

daring to dabble

sex worker advocacy burnout



e x-PCV Guru Keith Gilbert looks at the way working in a Sex Worker Organisation effects the lives of those who dare to dabble....

remember me? It's been about a year since I left PCV: I was Co-ordinator for a year (including editor of the magazine) and before that I was Boys Project Worker for three years. Yes it's Keith aka Miss Informed aka half of Anara. I found Deb's article ('Deb's Departure'-WG#18) very moving: it's a rare experience to work in prostitutes' rights and support, and it's very difficult to make the decision to leave. Out of thousands of sex industry workers, why is it that only a handful of us are advocates? The answer is quite simple: hookers crave anonymity, and rightly so.

The Madonna/whore stigma that every hooker has to deal with in the rooms or the bucket seats is so well described in Sabina's poem (WG #18). That stigma is magnified incredibly when you announce to a room full of doctors, community workers or cops..."I'm from the Prostitutes Collective..."

Chach(current Boys Project worker) and I got together during his recent trip to Sydney for the AFAO Gay Educators Conference and chewed the fat about the whole thing -the impact that working at PCV has on you; on your public, private and sexual personae.

Chach told me how he felt isolated walking into a room full of eighty gay educators. Although recent research suggests that twenty of them would have sex-worked at some time, only three people -all working in prostitutes rights groups-carried the prostitute label. And what a loaded label it is. Say: "My name is...I'm from the Prostitutes Collective..." and watch those mouths drop (in a strictly non-sexual way!). Listen to the pin. Drop. More to the point: listen to the clicking and whirring going on inside their heads:

"A prostitute. Wonder if he's a junkie"....."I'd like to get him in the sack before the conference is over (for free

of course.)...“What is he thinking?”...“I’m better looking than that”...“ I thought I’d gotten away from the industry”...“ I wonder if he’s better in bed than me”...“Must give good head”...“ I wonder if he’s better in bed than my lover”...“ I wonder if he’s better in bed than the prostitute I saw last week”...“ So that’s what a prostitute looks like”...“ How exotic”...“How disgusting-exploiting sex for money”...“A prostitute. What’s he doing at an AIDS Conference for gay men?”

Of course, these thoughts are never so clearly verbalised, but it can’t be ascribed to mere paranoia.

If hooking teaches you one thing, it’s to trust your gut instinct. And in your guts you hear every word they are thinking, along with your own inner voice (a prostitute, what are you thinking?): “Chin up! Tits out! You’re a prostitute and they’re not!” Their mouths close again. Back to the business at hand. The chasm between you and the rest of the people in the room has been silently, efficiently established. Whether it’s you or them on the pedestal, you know: “I am a prostitute. They are not.” All

right, so it’s isolating work (and being a man in a mainly-womans’ organisation can be even further isolating: the sex industry is based on the polarisation of the sexes). But someone’s gotta do it. So what sort of impact can it have on you? Your privacy becomes paramount. You screen your phone calls. You avoid gay bars. You lose a lot of friends who just don’t understand when you say “I want to be alone.” Your sex life becomes a series of anonymous encounters (satisfying yet “standard”) because such a huge part of your private self is already public property. And besides, who’s got the time or energy to give to more-than- a-one-night-stand? And really, the bottom line is you just don’t trust men any more, with all their preconceived ideas of what you are: “A prostitute”...in a gay man’s clothing.

I needed anonymity so much after 4 years at PCV that I moved to a different city (Sydney). Of course, Jeff Kennett and the Melbourne weather helped me to make that decision. (Thanks Jeff. It’s the best

thing you’ve ever done. Actually, the only good thing as far as I can tell). But even now, a year later, when men find out what I used to do, their mouths will drop (not necessarily in a non-sexual way). And they think they can treat me any old how. The sad thing is: part of me thinks they can, too. (Time to re-learn those assertiveness and boundary setting skills . Take control!) Yep. Although I’m extremely proud of most of the work I did at PCV and in the sex industry, my self esteem took a battering at times.

The themes of sex work are the themes of PCV

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work: your privacy becomes incredibly important; you learn to take control; your boundaries are constantly being pushed; you do great work and please a lot of people; you take a lot of shit; you are deviant; you are loved; you are other; it’s not the work that fucks you over but the attitude of the people you come into contact with.

So, WHY DO IT? You do sex work for the money, but at about \$15 an hour before tax as a PCV Community Worker, the money’s not enough (regular though it is). The one true answer I know is: the people. Wonderful Gorgeous creatures like Deb Mayson. Yeah I’d spend top dollar for an hour with any of you!

And, like sex work, you do it while you can. While you can draw on resources that enable you to cop so much love, so much hatred, and so much self-questioning all in the one day.