an interview with gloria lockett

Siobhan Brooks

Gloria Lockett is the former codirector of the prostitutes rights organization COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) and Executive Director of the California Prostitute Education Project (CAL-PEP), an Oakland-based, nonprofit AIDS and HIV prevention organization that works with street prostitutes. Lockett served on San Francisco District Attorney Terence Hallinan's Task Force on Prostitution and as a member of former Governor George Deukmejian's California AIDS Leadership Task Force. She has been published in several anthologies, including *The Black Women's Health Book: Speaking for Ourselves,* edited by Evelyn C.

White (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1990), *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry,* edited by Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press, 1984), and *Lessons from the Damned: Queers, Whores and Junkies Respond to AIDS,* by Nancy Stoller (New York: Routledge, 1998). She was also, for eighteen years, a prostitute.

SIOBHAN: What led you into the sex industry?

GLORIA: Money. I was young, twenty-one when I first got into the sex industry. I had two jobs, one as a clerk at a Lucky's store and the other as a clerk at City Hall. I was also waitressing at the Hyatt House Restaurant and various hotels in Oakland, trying to support myself and my two kids, and it was very, very hard.

SIOBHAN: How did you begin working in the sex industry? Did you have any connections with people who were already working in it?

GLORIA: During that time women in San Francisco worked in their fur coats. They were nicely dressed, and their hair would look good. One day, I said to this guy I was seeing, jokingly, "I could do that." Next thing I know he was bringing me a black dress and telling me to put it on. Basically, he and I were going out to work. That was in 1967, and it just went on from there.

SIOBAHN: How long were you in the sex industry?

GLORIA: I still consider myself to be in the sex industry, but as far as dating and working for myself, I was in it for eighteen years. I worked on the streets for about ten years, and then I worked in clubs in Burlingame and different hotels. In the latter years I went to working ads in newspapers.

SIOBAHN: How were issues around safety and clients dealt with?

GLORIA: I was working in a stable with lots of other women for about eighteen years straight. For ten of the eighteen years, there was an average of ten of us, me being the eldest. We were always around each other and worked in pairs on the streets and in hotels. We had procedures where if you got out of a car and no one was around, you took down the guy's license plate number, or someone driving behind you took down his license number. As soon as you got into a hotel room you would pick up the phone and tell someone where you were and what time you were expected back. For the most part, I felt pretty safe; the streets are a little more dangerous than being inside, but a lot funnier. When you worked inside you had to play girlfriend and boyfriend, but on the streets the guys knew what you were down there for. They knew why they were picking you up—there were very few games that were played.

SIOBAHN: How was race an issue in terms of how much money you made?

GLORIA: The money varied. It went up and down depending upon what city and what town. Over the eighteen years I worked in a lot of different states. In order to be black and work the sex industry you had to move around a lot. In each state the money was different, anywhere from $10 to $600. I've worked Vegas, Hawaii, Alaska, Oakland, San Jose, San Francisco, and other small cities, so money depended on where you worked and what kind of date you were going to turn. If you were in Vegas in those days, the average date was $100. Most of the time the guys would offer you as little as possible. If you were on the streets they would offer you $10 or $20, but the art is to talk the men out of however much you could get instead of taking what they offered you.

There was a time when I was on the streets that I could turn as many as ten or eleven tricks a night. But if you were in a hotel it was more like three or four, and if you worked out of ads in papers then it was five or six. If you worked in Alaska prices were up in those days because of the pipeline, so men had lots of money, plus it was very cold. Guys would work three months at a time before they would be ready to spend their money.

Race played a very big part in how much money you

made. Fortunately or unfortunately, I hung around a bunch of sisters who were white. We all helped each other out. If one of the girls would catch a date, we had an apartment or checked out the pad that we were working out of. The two or three black women would wait until they got to the apartment and we would double-date. So, if you were standing out on the corner, they would definitely pick up the white girl first. No matter how big, ugly, or old she looked—it didn't matter: The white girl went first, then the black girls.

When I worked the hotel scene there were very few blacks, so you had to be very careful. You had the chance to rip guys off, not that I did, though it was tempting at times. But you couldn't rip guys off because there were only two of you, and people in the hotel would know who you were, even if the guy didn't.

