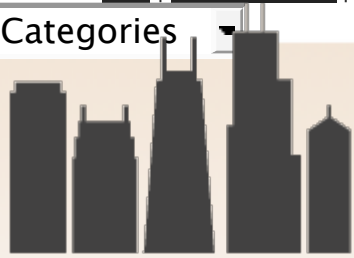


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The Great Porn Debate Comes to Chicago

As an occasional peruser of [adult](#) entertainment (**NSFW**), Chicagoist couldn't resist watching Ron "The Hedgehog" Jeremy debate Pastor Craig Gross about pornography last night at the [Lakeshore Theater](#).

As pastor of the [XXXChurch](#), Gross has been on a mission for the last five years. A mission not to eradicate pornography ("I don't want to shut down porn," says Pastor Craig), but to help people overcome what they consider a problem, like alcohol, drugs, or gambling. Jeremy, the legendary veteran of literally thousands of pornographic films, doesn't want to eradicate porn, either. "I like what he's doing," Jeremy tells the crowd. "Girls that don't belong in the industry, he helps to save them."

The debate opens in an unconventional sense, a traveling roadshow hosted in a venue known more for entertainment and comedy than academic discussion of serious issues. The dissonance doesn't end with the venue, however, as the moderator invites the crowd to text their questions to his laptop, and Jeremy comes to the podium with an armful of files and notes. Gross comes armed only with a notepad and a bottle of water.

Opening remarks make points that have been made before in such debates: "What happens in porn isn't what happens in real life" and "It's a matter of choice, with consensual sex between consenting adults, to be watched by consenting adults." The crowd laughs nervously as Gross reads a list of names women are called in pornography: "cum dumpster," "slut" and "whore." Jeremy asks the crowd how many people like anal sex or being ejaculated on, and who has watched porn with a partner. A smattering of hands go up to each question. Jeremy points out that while some people watch porn alone, some watch it as a couple, giving what he calls a "standing ovation": two people watching a porno and then deciding to try what they have seen.

As the forum moves on to its second half, taking questions from the crowd, a man in the back stands up and asks Jeremy who is actually responsible for the imagery in pornography, the sex industry or society at large. Jeremy answers that unrealistic images of women and sexuality saturates most mainstream media. "If that were the problem, then we should condemn Britney Spears, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Hell, I used to masturbate to 'Gilligan's Island!'"

Gross is asked if he is never going to "shut down porn," why bother? He replied that he isn't interested in stopping pornography, that people have a right to make that choice. He said that his ministry is focused more on helping people on their journey when they are ready to quit. Jeremy agreed with Gross on this point as well, challenging the minister to take on the entertainment industry as a whole, rather than focusing on the adult entertainment industry. "That's what's being marketed to young people today. We don't want anything to do with kids."

While the debate is interesting, it's the reactions that the topic elicits from the crowd that are most difficult to the participants. A man asked Gross if Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is pornographic, and two women in front challenged Gross as to what he thinks empowering women really means — can a woman really be empowered if your wife is cleaning your toilet at home? "Obviously you're pissed off about something," Gross replied, but then elaborated that being a schoolteacher or a letter carrier can be empowering, but selling your sexuality isn't. Jeremy was asked if he would support his daughter if she chose to work in the industry. "Many women in porn didn't go to college, and I would hope that my daughter would. I can't say that I would encourage her, but it's her choice, and if she did make that choice, I hope she would be more clever about it, working only with her boyfriend, or just with other women." Jeremy admitted that that question is his "Achilles Heel."

After the show, Chicagoist asked some of the people in attendance what they thought about the debate.

Martha Berner from Chicago and Alicia MacDonald (visiting from the Virgin Islands) were the two that asked Gross what he thought was empowering. "He talks about empowering women, but I don't think he knows what that means," Martha told us. "He didn't answer my question because he has no idea. Independence is empowering, for women, men, everyone."

Danielle Thornton from Chicago felt that nobody won or lost the debate. "They both want to see people treated ethically and treated well. It's just a question of how. I thought it was clear that they were friends, and I think that's a good thing. There are a lot of negative messages in pornography," but there are some positive ones as well. It's matter of perspective.

Katie and Kasha, two young women in their early twenties who came from Glen Ellyn to hear the debate ("There isn't much going on out there. After all, there's no Glen Ellynist, you know?") felt that the debate was more satisfying than they expected. "I kind of thought that I would feel awkward, that I would want to be alone after this," Katie told us. "Pastor Craig had a better sense of humor than I expected. He seemed like he wasn't trying to convert people," she told us. "He didn't address it as God or not. He was more real, and I liked that. I mean, it's a personal choice. Porn can be OK for people that are over 18, but I know some guys that have been watching it since they were 12, and they're creepy. It's like, 'Alright, we're friends, but stay five feet away from me.'" said Kasha.

As we walked west on Belmont to the Red Line, we wondered if what we saw was really a debate on the merits and faults of pornography, or part of a larger argument about the increasing commodification of people in Western society. Does presenting these views in this type of format actually reach anybody? If he didn't come off as so passionate and sincere, it would be hard to take Gross seriously. His website, his road tour, even his friendship with Jeremy ("with a Masters in Special Education, he's a qualified babysitter!") come off more as agit-prop than ministry. But herein lies the heart of Pastor Craig Gross' ministry: without saying so, he comes off as trying to live the life of

Christ of the Gospel of Luke; rather than sitting on a sanctimonious high horse condemning people in porn, Gross seems to embrace them, challenging the societal double-standard of sex work. He spoke of Ron Jeremy as a friend, saying that he was glad to know him, glad to introduce him to his friends and his wife, and even let him watch his children. Judging by the comments from the audience after the show, it seemed that the crowd got that message, as well.

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