

## **CONVERSATIONS:**

### **an interview with a sex worker**

What are my goals in presenting this interview on the sex industry. Over my 20 years of counseling I have discovered that a fair section of clients that one comes across are involved in the sex industry. They are either consumers of the sex industry or workers in it such as sex workers (prostitutes), exotic dancers, strippers, pornographers and so on. In any counseling accurate information about any industry a client may be in is a great help. My goal is to find some of this accurate information and put it in print in the TA TIMES.

However the sex industry is very difficult to get such information about. Most providers of such information have another agenda. For example, information from the government is clouded by it being a sensitive political issue. Community groups ranging from the church to Phoenix have their particular agenda to push. The media over the past few decades has become as much an entertainment industry as an information industry. This is not meant to be an attack on journalists. In recent times the news has become a very profitable resource. Huge corporations make large profits off news. So when the journalist presents the facts to their employer it enters the news presenting machinery and is styled and groomed and packaged so it comes out as "info-tainment".

All this leaves the counselor lost for some good quality information. So I endeavored to cut out all the 'middle men' and get some information from someone at the coal face of the industry. I ended up with an interview of a friend of mine who has had a long association with the sex industry. However, I now also find myself in the news business by doing this newsletter. To avoid myself presenting info-tainment I have presented what she has said in its raw, unsophisticated form. I have not 'cut & pasted' or jazzed it up with flash editing. I have given you what she wrote.

What is her motive for answering my questions. She did it because she was my friend ( she has never been a client of mine and for that matter I have never been a client of hers), and she wants to show how it can be a damaging industry. So her motives seem fairly clear and of course this is one woman's view and is presented from her frame of reference. Despite this I feel it is good quality information that hopefully will assist people to counsel those involved in the sex industry.

What I got from her however was much more than I had bargained for. I was moved to tears a number of times when I read this statement by my friend. Initially I was going to have a new section in the TA TIMES where I interviewed some one of interest - a question and answer type thing. After reading her statement I have not even bothered to include my questions as they just do not seem 'right'. In fact I find them embarrassing as they are so trivial compared to her answers.

As I mentioned before I have included her statement word for word. The only editing was to remove her name and the name of two others she mentions. I have even included her covering letter to me - in *italics*.

(Note: In Q 2 she states that over 20 years she has only been a sex worker for 3 of those. I have know her for at least the last 3 years and she has worked part time for that time. So the 3 years she refers to must be for full time sex work.)

What does it all mean?

On television one sees these adventure/endurance documentaries. Programs which document adventures of people trying to be the first ones to walk to the south pole in the middle of winter. Even taking away the physical endurance of my friend, she leaves such "south pole walkers" in her dust as far as a test of the endurance of the mind or psyche. The assaults on her psyche, the daily brutalizations on her mind which she has endured and she comes through relatively intact, is remarkable. For her to be able to write such an honest and authentic statement means that her Free Child has survived reasonably well. A true feat of endurance.

She is a testimony to the human will to survive - Physis. That driving force in humans towards growth and survival is shown in its raw form by my friend. The fact that she can suffer terrible, ongoing brutalizations of her psyche over two decades by the opposite sex and still maintain a relatively balanced view of men, deserves applause. In this day where anti male rhetoric comes at least relatively easily, as a male it is refreshing to hear a female say the reality of the situation - some men are OK and some men are not OK.

Even after all she has been through with a specific section of the male community, as she says, "most of my friends are men". From what I know of her this is true and she routinely speaks of her male friends in a positive fashion.

I hoped you are touched by this statement from a fine woman.

## Interview

Dear Tony,

*I think it is a worthwhile project, putting together an article.*

*I thought I welcomed this opportunity but have found it very distressing & had to erase vast chunks of stuff where my own bitterness at what became of me through my own gullibility has overtaken my ability to even stick to the subject.*

*Hopefully Phoenix (1) could help further.*

*This discussion paper from Norm Kelly (2) (enclosed) I recall was pretty good too, once I recovered from his opening premise that the community needed and expected the services of a "labour-force of cock suckers" for its gentlemen. OK my words. But it is a bizarre assumption to make, I believe. The rest is mainly about the new legislation.*

*I've learnt from this, but I'm not there yet I guess I can't be dispassionate about an 'industry' that chews up & spits people out.*

*Good. That's it now,*

*Love*

*#####*

(1) Phonex is an organization that provides sex industry workers with support, information and education on all areas of the sex industry.

