

<http://www.nhregister.com/general-news/20160507/legal-debate-focuses-on-prosecution-of-bottoms-in-sex-trafficking-of-minors>

## Legal debate focuses on prosecution of ‘bottoms’ in sex trafficking of minors



Shamere McKenzie, 32, was charged with conspiracy to commit sex trafficking of minors in January 2007. While she accepted responsibility for her actions, McKenzie also touts the story of a survivor, or a woman who was victimized by a pimp and forced to do his bidding. She is now an advocate for survivors of human trafficking.  
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

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When Darnell Crosland first went to visit [Sheena Dume](#), 23, at the Wyatt Federal Detention Facility in Rhode Island, she told him that even though she was in jail, she felt free.

“Being in jail was the freest she ever felt,” Crosland said. “To go to jail and feel free, that’s really telling.”

Crosland, Dume’s attorney, said that prior to the young woman’s detention for her admitted role in sex trafficking of minors in Stratford and Milford and conspiracy to commit that crime, she was subject to a whole different type of imprisonment.

Dume served as what is known as the “bottom” in the sex trafficking world, for co-defendant, [Wellington Brown](#), Crosland said. The bottom is considered the lead prostitute who serves as the “right hand” to the pimp, collecting money, posting ads, transporting victims, and instructing

victims, according to [Shared Hope International](#), an organization dedicated to preventing sex trafficking and helping victims.

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At her sentencing hearing in March, Dume, formerly of Greenwich, told U.S. District Judge Janet Arterton that she had been originally recruited by Brown to work as a model, but instead was put to work as a sex worker while she was still a teenager. Later, she said, she helped recruit and retain younger trafficking victims out of fear that Brown would hurt her or her family.

Dume and Brown were arrested by federal authorities in July 2014 at a hotel stop in Maryland. Brown pleaded guilty to two counts of conspiracy to commit sex trafficking of a minor and four counts of sex trafficking a minor in March 2015 and is now serving a more than 10½-year sentence. Dume pleaded guilty to the conspiracy charge and sex trafficking of a minor in February 2015 and was sentenced in March to six years in prison.

Per federal law, Dume will be required to register as a sex offender for the rest of her life.

Krishna Patel, a former assistant U.S. attorney in Connecticut, said that prosecutors often debate whether bringing federal charges against a woman who served as a bottom is necessary, or even the right thing to do, given the likelihood that they were also victims in these sex trafficking cases. But, it is hard to ignore the fact that the work of the bottom is to help recruit, teach, and control other, often younger, victims into a life of slavery.

“I don’t think there’s ever one right decision,” Patel said. “You just do your best to make sure justice is done.”

In the end, Patel is grateful for the existence of the federal grand jury, she said, so that a group of laypeople ultimately decides if a young woman should be federally indicted for these types of crimes.

“Let there be no question that conspiring to commit sex trafficking of minors and sex trafficking of minors is one of the most depraved crimes,” Arterton said before sentencing Dume in March. “While (the defendant) was very young while involved in this criminal activity, she was not a minor.”

Dume was the fifth woman to be sentenced in a Connecticut federal court in connection with a sex trafficking crime since 2006, based on information provided by the U.S. Attorney’s Office. Six women total have been sentenced since 2006, and all but one received less time than their male co-defendants. The one exception was a husband and wife team charged in October 2012, where both defendants received the same sentence of 6½ years.

Since Dume’s sentencing, the sixth woman, [Kayla Walters](#), 24, was sentenced to five years in prison in April for federal sex trafficking crimes. Walters aided in bringing minors from the West Coast to serve as sex workers in Milford, according to federal authorities. Her co-defendant, [Edward Thomas](#), is serving a federal sentence of more than 17 years in prison.

Like Dume, Walters claimed to have been manipulated by her co-defendant. Her lawyers argued that Walters considered Thomas to be her fiance and he took advantage of that relationship.

While there is no specific data to point to that shows how often a pimp chooses a man or woman as bottom to help do his or her bidding, the practice is very common in sex trafficking, according to Tammy Sneed, director of girls services for the state [Department of Children and Families](#). Sneed is also a member of the Trafficking in Persons Council and a co-chairwoman of the Human Anti-Trafficking Response Team.

Usually, the bottom position is coveted because the work tends to be safer, keeps the girl, or boy, off the street more, and usually comes with material gifts, Sneed said, though that does not mean that they are not subject to psychological manipulation and victimization by the pimp.

“You don’t become the bottom by sending in a resume,” Crosland said, adding that girls, like Dume, often attain that status after a time of sexual and emotional abuse by the pimp.

“And when business is slow, you’re out there on the street turning tricks like you used to,” he said.

Dume did get material gifts, including purses and new clothes, from Brown for her help in perpetuating this sex trafficking conspiracy, Crosland said, but she was still under intense emotional distress from his control.

“When I look at it, I say just because you are being dressed well, doesn’t mean you’re not still being pimped,” Crosland said. “Just because you’re inside the house, doesn’t mean you’re not a slave.”

Having a bottom is part of a pimp’s business enterprise, said Jim Ehrman, executive director of [Love146](#), a New Haven-based nonprofit dedicated to preventing human trafficking domestically and abroad.

“She’s capitalized on to help bring other girls in,” Ehrman said, which can be especially effective if the pimp’s chosen leader is from a group home, as the girls can return to what can be seen as vulnerable places to recruit more potential victims.

