

City pulls sex-trade photo exhibit

Display removed hours after opening

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Calgary Herald

Wednesday, June 11, 2008

A photography display at City Hall meant to give voice to former sex-trade workers was removed by staff after only three hours, leading exhibit organizers to question why the city agreed to the display in the first place.

The exhibit consists of 25 photos taken by five former sex-trade workers. The show, part of a year-long project by the University of Calgary's social work faculty, the United Way and AIDS Calgary, was meant to be displayed in the atrium at City Hall until Friday. Instead, it came down hours after opening Monday.

"Initially, we were very excited that it was going to be displayed at City Hall," said Gayla Rogers, head of the faculty of social work. "In essence, it isn't what you would call a nice photo exhibit. It was about challenging perceptions and the stories by the (former sex-trade workers) themselves and their experiences of leaving the sex trade.

"I guess by removing the exhibit, it's another form of silencing these women."

Terry Taks of the city clerk's office said no one at City Hall was available Tuesday to comment. He confirmed the exhibition was taken down "partly" due to complaints.

Rogers said she was told the exhibit was pulled because of two photographs. One featured a mutilated Barbie doll, while the other was of pennies. The text accompanying the second photo included the word "whore."

"I wish they would have said no to begin with and we might have found other venues . . . more willing to stand by such an exhibit," said Rogers. "I think the showing of it and then pulling it is very hard to deal with for the women themselves, who exposed a lot in sharing their stories. To turn around and be silenced, it would have been better not to accept it in the first place."

The five former sex-trade workers were given cameras and asked to document their stories. The photos were displayed with text and a video component. Most of the photos were described as fairly innocuous, including pictures of boots and high-heeled shoes in the playground, a doll on a windowsill and a letter from a child to her mother.

The display was launched Friday at the Art Gallery of Calgary during an invitation-only gala that attracted between 100 and 150 people.

Jamie-Brett Sine, manager of public and education programs at the art gallery, said she was surprised by the city's decision, adding officials should have expected the exhibit to be powerful.

"I wonder who wasn't talking to each other," she said. "When we went into the project, we discussed exactly who was doing the research and what was behind everything. I personally thought it was very powerful and had an impact."

On Tuesday night, the atrium where the exhibit was being displayed hosted the 2007 Calgary Awards, where Mayor Dave Bronconnier and members of council presented awards to citizens and groups involved in community work.

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