You couldn't hang around with other black girls. You had to hang by yourself or with other white girls, because if you were hanging in the Fairmont or the Hyatt, the people working there were more apt to bother you if you were with another black girl. I might have hung with one black girl from time to time, but for the most part I hung with white girls or by myself. It's a very racist thing, for different reasons. Some people have never seen a black woman; they're raised in areas where they don't see black women until they're grown. Actually, I remember one time I was standing on the corner

of MacArthur in San Pablo and this guy kept passing by looking at me. Finally, a stable sister of mine came out—a big white girl—and he picked her up. I waited until he got to the house; waited until she got her money. Then I went in and said to the guy, "You've got to tell me why you picked her up because I know that you were more interested in me than her. What is it?" He was shaking and he said, "Well, I didn't see a black person until I was twenty. I was too scared." [laughs] Racism plays a part in anything that you do.

SIOBAHN: Was the money more equal when you were with other black women?

GLORIA: Well, it's hard to say because the skill was not how much a person would offer you, but how much money you could talk them out of. I think it was probably about equal; of course they would give a white girl more money than they would give you. So black girls knew that they had to talk. I always figured if you had the money on you, then you should be prepared to spend it. Unfortunately, this was before ATM cards. [laughs]

SIOBAHN: How many times have you been arrested and what were the circumstances of your arrests?

GLORIA: I've been arrested about forty times. The first time I got arrested it was horrible; I was in San Francisco and

a sweep happened. They arrested me and about thirty other prostitutes. I had never been to jail. I was twenty-one. I didn't know anything about jail and I didn't know anyone who had ever been to jail. I remember I was in jail crying and one of the girls whispered to me, "You can't cry because if you cry the other girls are going to talk about you."

I was like, "I don't care! I'm never going to do this again." The girl said, "Aw, baby. You'll be back out there tomorrow." She was right. [laughs]

They had you sleep on cement floors with wool blankets, which I'm allergic to. The toilets were in front of the bed, so there was no privacy. In the first year I pled guilty, so I was on probation for a year—it was horrible. After that, I fought all my cases and I have to say that I'm a little bit different from the average person because I refused to think I was a criminal. I got up every morning and went to court, and used a public defender, sometimes private lawyers. I spent a lot of time in court and—knock on wood—I never served more than three days. But it was very difficult because if you're on the streets you get arrested, you're an easy pickup.

Police always want easy marks, and prostitutes are a lot less dangerous than a domestic violence call. If you're not on the streets, for the most part, you won't get arrested. Police constantly harass prostitutes; police have arrested me and said things like, "What if we put sand in this Vaseline? That

would really be something." They used to take our condoms and punch holes in them. So, the police were really bad, and that's another reason why you had to move around. I really hated it that we had to move around so much. Trying to raise kids and moving from one city to another city was hard. But my kids' lives were a little more stable. Either my mother kept them or the housekeeper did, so they weren't jumping all over the place like I was. I moved around a lot to keep from going to jail. Jail back then is the same as now, most people in jail are black. White people who go to jail don't stay and they don't get the same amount of time.

SIOBAHN: Were murders of prostitutes a big concern for you when you were working the streets?

GLORIA: It's always a concern, but my situation was a little bit different because I hung around so many people. Misery does not like company, so most of the time the women that were getting murdered hung by themselves. There was a time when pimps, if you will, would not let their women work with other women for fear that their women would become more educated and organized and leave them.

I can remember a particular woman who used to work the streets, and she and her old man were IV drug users. She had six kids and she was always by herself. One day a guy picked her up and killed her. It was really bad because she

was a white girl and she was with a black man. From what I heard nobody claimed her body because her parents disowned her after she got involved with a black man—prostitution was just another factor for her parents disowning her, but racism was really the issue. Her body stayed in the morgue for thirty days. So, that was the most fear of working the streets by yourself. I think women shouldn't be by themselves; people try to take advantage of women anyway, but when women are by themselves, they're more likely to be victims.

SIOBAHN: Did you ever have a pimp?

GLORIA: Yes. I was with the guy for twenty-five years. He was the same guy that got me into prostitution. I left him a couple of times, but he was the only pimp I had.

SIOBAHN: Was the relationship good?

GLORIA: Yes, but it was hard. Any time that you have a man that has anywhere between ten and twelve other women, it's difficult. He was a very good man, which is why he had so many women. He was very likable and very family oriented, not the type that would beat you and make you stay out all night, and he didn't make you fulfill a quota. We all just thought of him as our old man rather than our pimp because he wasn't the stereotype of a pimp.

You know, wearing the hat tossed to the side, jeans, a three-quarter leather coat, and big shades.

