

SALLIE'S STORY

# CAN A PROSTITUTE BE REDEEMED?

BY CHARLES CHANDLER

## Former madam of prostitution ring transformed

**S**ix female inmates in orange jumpsuits are led from their 8-by-10 cells into a larger room at the Mecklenburg County Jail in Charlotte, N.C. Sallie Saxon is waiting for them, Bible in hand. It's Sunday morning. The women scowl, but Sallie isn't fazed. She knows just how it feels to be in jail—the cold, the flip flops with no socks, the loneliness, the constant sound of the guards' keys clanging. It was right here, in this same room with the dull yellow cinder block walls and a tiny barred window, that Sallie came each Sunday morning for Bible study in late 2007.

► **BACK THEN, SHE WAS ONE** of the most infamous inmates in North Carolina. Known as the "South Park Madam," she had been arrested for running what federal agents called the most successful prostitution ring in the country. It operated from some of Charlotte's swankiest hotels and served a client list that included prominent, wealthy businessmen from the city and outside the region.

Sallie, 64, begins to tell the women in orange jumpsuits her story, how she spent nearly two years in federal prison

after her time in jail. She passes around two photographs of herself—one before surrendering to Jesus and the other after. The contrast is striking.

"I know what it's like to feel dirty and disgusted," she says.

Sallie's early years were littered with pain and unanswered questions. Born to a 16-year-old girl, she grew up not knowing her father's identity.

She lived most of the time with her grandparents, who provided a Christian environment. Sallie watched Billy

Graham sermons on TV with her grandmother and went forward to receive Christ at age 8 during Mr. Graham's 1958 evangelistic Crusade in Charlotte.

But Sallie was repeatedly devastated by her broken relationship with her mother and stepfather. During her visits with them, her stepfather would physically abuse her, sometimes while her mother watched. He would hurl insults at her and predict that she would become a prostitute. He angrily beat Sallie with a belt after she became pregnant at age 19 and refused his demand to get an abortion. She subsequently spent three weeks in the hospital, barely avoiding a miscarriage.

Sallie had no intention of following the path her stepdad predicted, but his words planted destructive seeds.

"If you don't have your family's blessing, you have problems," she says. "I felt

like an outcast, betrayed and unloved."

Sallie married the man who fathered her baby boy, but soon he was off to Vietnam with the Army. He returned with severe mental problems and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Many times, he physically abused her and her son, causing her to have broken ribs, a cracked nose, chipped teeth, black eyes, neck injuries and dislocated shoulders.

After receiving extended psychiatric treatment, Sallie divorced her husband and struggled to make a living for her family. In addition to their son, the couple also had a daughter.

Desperate for income, she agreed to a proposal from a wealthy businessman to entertain him and his associates. She knew it was wrong, but she followed that path into nearly 30 years of prostitution, eventually becoming a madam overseeing hundreds of prostituted women serving more than 2,000 clients.

"Most of the time, it was about the money, and I could never get enough," she says.

But being in the business was humiliating.

"You feel so used. The men will literally throw their money on you and say, 'I paid for you. I bought you.'"

As the years progressed, Sallie came under increasing conviction from the Holy Spirit, to the point that she became more tormented by her own sin than by anything anyone else had ever done to her.

She no longer took solace in her attempts to protect her employees' safety.

On multiple occasions, she tried to shut down the escort business, but received veiled threats from her clients.

One afternoon in 2007, she sat in her bathtub, ready to take more than 200 Valium pills she had accumulated. Why had God allowed so many terrible things to happen to her, and where had He been during her suffering?

"God, where are You right now?" she cried out.

Suddenly, she sensed a whispered response: "I am here."

And just as quickly, she was filled with hope. She no longer felt alone and was infused with a belief that God

would make a way out for her and her husband Don, who worked full-time for a dental company but sometimes ran business errands for her.

About two months later, FBI agents showed up at their door to arrest both of them. Rather than being distressed, Sallie told the agents, "I'm free!"

During her first few weeks at the Mecklenburg County Jail, she was overcome with brokenness. Every vile thing she had ever done, every action that had caused other women to be violated, passed before her eyes. Her grief was so deep that she sobbed and vomited for days, repenting over and over again and rededicating her life to the Lord.

She cooperated wholeheartedly with judicial authorities, confessing fully at her sentencing hearing.

"I have failed my husband, my chil-

**"I want to serve God for His glory, and I want people to know that the chains of bondage can be broken. I want them to know that there is hope and healing."**

—Sallie Saxon

dren, my family and my community," she told Judge Frank Whitney. "The sorrow and regret I feel cannot be expressed by words alone ... I offer no excuses ... I stand before you guilty."

Sallie was sentenced to 24 months in a federal prison for women in Lexington, Ky. Don was sentenced to 21 months in a men's prison in Bennettville, N.C.

While in the Kentucky prison, Sallie continued to draw closer to God, taking advantage of every evangelistic opportunity to lead inmates to Christ. Don had accepted Jesus shortly after the couple's arrest in 2007 and ministered to men

during his incarceration.

Upon their release in 2009, both quickly immersed themselves in discipleship and enthusiastically serving the Charlotte community.

Their transformation is unquestionable.

"There's just a radiance about them," says Mark Harris, their close friend and pastor at Charlotte's First Baptist Church. "There's a sense of calm and peace that the Lord has guided them. They continue to bear much fruit and to impact people in all walks of life."

Don became a deacon and has participated in a men's jail ministry. Sallie leads a weekly Bible study at the Dove's Nest women's addiction recovery center. She speaks at church events and loves her visits to the Mecklenburg County Jail, where she shared her testimony that Sunday with the six female inmates in orange jumpsuits.

Sallie could relate to those women, who, like her, had been so stained by the brokenness and heartache that the enemy had used to lure them into a life of crime. She understood the scowls on their faces. She knew why the sight of a man's hand could make them think of pain and betrayal. But because of what Christ had done for her and Don, she was able to tell them that the hands of Jesus hold no harm; that they are gentle, loving and true.

One woman, after Sally's proclamation of the Gospel, cried out in repentance: "I can't take this anymore! I've got to do this today!"

Sallie led the woman in the sinner's prayer and gave her tissues to wipe away the tears.

This is the Sallie Saxon of today—redeemed, filled with joy in Christ and blessed with a fruitful ministry to hurting women.

"I want to serve God for His glory, and I want people to know that the chains of bondage can be broken," she says. "I want them to know that there is hope and healing."

Her new life is an example. "My past doesn't define me," she says. "I was bought with a price by a Savior, not by man's money." ©2015 BGEA