go there. If they're not going there they will go someplace else. And if you don't accept that, you're only fooling yourself.

#16 male: The brothels serve a good function for single-people, men in this community.... It keeps them off the street, it keeps them out of the bars and picking up on the women and the girls on Main Street at night. If you guys close the brothels, the single men are not going to quit having sex....You're going to have an increase in pregnancies, divorces and everything else....

And importantly, the brothels protect the institution of marriage:

#15 female: And if it is a married man, at least he's engaging in safe sex and isn't taking some STD home to his family. [applauds] If we are so concerned about teenage pregnancy, why don't we make teens aware of their options and promote safe sex.

#16 male: By closing the houses you take the married man out of the brothels, the ones that are going to cheat on their wives anyhow. They go there for safe sex, so they don't take a disease home to their wife or their unborn child. You take them out of there, put them on the street, the wife and unborn child are the person who's going to suffer for it.

Not degrading to women

We also coded instances where women responded to the notion that prostitution was degrading to women. This was couched within the safety rhetoric—protection against men's sexual habits.

#28 female: [Many women did] not see it as a threat or degrading issue, because there are brothels here. Most of the comments made in my store, was they felt it was a protection, they felt free to move about this community because they weren't looked at by some lecherous person that maybe had unmoral things that they were going to do if they could get these ladies somewhere else.

Economics

We coded all references to businesses, profit, tourism, the financial and economic structure of the town as economics. Given the closing of the town's largest mine in recent months, this was a significant point of discussion.

#7 female: We think it is utterly irresponsible at this time of a major tumdown in, downturn in our economy to be closing down a business. We want everyone to know that brothel customers are some of our best casino customers. Stardust sends us a lot of business and we are continuously asked by our customers where the brothels are located.

#27 male: We consider them, not an official part of our racing events here, but they certainly do add color to it. And just to give you an example, the first race in 11 years, where there was not a brothel open, occurred here last May. Many of the drivers were very unhappy that they were not going to be able to have... what we call [494] Choice Award, where the drivers take their cars up to the brothel and put them on display and the girls will come out, pick their favorite car and win a trophy. And the houses were on an open-house mode during that where the women could go in and visit and take tours and so forth...Very, very few of our participants actually go to the brothels for the purpose intended. But it's just a colorful part of what you have to offer here in Ely.

#27 male: Now because of my background in tourism, I've been asked many times over the years, by hotel owners, business people, even elected officials, "what can we do here in Ely to bring more tourism in?" And that question has only really one answer. It doesn't matter who's asking it, or where they're from. And that is you have to offer people something that they can't get at home.

#27 male: Other states are now legalizing gambling. Other states are relaxing their liquor laws. This is the way of the future. And for this town, this community, this county to start stepping backwards is going to have very serious economic implications.

#47 male: I've spent many dollars of my own money untold countless hours out there bringing tourists to White Pine County. I have yet to have one tour operator, one person tell me they weren't come here because of the bordello. The opposite is actually true. Many of them asked if there was a place in Nevada where they could actually bring tour groups to them, and we, up until recently we always tell them they could take tour groups to the Mustang and Reno which they have, they've been many, many, many went through there. Tourism will flourish and believe me guys, this isn't an issue that has ever came up to me.

Defend Prostitutes

On the other hand, apart from questions of safety and economics, we noticed an attempt to normalize the legal, brothel prostitutes by defending their character.

#16 male: I would sit at the bar, I'd drink Coke, ice water.. and I got to know them. But they're very intelligent women. They're not deranged people, people that's been sexually abused, druggies, they've got college educations. There's been one that's come up that schoolteachers in Vegas, come up here and work for the summer to earn extra money so they live their lifestyle in the homes that they want while they're teaching school the rest of the year. There's girls that come up here to earn money to put themselves through college so that they can go on in the profession that they want. Nobody is forcing these girls to come in and do this, they're not regulated or turned out to be prostitutes as juveniles at 14 back in Minnesota and then drug into the industry here. They come here of their own free will, they leave of their own free will. And for the majority of them, really enjoy what they're doing. They serve a real good function in this community and it would be a great mistake of you people to vote it out.

#19 male: ...my mother died when I was a young fellow...well the good neighborly ladies in the town said that we couldn't play with the ministers children, or they would find a new minister, because my sister's dresses were not ironed...Well along about this time, a girl across the demarcation line, said, "if you will come down to the back door and bring a couple lard buckets, we'll give you lunch." And you know everyday when school let out, for dinner, I went down there and knocked on the back door, and there was passed out to me two large buckets that had dinner for three children. No one else in this community, as God fearing as they claim to be, did not want to do that. And I am grateful to that woman very much. She served an awful lot [156] to my upbringing from childhood until now. And I am 73 years old.