(2) Hon Norm Kelly MLC. Australian Democrats. "Discussion Paper - Reform and regulation of the sex industry in Western Australia"

Dear Tony

My answers would be a lot more detailed if I knew who was reading your article. TA people quite likely have amongst their number people who have used/do use the services of sex workers or people who have worked in the industry themselves, or even people who I have seen professionally. It makes me pretty nervous that there is even the slightest possibility that my answers might identify me to these people, so they will be more constrained than I would really like them to be. For instance, the fact that I worked over a span of 20 years, even if for a tiny fraction of that time overall,

might tend to identify me to past clients, as not many women stay associated with the industry this long.

Q1: How old ... ? (and yes, 'sex worker' is preferred way of referring to people in this occupation)

I was 21 when I first worked.

Q2: I was involved over some years, however, if you added up the actual periods when I worked, either 'at the pointy end' or in management, it would not add up to more than perhaps 3 years. I used to burn out really fast.

Q3: My impression is that the greatest number of sex workers would be found working in 'houses' or 'parlours', but that it is almost impossible to estimate how many this would be. Only the taxation department could supply accurate information on this as bodgy IDs are frequently accepted but tax file numbers have to be real and have to be supplied to employers. An establishment could support a handful of irregulars at most, and runs a risk in doing so. Many of these workers circulate around the different studios for a while and then drop out. Some go private after meeting up with suitable co-workers through the houses.

I think the next biggest group would be the private workers ('solo operators'). They are obviously the hardest to keep track of. They used to be pressured to register with the vice squad but it was not a legal requirement. The taxation department and the West Australian Newspaper, which is the only effective way of advertising, would be the only sources of reasonably accurate numbers that I could see. Some private workers have long-standing regular clientele and so do not advertise at all, but the number of contacts occurring this way would be small even though the number of 'semi-retired' workers operating might be great.

'Escort' workers are sometimes the same women who staff the houses, and sometimes a discrete group who only visit clients and do not have their own premises. They would be perhaps the next biggest group, although I'm not up to date on that. Their numbers certainly surged during the latter years of the 'containment policy', when 'licences' (not in the normal sense of the word, more like 'the nod' in fact) were given to a static number of premises

and changed hands for exorbitant amounts of money. Once containment began to crumble and 'massage parlours' began to proliferate as the main way of side-stepping containment I think there was a trend for workers to prefer the relative safety and comfort and more sociable hours to be had working this way and escort numbers probably declined. This along with changes in economic conditions which tended to see overseas/interstate visitors and northwest workers staying in hotels on R & R diminish in numbers.

Street workers would be a numerically small group in Perth, I believe. I'm afraid I know nothing about them.

I've worked in escort, in houses, in reception in both of these and as a solo worker.

Q4: Phoenix would have good info on ratios. To me it would appear that by far the largest group are female, that about 5-10% are male and perhaps 2% identify themselves as transexual or other. This could be wildly inaccurate of course as the number of males who work 'beats' would be very hard to estimate. They are pretty invisible to us girls.

Q5: Good information on who is charging what is really hard for women to come by. A male voice is all that is required to ascertain this. Sometimes you can be told in great detail exactly what is available and for how much - ring a private girl for this. Other times, as in a massage studio, the receptionist is only able to keep repeating the same information in different ways hoping that you will catch on. That is, all they are allowed to quote to you are the basic massage charges. They are not at liberty to discuss whether or not 'extras' are available or how much they might cost, so the client might be disappointed if he assumed that all massage workers offered 'full service' (intercourse), as they don't. Studios seem to go through phases. There are times when management is extremely edgy and adheres to the rules, at others they find ways of pressuring staff into providing all requested services by, for instance, insisting that they be available for both in-house and escort work. (Escort is almost invariably full-service.)

Then there are the preferences of individuals workers. Trusted reliable girls or outstandingly attractive ones who refuse to provide full service keep

their jobs if management values them for these reasons. I have worked in reception in these places. The clients just have to take pot luck really, on their first visit. Who knows why a place is run conservatively at one time and then seems to openly flaunt the rules at others?

Q6: Personally, my motivation for becoming a sex worker on the first occasion was sheer financial desperation, and a lack of perceived alternatives. At later times I contrasted my long hours and lowly pay regular job (with a bit sexual harassment commonly thrown in) with the kind of money I could make in sex work and the ability to work my own hours and there was just no contest. I hated the job but believed that a person could get used to anything with time and discipline.

I have heard of practically no other reason for women entering into this kind of work. I have never, for instance, heard any women say she was doing it for sex, although once I heard a boy state that this was his motivation.

Q7: A big question. Lots of things happen to your self-esteem.

Self-esteem derived from how attractive you are to the opposite sex can be boosted. Sex workers are seldom ugly but neither, on average, are they exceptionally beautiful. They are marketed as this however, by their employer, or if they are private workers, they have to claim this themselves. If you didn't claim to be really beautiful, the seasoned punters would assume that you were in fact the opposite, they are so used to being hyped, if not downright lied to. This is equivalent to affirmations or something?

