Lois Lee did not set out to make rescuing kids from the mean streets her life’s work.

Between 1977 and 1978, Los Angeles was terrorized by the serial murderer known as the Hillside Strangler. Lee was doing research for a doctoral dissertation about prostitution, and had interviewed the woman who became the Strangler’s 11th victim. She believed the crime was not getting full police attention because the victim was a prostitute. Angry, Lee appeared on the local news channels to plead for information regarding the identity of the Strangler, offering her home number to informants who didn’t want to contact the police.

Soon she was swept up by network media. “I was 25 years old and it went nationwide,” says Lee. “It just happened.”

Young homeless prostitutes in Los Angeles apparently took note of this crusading figure on television. “Over the next three years kids started coming to my apartment,” Lee says. “They would call me and come over.”

That was the beginning of Children of the Night, a 26-year-old nonprofit that has rescued thousands of children and teens from prostitution in L.A. and other American cities.

The Runaway Capital

“Los Angeles is the runaway capital of the country,” says LAPD Detective Keith Haight, who has worked with Lee for 25 years. “Kids in the Midwest living in abusive situations dream about coming here. They save up their money and buy
“Getting smacked around and letting people do things to you that you didn’t want them to do—I thought that was love . . . I was 13. What did I know?”

Eye on LA produced a documentary on Lee’s efforts and the Irvine Foundation called to offer its help. “They said fill out a grant proposal. I didn’t even know what a grant proposal was,” recalls Lee.

Starting in a Storefront

Her first space was a storefront on Hollywood Boulevard. “I had some of the most unlikely heroes to help me,” she says. “Johnny Carson, President Reagan, Hugh Heffner. Heffner helped to get my first three grants.

By 1989 Lee was able to purchase the old Post Office building in Van Nuys. She opened the Children of the Night home in 1992 and currently operates with a $2 million a year budget.
Child prostitution was not a real problem in the United States until after 1974, Lee says, when Congress passed the Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention Act that prohibited the arrest or detention of runaways. Unable to get real employment and easy prey for exploitation, prostitution became the default profession for many runaway children and teens.

With law enforcement out of the picture, it seemed no existing agency wanted to take the responsibility for these kids. “I would find a 12-year-old involved in prostitution,” says Lee, “and I would call child services and say you need to provide this child with a foster home and they would say, ‘No, the child is a prostitute and it’s a crime, have her arrested.’ So I’d call the cops—and this is how I got really close with the cops—they would say, ‘No, she’s having sex with an adult. Children’s services has to take her into protective custody. We don’t want to arrest her.’ ”

The kids nobody wanted to deal with became known as “Lois’s Kids.” A large part of Lee’s success has been due to a 24-hour response capability and giving children individualized help. Faye, a 17-year-old now attending a Southern California university, was rescued from an abusive situation at 13. Severely beaten and thrown out of her East Coast home, Faye recounts her life. “Getting smacked around and letting people do things to you that you didn’t want them to do—I thought that was love. I thought selling my [body] was, well, I thought they wanted me. I thought I was a star. I was 13. What did I know?”

Someone gave her the number to the Children of the Night Hotline. “They had a ticket to me within three days,” says Faye. “I kept calling them during those three days and talking to the counselors on the hotline. They were great, but I thought I was just going to come and see the Hollywood sign and leave. But then I saw the other girls, that they could do it, and I decided I would stay.

“They help you to grow. They did so much to inspire me to become a lawyer and someday I’m going to become president of Children of the Night.

Someone Will Be There

“At Children of the Night, you can become a kid again. You experience things you never had a chance to as a kid if you’re living in poverty or your mom’s doing drugs. When you go to Children of the Night you see these people and they have adult bodies, but when they talk, a kid comes out.
"I left Children of the Night and am living in a dorm," Faye says, "but they're all still there for me. I can call at three in the morning and someone will always be there. Even if I wanted to, God forbid, go back to the streets someone would be there for me."