SIOBAHN: How did your kids react to you being a prostitute?

GLORIA: It's hard to say because my kids were three and four when I got with the guy. So he was the only father that they knew. My kids starting asking me about it when they reached ten and twelve years of age, but before then it was never brought up. None of the prostitution took place around them . . . but they knew. Having housekeepers, living in fine houses, driving Rolls Royces and Cadillacs, and having a whole bunch of white women around the house: They knew.

After a while they asked. I used to just tell them I was going to work when I would leave them, then they asked me what kind of work was I doing. They were so used to having designer clothes, I don't think it affected them much when they were younger. However, I do think now that they're older [prostitution] had an effect on them which I'm not happy with. Both of them are not as stable as I would like them to be, especially my daughter. And who knows? I don't know if it's the prostitution or me not being around them when they were growing up. We love each other. Neither of my kids have said anything like, "Oh, Mom! We hate you because you was a ho."

SIOBAHN: How old are your kids now?

GLORIA: I'm fifty. My son is thirty-three, and my daughter is thirty-two.

SIOBAHN: How did you become involved with COYOTE?

GLORIA: I got involved with COYOTE because there was a group of us working the streets of Berkeley, Oakland, and San Jose. When working the streets of Berkeley, the police started to figure out that we were prostitutes all working for the same person. This happened around the same time as the Jonestown Massacre. The police would say that the guy we worked for was another Jim Jones, brainwashing us, and that they would catch him like they caught Al Capone. So the police got really heavy on us.

When we started working San Jose back in 1977, there was lots of money, until 1983. What happened was [the police] started watching us, and they set us up. One night the police called the house we were working out of. I was the one answering the phones, setting the girls up on different dates. Then they came in and busted me; I was the only black woman. Six women got busted, but two of them weren't there, so they didn't get busted. They charged me with pimping and pandering, conspiracy, 647b [which is prostitution], being in a house of prostitution, being around a house of prostitution. They charged the other [white] women with

647b. The six customers got tickets, they were never arrested, and they were made to testify against us. We spent a year in court, and according to the police, it cost the taxpayers a million dollars for a prostitution case. I refused to plead guilty to conspiracy. I told the police that I would plead guilty to being in a house of prostitution, which is six months probation, which I could deal with.

In the next bust, the police only went for me and my lover (who was black), and one other woman (who was also black). They tried to get all of the white women and the Mexicans to testify against us! It was a huge case, and they charged us with every felony there was. They charged my man with having a gun in the house. My bail was $500,000. My old man's was $1,000,000. When I got the first case, I had tried to call Margo St. James, but I didn't really follow up. But when I got the second case, we really needed some kind of help and support.

The police also asked the white girls to testify against the black girls; some of them wouldn't and stayed in jail the whole time of the trail. Margo St. James went to court with us every day. I won my case; the other woman pleaded guilty and did a year and a half. My old man got twenty years. He did two-and-a-half years and then won on appeal.

After the trial I became more involved with COYOTE. I knew that, for the most part, the people working the streets

were black and other women of color. So I had a real problem with the fact that COYOTE was so white. The people were real nice, it was just too white. But I wanted to be involved with COYOTE to let my people know that prostitution was not an all-white issue.

I turned out to be quite an activist, but mainly because I knew that there had to be a voice for people who were working the streets and getting arrested—which meant mostly black people. Those were people to me who were doing prostitution big time. It was horrendous to me, the white women who would turn two tricks a month and call that prostitution, when black women were working the streets turning five and six dates a night. They were working six days a week in rain, cold, and snow. I felt it was important for me to be a part of COYOTE to let people know that black women's issues were different from white women's issues.

For the most part, white prostitutes work inside, and many of them get into prostitution because of power issues. Some were once in the professional world and felt like they were being treated like whores. Many of them have gone to college. Black women mainly do prostitution to economically survive. Most of them never had the opportunity for higher education.

I think black prostitutes think COYOTE is a waste of time. They feel that prostitution is never going to be legalized

or decriminalized. Many of them feel that they don't have the time for meetings because they're too busy making money, and that the meetings aren't going to benefit them in any way. I do understand all those reasons, and if I hadn't been in the situation I was in, I probably would not have attended them, either. However, I definitely think that my being at these meetings made a difference. Though COYOTE is still mostly white, they understand many issues relating to women of color that otherwise would have not been addressed. I served for two years on Hallinan's task force to decriminalize prostitution in San Francisco, and I'm sure I made a difference by being on the task force. I've been to the International Conference on Prostitution in Amsterdam, which I also think was valuable. Black women do need to be heard.