You get to wear beautiful clothes. The pleasure from that quickly fades when you realise that clients have truly dreadful taste however. Because they only appreciate 'tacky' in most cases you begin to adjust your wardrobe accordingly. And because its horrible to have a greasy, sweaty gorilla try to hug you when you are wearing an expensive dryclean-only gown, your outfits get tinier and tackier and you learn to dance out of their way before getting them into the shower.

Self esteem can also be boosted by taking more control over your life, e.g. picking your way through the maze of obstructions that the law places in front of you. Getting your own place going with all those false references on

the rental agreement and your bogus ID on the mobile phone etc takes a bit of doing. You find ways of feeling that you have the reins of your life in your own hands. (If only it were really so.)

Of course the biggest potential for lifting your self esteem is to find yourself with lots of money. This happens for some, but most achieve modest, at best, financial goals, such as getting out of debt or getting enough money to buy things for their kids that supporting mothers, who represent an enormous part of the industry, can't usually afford. For many women the money that they make disappears as fast as it comes as they try to make themselves feel better after the indignities they have had to endure to get it. High living I suppose you would call it. Of course for some that includes quite a bit on recreational drugs. Many support boyfriends financially. Long spells of unemployment between stints of sex work dries up the gains for others as their skills and contacts for other kinds of work get out of date.

To get back to self-esteem - others you interview can give the positives. For me, it was a huge net drain on my self esteem. I don't like the way seemingly ordinary men change when they are with a prostitute. I have seen enough of men 'behaving badly' because they think that we are some sort of nature's antidote to feminism. They behave appallingly and you have to just take it. Don't tell me you don't have to take it, you do. You can take steps to make sure that you never see the particular person again, you can make a complaint about them to management or take it further, but when there is just you and the client in the room, you have to take it and you better smile while you do. You are not empowered, you are vulnerable no matter what nonsense management are telling you to keep you turning up for shifts.

For example, the client who comes through the door tongue first and tries to shove it down your throat. You can tell him that isn't allowed, in fact nothing is allowed until money has changed hands, but if he doesn't like it he can and will do numerous things to get you back. I have had clients I have turned away make multiple follow up appointments under false names (thinking I would perhaps not recognise them?) believing that they can demand to be seen because I am a 'public facility' (no joke). The kind of response this deserves you do not dare deliver, tempting as it might be to have somebody ugly intervene on your behalf, because this just ups the ante.

In the end, you are vulnerable. Disgruntled clients smash cars, urinate on doors, dob-in to neighbours, tie-up phone lines and paint graffiti on buildings, go to elaborate lengths to set-up bogus appointments for large chunks of time at distant locations. This is just a few of the things I have seen, and I have never worked anywhere but the supposedly top studios, or privately. These are not thugs with tattoos these are men who are perhaps going through divorce or god knows what and simply must not be made to feel humiliated in any way. Of course you can handle things very comfortably with most men, should they overstep the mark in some way, but these sorts of reactions above are far from rare and always leave you apprehensive once you have encountered them. In theory you are in control, in practice you dare not speak sternly ever. It is extremely draining absorbing their anti-women jokes, their constant attempts to push the physical limits of what you allow and don't, their reluctance to accept your need to finish the session on time if they have not completed the deed, their attempts to find out personal details about you, their pathetic lack of insight into why their wives or girlfriends are undersexed (unlike you, they will claim, secure in the knowledge that you are a nympho and their own partners are 'frigid'). Feeling frequently annoyed and occasionally disgusted by someone and powerless to reflect this back to them is not what I call good for self esteem. Making sure they don't get subsequent appointments is insufficient to normalise the way you feel after meeting this type.

Tony this is getting me upset and I sound a bit crazy. I really wanted to do this because I am incensed that a lot of worthwhile ideas such as harm minimisation, promoting self-pride in workers and keeping them visible and reachable by taking a 'pro' attitude towards their work rather than 'anti' are very worthwhile, but people sometimes seem to take the ideology too far. It is not a great job. It is a dirty, dangerous, depersonalising job where one section on the female population take all the crap their more secure, affluent and self-respecting sisters are no longer prepared to put up with. (PLEASE QUOTE ME).

The media often try to make it seem in someway perversely, glamorous. They show women calling on attractive men in penthouses. Saxophone music seems to follow them around. The women are self-possessed and beautiful and they don't take no crap. It just isn't like this.

Apologies perhaps to 'The Bill' and some of their ilk. They at least put it a little more realistically. Elizabeth Shue and Nicholas Cage in 'Leaving Las Vegas' I think it was have a scene where ... Oh, I think I'll just leave it here.

