

# Character of K' Road – Annah Pickering of the Auckland NZPC



Sex workers are part of – not apart from – the K' Road community, says NZ Prostitute Collective's Auckland regional co-ordinator Annah Pickering.

"K' Road has been the heart of Auckland's red light district for a long time. Therefore it is really important to find a way to co-exist equally in this constantly changing space."

We talk to Annah about the role of NZPC around the K' Road precinct.

## **How long has Auckland NZPC been part of K' Road?**

It has been here for nearly 30 years. The centre started in Symond St sharing with the Needle Exchange Programme, then moved to Pitt Street before setting up in 486 K Road. That was our base for 25 years but the rent got too high eventually so we moved to 3/2 Canada St four years ago.

## **What does the NZPC do?**

We are a community centre for street workers, brothels, sex workers, dancers

and others, run by four paid staff, a small group of volunteers and a number of student interns. We offer support and advocacy around rights, law and workplace safety. We offer free sexual health checks, (including/provide free condoms and lube), and a free legal clinic dealing with tenancy, employment disputes, affidavits etc. We also have a WINZ satellite clinic here one day a week assisting sex workers who may be exiting or experiencing rough sleeping.

Our days are never dull. Someone may come in who has been sexually assaulted or is trying to sort out a workplace issue or just want a hot drink and a friendly chat. Our job is to assure that every person is respected, supported and not judged. Sex work is a hard job, especially for street based sex workers.

Our sex workers really appreciate the service, whether we are visiting them on the street or in homes, motels, apartments or the big brothels. You know, only 8% of our industry are street workers – yet they are the most visible part of our community because the media tend to portray the sex industry as street based. There are a number of brothels and homes around this area also providing sexual services.

### **How wide is your reach?**

The centre provides support from Bombay to Wellsford, as well as the far North through three outreach cars.

### **You do a lot of advocacy work too, don't you?**

Yes, we work with the Human Rights Commission, KBA, Auckland Transport and Auckland Council around different issues to do with registration and location of brothels and ensuring street based sex workers can continue to exist in the public spaces of K' Road and Auckland.

We are also part of Auckland's rough sleepers initiative, working alongside local government and non government agencies with marginalised people.

### ***Under the Red Umbrella: History of the red light district was something you put on during the Heritage Festival. Why?***

We wanted to get people to respect and not discriminate against the community and recognise the fight against discrimination and sex workers rights. We wanted to tell the community's story through their eyes, not the media.

It is a really important part of our work to look at de-stigmatisation and challenge people's perceptions about people who sell sex for a living.

### **What would you describe K' Road?**

K' Road is the most exciting street in New Zealand. It is quite a bohemian street - a place where you can be who you are. Other places are bloody boring, but K Road has great food and culture and a community feel about it.

It is also a place where people living on fringes of society, whether through mental health, drugs, alcohol or transgender issues, can come and be with their peers and feel safe.

As mainstream becomes more integrated into the tapestry of K' Road, we want to educate our new neighbours about the community, about inclusiveness.

### **How is K' Road changing for street workers?**

Sex workers have felt a lot safer since decriminalisation and more comfortable about going to the police.

But gentrification along K' Road has meant big changes with baby boomers moving in and lots of new apartments that are impacting on our street workers. We receive complaints from some of the new apartment dwellers who want us to move on "these things" working outside their front door. The complaints usually come through the police, KBA or an community liaison person. So we meet with those concerned and try to take a collaborative approach about how to live and co-exist in this changing space.

### **How can you help if someone is complaining of a sex worker on their corner?**

Litter or noise can be dealt with in a collaborative way. We know where all the workers work and who they are and we visit them regularly, day and night. We'd rather meet with people complaining and have a talk and come up with solutions together in a reasonable time frame. What is worrying is hearing of hateful comments on Facebook groups and other social media. We need to be talking.

### **How did you become involved with the NZPC?**

I got involved with the collective in a volunteer capacity through my flatmate who was volunteering there in 2001, around the time of the second reading of the Prostitution Law Reform. I enjoyed it a lot and kept helping out.

My first paid role was as a community liaison officer, primarily coordinating our brothel outreach across Auckland. I did that for a few years, then became a co manager role with two others. When they departed in 2006 I took it all on – my title officially now is regional coordinator.

### **How involved is the NZPC in K' Road?**

We've been part of the city planning for a number of years, people don't realise that we are very involved with K' Road strategy and community. The police consult us about positioning of CCTV around the hot spots on K' Road. A huge focus for us is crime prevention through environmental design – I've done training in that area with police and Council, eg about cutting back bushes and putting more lights in areas.

We make sure we keep our street workers informed and also get their feedback on what they think of the changes planned for the street. They are around 24/7 and they see things that someone in the day wouldn't be aware of, so they are in integral part of K Road and play an important part in safety and development. We are a part of the community not apart of the community.

### **What is the future of Auckland NZPC?**

We will keep doing the work we're doing, hopefully in this space. Our core funding is from the Ministry of Health for sexual and reproductive health services so our existence depends on politicians. Our rent is renewed every three years so we live within those limitations.

### **Advice to K' Roaders?**

Treat people as people. K' Road is a very special road and unique community that attracts forward thinkers. K' Road is about being inclusive.

But if someone does look scary because they seem under the influence of something, then take a description of what they're doing and call the police if you're really concerned.

### **Who is your greatest influence?**

My mum. But also Dame Catherine Healey, who founded the NZPC. She had to be bold and radical to start this. They had to step out and they really did.

### **Favourite K' Road places?**

There are many, but [Merge](#) is definitely up there – and then [Coco's Cantina](#), [Besties](#), Sri Pinang, 8.30, [Little Algiers](#) and [Mercury Plaza](#). I also love the home-made chocolates from [La Noisette Chocolats & Patisserie](#).