Girls have an easier time recruiting than men, said [Erin Williamson](#), the survivor care program manager for Love146. Girls are more approachable and can be seen as more trustworthy to potential victims being recruited.

There’s almost always a bottom, said Patel, now the director of [justice initiatives for Grace Farms Foundation](#), which is dedicated to eradication of child exploitation.

Attaining that kind of status, is a “goal for girls that psychologically get caught up in this hell,” Patel said. And federal prosecutors and judges are aware of this.

Charging these girls, or boys, federally is regularly debated topic among prosecutors, Patel said. She prosecuted a number of sex traffickers in her time with the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Patel said that often across the country bottoms are seen completely as victims or viewed by prosecutors or a grand jury as the "girlfriend of the week," rather than a regular conspirator and recruiter, and do not face federal charges.

But, while Patel said society has created somewhat of an "artificial designation" for adulthood, it's difficult to say that women should not be held responsible for the victimization of younger girls, when they are considered by society to be adults.

"It continues to be a big debate," Patel said. "At what point do you send a message that it's never OK?"

One case that stands out the most in Patel's mind is that of Shamere McKenzie, a woman who was prosecuted when she was in her early 20s for her role in recruiting and retaining victims for her reported pimp, Corey Davis.

According to court documents, McKenzie not only helped recruit girls, she routinely lied about their ages to law enforcement and provided them with fake identification. One of the victims was 12.

McKenzie said she was forced to do these things by her pimp, and maintains that she did not know the ages of the girls at the time.

The indictment in McKenzie's case, which alleged abuse and trafficking crimes with Davis in 2005 and 2006, stated, "At all times relevant to this indictment, McKenzie was Davis's 'bottom,' the pimp's most trusted prostitute, who facilitated transportation of the female prostitutes to various adult strip clubs, collected cash proceeds generated through prostitution, informed them of the 'rules,' and maintained control over them when Davis was not present."

During the sentencing hearing, McKenzie's attorney, Diane Polan, said, "I think Mr. Davis basically sucked her into the vortex of his pimping business before she really knew what had happened to her and after that, it was the beatings, the guns, the threats, and that was his way of maintaining control over her just like all of the other young women."

"I think that the fact that she was a little older, the fact that she was maybe a little smarter, a little more life experience, doesn't change the basic fact he controlled her just like he controlled everybody else," Polan said, according to transcripts from the hearing.

McKenzie was sentenced to five years of probation in January 2007, the only sentence given in a federal sex trafficking case since 2006 without prison time. Patel said she was in favor of the ruling because it let McKenzie know that the court was giving her a second chance, but she would have a tight leash in case she strayed again.

McKenzie, who has since graduated from college, is now the chief executive officer of the [Sun Gate Foundation](#), an organization dedicated to helping provide funding for victims of sex trafficking to continue their education.

Whether a bottom should be prosecuted is a discussion that may remain philosophical because every case is different, Sneed said.

“These kids have been through a whole lot,” Sneed said. “It’s hard to say yes or no.”

“(But), I’ve seen the outcomes of the girls that have gotten recruited into this life, and that’s pretty horrible too,” Sneed said.

When Dume first got arrested and was being held in Rhode Island, she told her family to leave Connecticut for fear that Brown would harm them too, Dume’s mother, Marie, said.

“She was so scared,” Marie said. “She wouldn’t talk about him that’s how scared she was.”

She’ll talk about him now, according to Dume’s sister, Daen Alexandre, but only to describe visions she sees of him from her cell in a West Virginia federal prison. Brown is being housed in Danbury.

“She’s not OK,” Alexandre said, adding that the pair speak every couple of days. “She still sees that man in her dreams.”

Alexandre described Dume as a normal teenager who got taken advantage of by a con artist and said that Dume has “accepted (her fate) for what it is.”

Crosland also talks to Dume regularly and said that her spirits are “ever changing.”

“Now she’s with the big boys, and I think it hardens you a little bit,” Crosland said. “Make no mistake, she’s being punished.”

Since 2006, the U.S. Attorney’s Office in the District of Connecticut has indicted 28 individuals involved with alleged sex trafficking crimes. All but three of these defendants have been sentenced for their crimes and only two convicted traffickers went to trial, while the rest pleaded guilty, according to court records.

The longest sentence to be handed down by a district court judge since 2006 was to Dennis Paris, who received 30 years for his role as the lead trafficker in a conspiracy that included nine other defendants all indicted in March 2006.

And for the women indicted and subsequently sentenced for their crimes as bottoms, moving on is not easy.

McKenzie said she has worked with countless women through in her fight against human trafficking who struggle to find housing or gain employment because of their federal criminal

records. McKenzie said she has struggled to secure places to live and jobs because of her federal record, despite never serving any prison time.

“How can we say we want victims of trafficking to move forward... but we’re still faced with those same challenges as if you were behind bars,” McKenzie said. “That felony is standing in the way.”

While she understands that once she reached 18, in the eyes of the law, she was supposed to be held responsible for her actions as a bottom, McKenzie said fighting back was not as easy as simply saying no.

“There’s no way I can say, ‘No I’m not going to do that,’ because there’s consequences for that. And those consequences are extreme,” McKenzie said, adding that she had been threatened at gunpoint by Davis when she refused to do his bidding.

“Given support, survivors can move on to be contributing members of society,” McKenzie said. “I am lucky to be in a position where I have this organization. But every survivor is not like me.”

*Editor’s note: This story has been update since it was first posted, to clarify the anti-trafficking work done by Shamere McKenzie.*