Tradition

We coded any reference to the fact that brothels have always been here under tradition. This was usually accompanied by the statement that the brothels have never caused any trouble. Clearly, Ely probably would not be supportive of legal brothel prostitution if brothels and their owners/workers did not have such a long, strong history in the community.

#16 male: And the brothels have been here for a number of years, they've been good to the community, they've put a lot of money into the community, they don't advertise it, they're not allowed to, but if you take this away, you're going to hurt this community greatly.

Visible/Invisible

One defense of the brothels in Ely is that in spite of selling sex, they are quiet out of the way businesses—they are invisible. Sexuality is tolerable as long as it is unseen, particularly as contrasted with the proliferation of nudity, permissiveness, and visible sex saturating media.

#6 male: I've visited the place. I've have coffee and beer quite a few times in there. I'll say I've never seen anything indecent, in fact I think Cosmopolitan has got better things on its cover

#3 male: I cannot recall one instance in all those years, when the line (as we've always called it) ever gave

me one instance of trouble... these women do not come and knock on your door and walk in your house to disrupt your family. But, if you stop to think, the TV and your computer bring all the filth into your house that you could possibly want -- and they bring it into your house. [applause].

ANTI-PROSTITUTION RHETORIC:

Community and Morality

The most common rhetoric against the brothels was that of morality. We coded all references that contained that term. Most of this rhetoric revolved around the notion that the town must take a moral stance, which requires the elimination of brothels. But, like the pro-prostitution use of the term, it also revolved around the creation of a sense of belonging and community.

#55 male: The moral power will be drained... People have asked me, what's next, you gonna take away alcohol, you gonna take away gambling? What's next? We already have legalized prostitution, what's next, strip bars? We don't have the moral ground to stop that from coming in. We don't have the moral ground to stop sexually oriented businesses, adult bookstores or anything else because we have not made a stand on moral ground. When you make a law on moral ground, you have the sure foundation. Morals don't change throughout time, have they ever changed? The basic morals have always been firm and strong, and when you have laws based on that firmness, those laws do not change with time. But when you make social policy, social policy that affect the people in this State, it will change with the tides that come in and out, and it will not be able to support the people or protect the people.

#47 male: Not one of us would want our children, male or female, to be involved in this business. I don't think that we, we would shirk to think that our children, your daughter, your son, is part of that business.

Economics

Again, we coded all references to businesses and the economic vitality of the town. Anti-brothel forces felt that the Old West tradition of prostitution hurt economic growth and development.

#18 female: We want this ordinance repealed so our community can progress and grow. New businesses will come in if we rid this town of this evil. Grants and loans will be approved for improvements to our community if we do our part to bring about the necessary changes.

Bad for women/men

Another common claim was that prostitution and the brothels were themselves bad for the men and women of the town. Much of this rhetoric was very similar to the morality arguments, and constructed a more conservative and tradition-bound notion of appropriate femininity and masculinity.

#18 female: Some of you want to close your eyes to it and pretend it does not exist, it is time to open your eyes and see what decades of this has done to our families. It has made very selfish men. A man is nothing but selfish, when he leaves his pregnant wife, pregnant with his child, and goes to a brothel

because he cannot control his selfish urge, and he thinks that his wife cannot sexually satisfy him. Where is the love?

#20 male: I heard a lot of this information tonight and I just want to go over some brief facts. ... As far as prostitution we know that most prostitutes do or come from incest or physical abuse. That's a fact. ...It is also considered by many professors around the country that have studied this, that it is a form of abuse, and teaches a man psychologically to abuse a woman. It is degrading to women, there is no doubt about that. You can't beat that, the fact is this degrades women and it teaches immoral character to the community.

Health/crime

We coded references to health and crime, and these usually indicated that the brothels were not safe and should be eliminated as a result.

#20 male: We talked numerous times about safe sex. Safe sex is a myth. If you use condoms with sex it's just a matter of time before you catch a disease. To go and visit brothels by a young man, it guarantees, it's just a matter of time before they catch a disease. This is spread through the community.

Modernize

There were several instances where reference was made to the fact that the brothels were a throwback to the old west. Ely would not be able to progress without eliminating the brothels. Most of this was related to economics, however, some clearly was not.

#48 male: This is not an economic issue, it's not a health issue, it's a moral issue. It's one we need to take care of. I've heard a lot of talk about keeping the Old West the Old West, I looked out there and I haven't seen a team of horses out there. You want to keep the Old West the Old West, you do that. You want to keep things around that were around, stealing was around, it's a moral issue. You want to keep stealing here too? It's a moral issue. I think we need to step out and take action,

DISCUSSION

At the end of the meeting the city council voted three to two in favor of the ordinance to make prostitution illegal in Ely. Just as he predicted that he would, the Mayor vetoed the ordinance, and the city council did not have enough votes to sustain the veto. Thus brothels remain legal in Ely today.

