

GUEST COMMENTARY

Sex crimes captivate the audience, but why not the Arizona legislature?

Find it interesting the number of Arizona folks who are captivated and fascinated with sex crimes. It's like they can't get enough of it. I hear constant talk about the media-created, soap-opera-like atmosphere surrounding the Jodi Arias murder trial. People are fascinated with the sex talk and titillating tales of what Arias and Travis Alexander did before she admittedly murdered him.

No doubt the media loves it. Sex sells and — media-driven voyeurism sells really big in Arizona!

In an opinion piece in last Saturday's Arizona Republic, Cindy McCain — wife to Sen. John McCain and a highly-successful business executive and known global humanitarian — stated that "Phoenix is a major hub for this activity and is often listed as one of the top spots in the U.S. for child sex trafficking."

Imagine that, Arizona as a top spot for child sex trafficking.

When you consider Arizona's continued lack

of a strategic statewide plan and effective state agency to take on the organized crime elements that sell kids for sex, Arizona is a great spot trafficking in children.

I wrote in my March 5 Tribune column ("Recent Valley freeway snarls only part of the issue with DPS") that "Without a centralized and coordinated effort like was once the case with DPS taking the lead in organized crime investigations, the public suffers and the criminal's profit. No wonder organized crime loves Arizona."

While the public's anti-crime focus is kept on the border and billions and billions of dollars are spent to intercept illegal aliens and drugs — to questionable success — organized criminal activities continue to flourish on our city streets. Human trafficking whether it is for sweatshops or the sex trade has always been a major profit center for organized crime.

In Arizona, it's no secret among law enforcement officials that the streets are controlled by gangs with ties to the Mexican mafia prison gang and Mexico based organized crime groups.

For whatever reasons, Arizona's policy and lawmakers continue to ignore the threat these groups present to Arizona's sustainability and quality of life. The legislature's neglect of statewide law enforcement efforts is legendary. When you

look at its recent performance, it's easy to see how Arizona went from being one of the best in attacking organized crime to being a state that's a major destination and transshipment hub in organized crime's North American supply chain.

McCain pointed out in her op-ed piece the legislature's latest gift to crime and criminals was House Judiciary Chairman Eddie Farnsworth, R-Gilbert, refusing to schedule a hearing for a bill to help law enforcement target the growing problem of child prostitution. House Bill 2569 would have cre-

ated "higher penalties for pimps and traffickers than for johns when the victim is 15, 16 or 17.

"This bill is relatively simple and straightforward, and just the start of legislation needed to address the larger problem of human trafficking in Arizona," she added.

Kiddie pimps would be looking at up to 37 years in prison had this bill moved forward and become law.

McCain pointed out "Sex traffickers target children because of their vulnerability and gullibility, as well as the market 'demand' for young victims. Studies show pimps prey on victims as young as 12."

Farnsworth's refusal to hold a hearing killed anti-organized crime legislation that would help police and prosecutors attack Arizona's flesh mongers.

But what else would you expect from our legislature's leadership — a group that has made ignoring Arizona's crime problems its usual way of doing business?

McCain is known for her courage. She's not afraid to get her hands dirty doing what's right. It's too bad our legislature doesn't have the same commitment and courage to protect Arizona's children and communities from organized crime, and sexual predators.

• Retired Mesa master police officer Bill Richardson lives in the East Valley and can be reached at bill.richardson@cox.net.



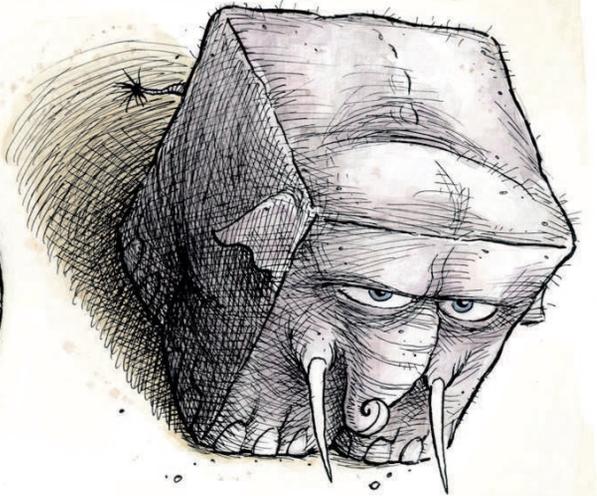
Bill Richardson

Opinion

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SQUARE PEG, ROUND HOLE...

GUEST COMMENTARY

MYLIFE changing lives one young adult at a time

'MYFEST' — focusing on suicide, bullying prevention — Sunday

Being a young person is never easy. Add to that the challenge of a mental illness and life's hurdles can become skyscrapers.

Understanding this challenge, Jewish Family & Children's Service partnered with Magellan Health Services to launch MYLIFE — Magellan Youth Leaders Inspiring Future Empowerment. This free youth leadership program brings together youth in the community with similar challenges to support one another and learn leadership and advocacy skills that help them to grow as a person, and support their recovery journey.

The MYLIFE youth hold regular meetings, local and national workshops, presentations and hip-hop performances to help empower youth and give them a

voice to improve programs and services in their communities.

MYLIFE's biggest event of the year, MYFEST, is coming up Sunday, March 24 at Tempe Beach Park. This annual celebration celebrates recovery and this year's event focuses on preventing suicide and bullying.

Additionally, MYLIFE advises behavioral health professionals, community stakeholders and government officials on the issues affecting child/adolescent and

young adult programs and services, and providing outreach to help reduce the stigma associated with being a young person living with a mental illness and/or substance abuse issues.

MYLIFE members provide support for their peers; develop critical skills in leadership, mentoring and mental health resiliency; act as advisors to local officials to help improve services and systems that serve youth; and provide a much-needed voice in the commu-

nity to combat the stigma associated with behavioral health issues. MY LIFE has been the catalyst for changes that have been very beneficial to programs and systems that serve youth. Their advocacy has brought about changes to improve care for youth in Arizona and across the nation.

Moreover, MYLIFE Arizona youth have been instrumental in starting four additional groups in southeastern Pennsylvania and two groups in Louisiana, and engaging more than 400 youth nationally in MYLIFE.

JFCS is honored to work with Magellan on this important and life-changing program and it's been a pleasure to watch the program change one youth's life at a time.

• Mary Jo Whitfield, MSW, is the vice president of behavioral health for Jewish Family & Children's Service a non-profit, non-sectarian organization that strengthens the community by providing quality behavioral health and social services to children, families and adults of all ages and faiths throughout Maricopa County, in accordance with a Jewish value system that cares about all humanity.



Mary Jo Whitfield