One of the issues people are beginning to recognize, but is rarely talked about, is that wealthy people's children are vulnerable, says Lee. "They are abused by drivers, security people, housekeeper's children, tutors, coaches. When a child is sexually abused, it's such an insidious kind of crime. It's like you cut off their arms so they can't defend themselves. So much of what we do at Children of the Night is teaching them how to assert themselves."

Structure is part of that. "I believe you are what you do," says Lee. "At Children of the Night, they wake up at 8 and shower and dress and have breakfast. From 10 to 12 they have either keyboarding or Driver's Ed, at 12 to 1 lunch with staff, from 1 to 5 back in school. A break from 5 to 6, dinner at 7 and then we have different volunteers, actors and other people who come in to do workshops. At 9:45 lights are out."

"That's half of it. The other part is I have residence meetings once a week. The kids have control over the menus. We ask them about the staff, who they think is not doing their job, who is doing a good job. They are empowered to participate in the process. Every Wednesday is a staff meeting and they participate in that and have a say in terms of how the program is actually run. Fridays are an outing day. They may go to Universal Studios, to the beach or something special. Saturday is a day of rest, and Sunday we have a barbeque and play softball and we take them to religious services. So the kids know exactly what's going to happen and if we are not doing our job, they're taught to speak up."

Safe, Healing Environments

Children of the Night has taken in kids in from all over the U.S. and helps hundreds each year, with an 80% success rate according to its annual follow-up studies. Saving children from pimps has gained momentum and detectives, FBI agents, and prosecutors in Los Angeles, Hollywood, Santa Ana, Anaheim, San Diego, Las Vegas, Portland, Billings, Montana, Seattle, Miami, New York, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Arizona and Hawaii—all stops on the child
prostitution “circuits”—are making headway. But that’s only half the problem. The other half is providing safe and healing environments.

“The system is a mess, really a mess,” says Lee, “but, we’ve gotten better at what we are doing because I’ve gone from a fledgling walk-in center with a couple of showers and some clothes to a home that has a school with a college placement program. I’ve been able to organize dentists and doctors to work with us, a phenomenal number of volunteers.”

Haight considers Lee someone who makes it possible for him to do his job. “I’ve been on the police force for 32 years, 20 in vice, and I can tell you she’s the only program I’ve seen that is totally successful in rehabilitating young prostitutes,” Haight says. “One of the parts of recovering is to be able to climb on the stand and testify against their pimp. I have two jobs: to get women out of prostitution and make sure the pimps are prosecuted. Children of the Night is able to break the bond between the pimp and prostitute and get the girls to testify, and that is a big deal, because these girls are totally traumatized.

“We look at prostitutes as victims of crime now, and we treat them as such,” he says, “but they’re lost victims no one wants to deal with. Most people think these are choices that they’ve made, but that’s not the case. They’re just kids who have had it tough from day one.”

Though President Bush made the trafficking of persons a priority item related to terrorism, and money is being pumped into the Department of Justice and the FBI, as Lee explains, “There’s no place in this country to put these children. Everyone is talking about the trafficking of children for prostitution but no one will take them. No one knows what to do with these kids.”

Lee is called upon to work on cases throughout the United States. “I usually work 20 or 30 prosecution cases a year,” says Lee. “Most of the cases happen out of Las Vegas and we’ve worked very closely with Sheriff Bill Young for the last nine years. He’s taken a leadership role in raising money for us through the casino owners and other prominent people in Las Vegas, and the FBI got involved with about eight cases. I’m hoping that some of this government money will do some good—not just do what’s politically correct and move on to the next flavor of the month.”

Lee has started to receive calls from numerous major cities. “I just got a call from the Dallas District Attorney,” says Lee. “They have such a child prostitution problem that their county has put up money and they are going to raise private funds to start a program in Dallas. When the DA asked if I would help I said absolutely. I’ll go in and set it up, train people, set up the job descriptions, do the budgets, but I do what I do really well and I’m not going to let anyone diffuse me by putting me on a jet to travel all over the country. I have to be very careful with the things that I do and stay focused on my program.”

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