SIOBAHN: How do you feel, overall, about your experience as a prostitute?

GLORIA: My parents are dead. I'm the oldest in the family. I'm not proud of what I've done, but I'm also not ashamed of it. I've learned from my experience, and now I have my job at CAL-PEP: California Prostitutes Education Project. If it hadn't been for my experiences as a prostitute and with COYOTE, I wouldn't be where I am now, at a place where I can talk about it and let black women know it's okay. But many people feel that the older they get, the more they want to for-

get about certain parts of their life. People will say, "Oh, that was back when I was on drugs," or under someone's power. I feel that my being visible and talking about my experiences will let people know—especially let black women know—that it's all right to have a past. We all have closets. So, I think I have made a difference, and I will always be a member of COYOTE. The more people come out about an issue, the more power they will have. Sometimes, though, I do get tired of talking about prostitution because it was in my past.

If you're going to get prostitution decriminalized or legalized, there has to be a large body of people behind it. I think one day we will have prostitution decriminalized, if not legalized. Actually, I don't think it will ever really be legalized in the United States because we're so moralistic. Ministers were some of my biggest clients, yet they were preaching to get prostitutes off the streets. I wish that prostitution would become decriminalized or legalized so that I could openly share basic information, or even mentor young women, so they wouldn't have to go through what I went through. At times I have met with people, giving them information, while knowing that I was committing a crime because it's illegal to advise someone on doing illegal activities.

SIOBAHN: In Evelyn C. White's book, *The Black Woman's Health Book*, you mentioned that black prostitutes could be viewed as educators in the black community. What do you think the black community's overall view is of prostitution?

GLORIA: The black community is very downing, very opinionated. However, I think that it's easier to accept a black prostitute than it is to accept a lesbian or gay person in the black community. I think that's because prostitution is about money, and people understand that the reason you're doing it relates to money. But still it's very difficult.

SIOBAHN: How did your family react to you being a prostitute?

GLORIA: I've been very fortunate because my family has always been very supportive. I was on the Donahue show six or seven years ago, and I assumed my grandmother in Waco, Texas, wasn't going to see the show. [laughs] I called my grandmother a couple of weeks after I had been on the show, and she said, "Oh, I saw you on television." I asked what did she think, and she said that she's never been so proud of me. In our family we don't throw away our children for what they have done.

My mother never said the word prostitution, but she knew what I was doing. She was very accepting, and she used to keep all of our kids: six little white kids and three little black kids. She also loved my man; he would bring her roses and

food. My father loved him, too. That's another reason I speak out, because my family has been very supportive.

SIOBAHN: You've been published in a few anthologies. I was wondering if you considered yourself a writer.

GLORIA: No, I don't. I think one day I could be a writer; I'm getting more into it than I've ever been, but I don't consider myself to be one now. I do think I have an interesting story to tell, and the older I get the more I want to document it. For years I have been afraid to tell my story because I know that the media just takes the truth and bends it. I don't want people to glorify and exploit my experience. Prostitution to me was a way of making a living, I was solely in it for the money. All the other stuff about power came along with it after a while, not in the beginning. I and most African Americans who get into prostitution are in it because of the money. If we had another way that would make us $50,000 and $60,000 a year, then that's what we would be doing. Prostitution is very difficult; it's a job. I didn't let it destroy me and I wasn't addicted to drugs. I wasn't this horrible little victim who was misused by this pimp. I knew what I was doing. I was grown when I got into it, and grown when I got out.

SIOBAHN: What is your opinion of a lot of the literature coming out about sex workers?

GLORIA: I've been absent lately from COYOTE, so I haven't read a lot of the current things on sex workers. But for the most part what people write is bull. Writers often exploit you and twist your story around: Either the prostitution is all glorified or it's horrible. There's never a happy medium.

SIOBAHN: The reason I asked is because I have a real problem with a lot of the "feminist" literature coming out about the sex industry. The literature coming out now is basically about sexual expression. It's from a middle-class white perspective, which sends the message that all prostitutes are college students who were tired of being a part of the patriarchal capitalist system. They basically wanted a job to allow them to continue their art, write poetry, and write books. I think some of the writing is interesting, but since we live in a white-supremacist society, publishers will take that one experience into account.