My problem is I want to be heard - because of what happened to me when as you know, I was blackmailed and stalked by the client who had become my accountant (and was therefore able to blackmail me) and then raped and left for dead by a serial rapist. I will probably never get over this. I can't speak coherently about it and it looks like writing is no easier, but even if I were able to put it all down it is too personal to just let anybody know about it. But without them knowing about it, people will just switch off to the ranting tone of my warnings. I think this is why other sex workers who have been injured physically or psychologically are not speaking out. You want to, but you just can't, it's too personal, too horrific and you just feel it in your bones that they don't want to know anyway. Was I just incredibly unlucky? No. There are so many other horror stories. But people never believe it will happen to them. I was never confrontational with clients. I was too well aware that I could not afford to be. But look what happened to me. How can any sane person, who might counsel their own daughter not walk the dog after dark, inside the same skull entertain the idea that sex work is OK?

Nothing I can say about the sex industry will not be coloured by my own experiences. Who will objectively put the case 'against' then? I don't know. It just annoys me so much to see irresponsible people like my ex-friend ##### talking-up an industry in which they have never worked.

Q 11 I've taken a break. Going to try to whiz through to the end.

Yes, the sex does become secondary at times. If a client is good at respecting your boundaries, the emotional contact is fine for both sides. But if it starts to become an exchange between you, you have made a big mistake. I can't bear having to then perform, after I have allowed the person to meet some of the real me. It is a terrible invasion then and I have had to discontinue seeing these men unless their is enough there to base an out of hours, non-sexual friendship on, which sometimes happens.

Regular clients become so for some of these reasons: Stated disappointments regarding other workers + reluctance to continue expensive

experimentation. Particular needs which they familiarise you with - e.g. cross dressers, S & M etc. Locality and times of availability. And most commonly - so they can push the limits a bit. Always trying to get extra time, discounts, special treatment (e.g. kissing) and some will try to get you to allow them to not use a condom. Some just get attached. Some are regulars for a while, drift off elsewhere for a while and then return.

Q12 I have seen partners drop girls off at work. I have heard of married women working. Most I have spoken to feel tremendously burdened. They feel they are getting the family's finances fixed up and at the same time having to emotionally 'carry' themselves and their husbands because the men feel ashamed, jealous, turned-on and all sorts of other strong emotions about their partners working. Personally I was never able to have a boyfriend at the times I was working. When I tried it I found that I could not bear strangers touching me, whereas when I was without a boyfriend I was able to dissociate from my body more and found it mostly bearable, sometimes disgusting and sometimes mildly to moderately stimulating.

Tony -this is the best I can do. I hope there are some useful bits that you can re-work for your article. Could I check with you before anything is printed please?

Q8: Left out on purpose - how to answer this to a man who is a friend without causing offence? The fact is however that I don't feel the industry changed my attitude to men, it just reinforced it. What I hoped for was that it would give me some understanding of the way men worked. I went into it straight from the awful situation with #####. I had admired him tremendously and just could not assimilate his sexually predatory behaviour with the person who I had thought him to be. All the industry did was slowly disabuse me of the idea that there was any mystery to solve. Men can be fine human beings. I enjoy their company and there are men I have loved and do love. I have more men friends than women. But I consider that where hormones have a hand in it, it is not possible to feel safe around them. If I had not worked in the sex industry I would probably be more like women friends who beat themselves up all the time for 'attracting the wrong sort of man'. I have seen enough to sadly conclude that where male hormones influence behaviour you'd better not expect too much insight or self control or honorable behaviour.

This in no way applies to you. Each time I thought my friendship with you has been beyond salvage something nice has happened instead, and my gratitude to you for this is why I have the courage to admit to the above.

I think my reactions to bad behaviour from men have been amplified by my experiences, that is undeniable. But the smaller insults that accrue from working in the sex industry seem to make most of the women I have talked pretty despondent about the opposite sex. Just one small illustration - when working privately it is nothing for a whole days appointments not to show up. And not to ring. This could happen for days, until you start to get some regulars. And as for how they speak to you on the phone, I don't know if I could adequately describe how caller after caller manages to be crude, slimy, and patronising all at once. Not all callers. Some are fine, some are polite and businesslike, some sound charming. And then when these ones also fail to turn up..... Well, what can you conclude? A new private worker takes hundreds, yes hundreds of 'enquiries' in a week if she has the stomach to consistently answer the phone. There can't be too many men out there being faithful. And there aren't even that many who are able to be civil. All you can conclude that is that they hate us somehow for what we do. I will never understand.

There were good times and good guys. There was just so much shit handed out.