

DECEMBER 11, 2015 BY [CAMILA CIBILS](#)

No More Sexual Exploitation, Says Jackson Heights Artist

VOICES of NY



Deborah Wasserman (Photo by Francena Ottley for Voices of NY)

A woman with a mask made of paper pieces, most depicting women's body parts, was standing on Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights last September. Wearing a short, tight, shiny dress and a blond, tangled wig, she handed out colorful cards with feminine figures, text and a telephone number.

"No longer your chica," read the cards — a reference to the infamous chica cards commonly handed out on Roosevelt Avenue to advertise prostitutes. The cards get their name from the distributors who offer them to passersby, muttering "Chica, chica," or "girls, girls." They usually show women with skimpy clothing and offer a telephone number for "free delivery."

But the number on these new cards — 917-732-7622 — gives callers something different: a four-minute voicemail in English and Spanish that says in part: "I'm your sister, your daughter, your next-door neighbor. I'm a woman."

The woman in the mask is Deborah Wasserman, an artist and performer from the neighborhood, who wants to raise awareness about sexual exploitation of women and speak out about what she refuses to accept as natural. In the past year, the Human Trafficking Intervention Court of Queens referred almost 140 women to counseling at Mount Sinai's Program Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation. Now, she is planning the same performance, but a massive one, again on Roosevelt Avenue.

Wasserman, originally from Brazil and raised in Israel, moved from Williamsburg to Jackson Heights six years ago. She was shocked by the sexual exploitation she saw in her new neighborhood. "It was a very powerful experience for me and also upsetting that all this is happening so close to where I live," she said.

Naia, 10, and Eliana, 8, are her two daughters.

"You looked crazy," said Naia to her mother about the performance. And she added her impression about the mask: "It looked like the faces of nobody."

Wasserman, who declined to disclose her age, says she worries about younger generations not only as an artist and a mother but also as an art educator. She has taught at the Guggenheim Museum in NYC and currently runs the children's space Art for a Start in Jackson Heights.

On only one block of Roosevelt Avenue, near 77th Street, at least three bars display faded posters on their entrances. The posters offer "pretty and pleasant dancers" and Central American models.

"It is really the epicenter of human trafficking and sexual exploitation throughout the entire state," said state Sen. Jose Peralta, a Democrat whose district includes Jackson Heights.

He sponsored a law, passed in 2011, to ban the chica cards.

Usually, when the police arrest a woman on prostitution charges, the Human Trafficking Intervention Court requires counseling instead of community services or fines, according to Rita Abadi, the operations manager for the Mount Sinai Sexual Assault and Violence Intervention Program (SAVI) in Queens.

“They are mostly foreign-born women who worked in what is called delivery,” said Abadi. “Men call a number and they get a woman delivered to their houses or hotels.”

The majority of women arrested in New York City share a past of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Many are victims of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, or are forced to resort to survival sex when they are in extreme need and have no other means to survive, Abadi explained.



Chica card handed out by Wasserman

Wasserman created the “No longer your chica” performance for The Queens Art Intervention on Sept. 20, an event that showcased the work of 10 artists in outdoor spaces around Queens.

Now she's working to expand her project. She plans to produce a performance with at least 20 women from her neighborhood, including former victims of sex trafficking and advocacy groups. This spring, they will stand in pairs on the corners of Roosevelt Avenue wearing masks and handing out the mock chica cards.

"We will try to get attention to the problem, so these women can get more assistance or legal protection," Wasserman said. She has applied for a grant from the Queens Council on the Arts for the project.

Sen. Peralta believes that this kind of artistic expression could make people more willing to denounce exploitation to the police. "It's not ignoring the issue, and to say that is just part of Roosevelt Avenue, but also get engaged, involved and say something to the police department."

"Every form of information or expression about the subject is good; it helps," said Abadi about Wasserman's work. "There is an education that we need to do, not only about prostitution or sexual trafficking, but also inequity and poverty."

During Wasserman's last performance, seven policemen and firefighters suddenly surrounded her.

"Do you have suicidal thoughts? Do you take any drugs?" they asked her. Finally they left after realizing it was an artistic event.

Wasserman's work touches on issues of exploitation, gender inequality, power and immigration. And she is an immigrant trying to engage her community in a problem rife among them.

"I don't make laws and I don't have the power to change the whole reality," she said. "But just by being there, wearing my mask and my cards, I can open a little window."

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