GLORIA: I've heard some of my white friends say that they're in prostitution because of the power. Well, for black women it's for the money. We are powerful people, we don't need to get power by standing on no corner. [laughs] The writings are very white, and people need to know that.

SIOBAHN: Can you talk about how you got your position at CAL-PEP?

GLORIA: CAL-PEP came out of COYOTE. There was a conference at Margo St. James's house in 1982. At that time we realized that as soon as people stopped scapegoating white gay men for transmitting AIDS, the next group would be prostitutes—and in fact it was. We started doing support groups, and Margo St. James, Priscilla Alexander, and I wrote a grant to the state, and the state funded us. Our first grant was $30,000 to work with female sex workers, to talk to them about AIDS, and to make them aware that people were scapegoating them for the spread of AIDS. At about this same time, people were interviewing these women and paying them $15–$20 for an interview, but they were using the information wrongly. We wanted to make sure those women were educated as to what was happening.

After the conference at Margo St. James's house, I got a job as an interviewer for a group called Project Aware, which was a research project. One night I was out talking to some of the prostitutes on the stroll, and this one black girl came up to me and said, "I'm positive. That's good, right?" I'm sure people told her what it meant to be HIV positive, but she didn't hear them. She could not communicate or relate to these white people coming down talking to her about AIDS. She didn't know what AIDS was. She couldn't relate to what it meant to be positive or negative. We then felt that it was really important that we do an HIV prevention and education project. CAL-PEP started off doing education and HIV prevention and testing. Now we are also doing research, and we work with people on the street in the Bay Area.

There's about twenty-four of us, and I'm proud to say that some people have been here as long as ten years. We hire ex-prostitutes, ex–IV drug users. We hire people other people wouldn't hire or feel they can't hire. We do outreach in the real sense; we go to where the people are: the street, crack houses. We feel the people on the street are us, so we look like, act like, and walk like the people we serve. We don't discriminate on the basis of gender. We reach out to everybody: transgendered, drug users, prostitutes, lesbians, and gays.

We also do support groups and offer support groups for HIV-positive African American people and their families. We have made a video—called Blood Sisters: Breaking the Silence—about HIV-AIDS, which features eight African American women who touch on every aspect of living with the AIDS virus.

It's easier for us to work with hard-to-reach people. We do not think prostitutes are the carriers of AIDS. In fact, I have not known one woman who was HIV positive only because of prostitution. Other factors, like drug use or being a partner of someone who's HIV positive, always play a part in their HIV status. Prostitutes have been tested in brothels in Nevada since 1988. They are tested every three months,

and they have not found one woman who was positive. It's a myth that prostitutes spread AIDS. Prostitutes are actually the people who have been using condoms for years.

SIOBHAN: What do you think makes it hard for prostitutes of color to seek information about AIDS?

GLORIA: I think there is a lot of denial among the African American community and other communities of color when it comes to AIDS. We don't think it is our problem. I'm real concerned about women and men in heterosexual relationships getting it [HIV] from each other. I'm concerned because many people have multiple sex partners. People think that because in the '70s they had multiple sex partners, they can still do that. I'm scared that a lot of people who think they're okay will come down with AIDS. Many [black] people still think AIDS is a white gay male problem, that we're being brainwashed by the white man, and that it's a form of genocide. Many prostitutes feel that they should use condoms with tricks, but not with their intimate partners. Women can be just as bad as men can when it comes to not using condoms. I'm much more concerned with women getting HIV from their intimate partners than from their clients. My fear is also with women on crack who are in denial that they are prostitutes because they're in it for the drugs, not the money. Sometimes they turn tricks without

condoms because they don't consider the man to be a trick. We do a lot of education with crack users, and give them condoms to use.

SIOBHAN: Do you feel like a sex workers' movement is happening, and what are your thoughts about the feminist movement of the '70s?

GLORIA: I've always felt that I was a feminist, but what a feminist is to me is not what a feminist is to some people. I love being a woman and I think it's my right to do whatever I want with my body and mind. Many people think that if you're a prostitute you couldn't be a feminist because you're letting people use you. I always felt that I was certainly using them [the customers] as much as they were using me. So who's using whom? That's the art of the game. It has always irritated me when people asked me, "How could you be a feminist and do this?" How could I not be? Women are breadwinners for the most part, and very strong and powerful. Women basically call the shots, and sometimes we let men think that they're calling them.

Hopefully, women in the sex industry will come together more; I see this with the white women, I'm hoping that the black women and women of color will start coming together, as well.