Ethnographic observations provide us with a glimpse at the motivations and dynamics behind the scenes that drove the public debates. As might be expected in small town politics, many of the references to more global principles were veiled references to interpersonal dynamics. For example, there were frequent references to a story that the City Attorney was the scorned lover of the brothel owner, and was using this to get back at her. Likewise, much was made in the newspaper of a campaign contribution made by the brothel owner to the mayor's campaign months earlier.

More importantly, much of the community rhetoric, allusions to hidden agendas, and even the libertarian morality was informed by a perception that a rapprochement forged years ago between the Mormon and the non-Mormon residents was being breeched. Many of the towns' folk angrily pointed out

that some of the Mormons had overstepped their bounds by trying to dictate their morality onto the others, causing conflict and dissension between friends.

At the same time, there was a belief that it really wasn't all the Mormons that had shattered this peace. Several of the individuals we spoke with mentioned that they knew for a fact that many of the Mormon business leaders had no desire to shut down the brothels. They explained to us that these downtown businessmen knew that the brothels brought in business. And in a town where one of the major mines had just shut down 6 months earlier, throwing 450 of the town's 5000 residents out of work, closing down any business was not good. Thus it was the belief that it was one small group of the Mormons who were letting their religious fervor outweigh their sense of community. There was also widespread debate about the appropriateness of Councilman Stuart Tracy's authorship of the ordinance. He had only lived in town for 11 years—making him an 'outsider' to many—even though his wife's family had been here for generations, and he was a newcomer appointed to the City Council to fill a vacant seat. Some perceived his participation in bringing forth this ordinance as overstepping his bounds, and were suspicious of his motivations; others found his bravado invigorating and important in leading the community in new directions.

Another explanation for why this small group may have challenged the brothels is revealed in widespread rumors that the company Stuart Tracy works for stood to gain monetarily if the brothels closed. Some said that company could not get a loan from Zion's Bank (Mormon owned) in Utah because the brothels were too close to a proposed new business on the West side of town. This fed the anti-prostitution side's belief that the brothel's hurt business, and fueled the pro-prostitution's belief that the ordinance was motivated by personal gain.

While the sense of community carved by diverse religious groups contextualizes much of the debate, it is painfully clear that a strong libertarian ethic drove supporters' desires to keep the brothels. It was more important to let a business that had never caused any problems survive, than it was to legislate a particular group's morality. Because the brothels had been there, and had a proven record, many members of the community were able to see the benefits of legalized prostitution, and the harms of elevating one group's morals over another.

There was also a very interesting gender dynamic at work in the Ely brothel hearings. At the same time as protecting a hegemonic perception of heterosexuality and a belief in men's "natural" sexual drive, there was a perception that women were strong and not automatically victimized by male sex drives. Many argued that the women who work in the brothels are good, smart women. Thanks to them, Ely residents seem to feel that women were free to walk the town, knowing they wouldn't be victimized by sex starved men. Similarly, single and widowed men have a safe outlet for their sexual urges thanks to the brothel prostitutes who offer a service far more acceptable to most community members than the unregulated and overly visible street prostitutes that they hypothesize will expand in numbers if brothels close. Some women even felt that marriages were made stronger thanks to the existence of the brothels. Despite some of the contradictory impulses and rhetoric, the discourses about sex and sexuality were surprisingly open for public discussion in small town America.

CONCLUSION

As George Flint, Director of the Nevada Brothel Association, always says in response to inquiries regarding the current state of life in any particular brothel: "Well, there are men paying to get laid right now." And so it goes in Ely, Nevada. Under the watchful regulatory eyes of the State, White Pine County, and the Ely City Council, the historic Stardust Ranch continues to operate as a legal business selling sex in what may be America's most unique service industry.

This case study of Nevada's brothel culture at the crossroad of the Old and New West has offered a descriptive analysis of the rhetorical devices and political discourses that seem to define contemporary insider debate about brothels. With a combination of formal political interests in re-election, economic development, and moral leadership, and micro-political interests by individuals with personal agendas—economic, moral, or otherwise—evidenced this descriptive research has made apparent the contradictory and complementary relations between discourses of Christian morality, economic development, tourism, community culture, health, crime and safety. Drawing on many of the same ideological frameworks, opponents and proponents nonetheless invoke the values and ideas in ways that lead to widely differing political positions regarding prostitution policy.

Future research will expand upon this analysis with additional data—historical and contemporary—from Ely in order to better flesh-out the context and implications of the on-going brothel debates there. In addition, our next analyses will diagram and discuss the specific discourses of gender, sexuality, religion and prostitution which characterize these debates and shed light on broader cultural questions and contradictory constructions of prostitutes and prostitution policy.