

Rhea Coombs, a 32-year-old charity worker, used to be called Angel and ran a south London crack house. Diane Taylor, who has written a book on her life, describes the remarkable story of a woman who hit rock bottom but lived to tell the tale

FIRST met Angel on a park bench in Soho Square, central London on a hot summer's day in 2004. These days she has a professional, responsible job and goes by her real name of Rhea Coombs. When we met she was still tethered, although increasingly loosely, to the world of drugs and prostitution, where she was universally known as Angel.

On that day in Soho, as students, tourists and staff from nearby shops lounged on the grass chatting and sunbathing, Angel was in a serious frame of mind. I was writing an article with a colleague for *The Guardian* about the grave shortcomings in support for a group of vulnerable sex workers 'rescued' from crack houses in south London. She was amongst them and had agreed to meet me to talk about her concerns.

She was 30 then and her hair was cropped and bleached white blonde. After a while her teenage son joined us. She was overjoyed to see him and she checked anxiously that he had been working hard at school.

EMERGING

I didn't realise then that I was seeing Angel at a key moment in her life. She was emerging from a dark, chaotic period in which she had sold sex on the street and ran a crack house. She had a heavy class A habit and, unable to cope with looking after her son and her younger daughter, had handed them over to her daughter's father and his family. It was a move that left her distraught and sent her spiralling into deeper and deeper despair and heavier and heavier drug use to blot out the pain of her loss.

When we met she was stable on a Subutex script. In a bid to leave the world of prostitution and crack houses behind her, Angel had got back in touch with her children and was looking at being trained as a hairdresser.

At this first meeting she talked little of those things, more concerned about the bad experience that she and other women had had with the programme of support they received following a large police operation to close down south London crack houses. After this group of women had been

put together in a so called 'recovery programme' some found that their drug use and the amount of prostitution they needed to engage in to fund it had escalated.

As we chatted, Angel said dreamily that an awful lot had happened to her in her life and that she wouldn't mind writing a book about it some day. I had been told by the source who put me in touch with her that at one point she had run a crack house – a highly unusual position for a woman to reach in the male-oriented world of crack house dealers. I said that if she ever decided to do a book that I'd love to help her with it.

The conversation went no further. The article appeared, enraged the organisation it criticised and Angel and I moved on. But last year (2006) an opportunity arose to work on a book together. Angel was keen and we got a contract with Virgin to write the book. A lot had changed in Angel's life since our first meeting.

She hasn't used drugs for more than two years, has a responsible job working as a women's outreach worker at Spires, a south London-based charity which supports homeless people, drug users and women involved in prostitution, and is back with her children. Her son lives with her full time and she shares custody of her daughter with her daughter's father and his family.



“They told her that hers was the nicest crack house they had ever been into”

ROOTLESS

Her first memories were of her free-spirited mother who experimented with alternative living in Wales, Germany, Portugal and south London. Later she and her mother settled in Bristol. While her mother hung out with the love and peace brigade munching on macrobiotic food and home-brewed alcohol, she yearned for a more conventional lifestyle – craving white socks and black patent shoes at primary school instead of the flower power waistcoats and corduroy trousers her mother dressed her in.

Throughout her childhood she experienced a powerful sense of “unbelonging” and a hollow, empty space inside her, a feeling which many drug users report in their early years.

Back from



Teenage rebellion followed. At the age of 14 she began selling cannabis in the school toilets, an early taste of her later experience of running a crack house. She began missing school and often sneaked out of her bathroom window clutching a bottle of vodka when her mother grounded her. She had a one-off experience of street prostitution to please a boyfriend who complained that she wasn't earning any money. At the age of 16 she gave birth to her son. His father became violent and she escaped with her son to London. Her sense of not having a place in the world continued and she became involved in the clubbing scene, necking large quantities of ecstasy pills. She developed an addiction to base speed, which she stirred into her morning tea every morning.

A period working as a hostess in a Soho clip joint followed. Then she met her daughter's father, who wasn't a drug user, and stabilised for a while. But she parted from him before her daughter was two and began using crack. As her drug habit spiralled she found it increasingly difficult to look after her children and eventually, after a malevolent crack user attached to a colostomy bag moved into her home and refused to leave, she had to call on her daughter's father to eject him from her home. Seeing the bad state she was in, he said he would have to take the children for a while until she could straighten herself out.

HOUSE PROUD

Grief at the loss of her children made her seek out chemical oblivion. Her crack habit increased and her life became a non-stop to-ing and fro-ing between the street, where she sold sex, and the crack house, where she bought her drugs. She became friendly with a dealer called DP who ran a crack house in south London – a teetotal, non-drug using health fanatic who urged her to follow his clean living path. He trained her to run his crack house for him and for a while she did this successfully. She parcelled up the rocks for sale, stuck by DP's rules of giving absolutely no one any credit for their drugs. When she wasn't supervising her mini-empire, she scrubbed the

A girl called Rhea:
 Below clubbing in Bristol
 Left with her daughter in the 1990s
 Bottom with her son in her late teens



house clean and occasionally cooked meals for the selective group of crackheads who DP allowed into the house. They all complimented her on the ambience of the place. They told her that hers was the nicest crack house they had ever been into.

However after a few months of heady power, and smoking away all the crack profits she made from dealing, she ran away in a fit of sleep-deprived and crack-induced paranoia – convinced that DP was out to get her.

She started to live on the streets and in a series of crack houses and decided to try heroin. Before long she had a large habit and began speedballing. She became increasingly despairing. Her attempts to fill up the empty space inside her and become a fully paid-up member of the world had failed and she was moving further and further away from her children.

MOTIVATION

As she used more and more drugs she hit the proverbial rock bottom and decided that she hated what drugs were doing to her more than she loved the temporary buzz they provided. She decided that her only chance of happiness and stability lay in giving up drugs and booked herself into detox. She left before she'd completed the programme and relapsed. But the yearning to get clean continued. She was offered temporary accommodation in east London, a world away from all her dealer and user contacts south of the river, and jumped at the chance of moving. She went cold turkey and joined a 12-step programme. Motivated by the knowledge that if she stabilised she would be able to get her children back, she didn't falter this time. She took a series of slow and steady steps out of the world of drugs and arrived at the point she's at today.

Angel's story, of addiction, of belonging and failing to belong, is unique because the voices of women involved in street prostitution and drug dealing are rarely heard. Instead harsh stereotypes abound in the media. Her ambition for the book is that it will soften the attitudes of those who pass judgment on women who get involved in prostitution to support a drug habit: "If just one person who scowls at shivering, drug addicted women standing on street corners waiting for punters reads this book and shows some kindness instead, I'll be happy." ●

**My Name Is Angel by Rhea Coombs with Diane Taylor is published by Virgin on 25 January at £14.99*

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