

Posted on Sat, Apr. 19, 2008

It was business as usual at the porn convention

BY ANDRES AMERIKANER

It was business as usual at the porn convention.

A loudest-orgasm competition blared over the loudspeakers; a cowgirl engaged in a fierce battle with a mechanical bull; a paunchy man craned his neck to catch the exposed backside of a scantily clad star.

And then there was Jesus.

Thousands of attendees at this weekend's Exxxotica in Miami Beach, the largest adult-entertainment event on the East Coast, would go home to find, deep inside their goodie bag, a sizable chunk of the New Testament under the title ``Jesus loves porn stars."

All this courtesy of Craig Gross, a 32-year-old former youth pastor in Southern California who had set up a booth for his XXXChurch -- which he started six years ago to fight back against rampant Internet pornography use -- deep inside the belly of the beast. Gross and his crew of volunteers, all women in their late teens or early 20s, were passing out the deceptively packaged Bibles to attendees; there was no preaching or judging, only smiles and friendly conversation.

"It's a little light in a dark room," said Gross, standing next to a pile of 4,000 Bibles he was planning to give away this weekend. ``I feel like we're planting a lot of seeds."

Gross, who is known to some as the Porn Pastor, is as unconventional in appearance as his methods: Piercing green eyes, jutting cheekbones, day-old stubble and straight dark hair that cascades over his forehead. He wears tattered jeans and a T-shirt, has black studs on both his ears and sports a heart-shaped tattoo on his right forearm.

These days, aside from attending conventions -- he's been to about 20, he said -- he tours colleges, staging debates with adult entertainment megastar Ron Jeremy. He has two children, age 5 and 2, and his wife travels with him, handing out Bibles with the rest of the volunteers.

This morning at 10:30, he'll leave the convention floor to bring his porn protest message to the Pursuit Christian Church in Pembroke Pines.

As way of explaining his work, Gross brings up the story of Zacheus, a crooked tax collector who climbs onto a tree to see Jesus when he comes into town. Jesus calls him down and invites himself to spend the night in Zacheus' home.

That sort of involvement is what Gross aspires to, and that's exactly where traditional religion has let him down, he said.

"They've never gotten on the field," said Gross, who was ordained in the non-denominational Eastside Christian Church in Fullerton, Calif. ``Shouldn't we go where the problem's at?"

He's never gotten kicked out of a convention. In fact, in the span of an hour, he was invited to bring his group to a Pitbull concert next week and to Swingfest, a swinger party and adult expo taking place in Hollywood starting July 31.

At Miami's convention, his neighbors included a booth pawning penis-themed pillows on one side and the mechanical bull on the other, surrounded by a gaggle of men, mouth agape, snapping photos.

Rick Blont, a Brazilian visiting his first convention, was walking briskly down the aisle when one of Gross' volunteers placed the book in his hand. Blont smiled awkwardly, leafed through the pages and asked what it was all about.

"I think it's a good idea," Blont said before heading off to the next attraction. ``It's good to hear everybody's point of view."

The relationship with convention-goers is cordial, never strained. That, in part, is thanks to his crew of volunteers, like 19-year-old Kristen Iovino, a petite college freshman from Weston with blond hair, blue eyes and one big advantage: she's lost her ability to blush, she said.

"I'm used to all kind of questions," said Iovino, who handed out more than 200 books in a few hours.

It was her first time at a convention; she learned of Gross' group when she was 14, she said.

"They were speaking about things and addressing issues that the church was not addressing," she said. ``I knew that people had issues with [pornography]. Being in college, it definitely shows up really quick."

Gross knows that handing out some Bible passages is unlikely to change anything on a large scale, but he hopes to pique people's curiosity. His site, www.xxxchurch.com, already gets 500,000 visitors a month; almost half of them end up there by mistake, trying to find actual pornography.

Available on the site is what he touts as a practical way of curbing pornography addiction: A program that sends out notices to an "accountability partner" any time that computer visits an adult site.

"Like, short term, I get the draw of porn," Gross said. "I get why people look at this." What worries him, though, is the larger effect: pornography has gone mainstream, as evidenced by the teeth-whitening booths at the Miami convention and the smiling, curious couples enjoying an unusual night out.

"It's not, like, a bunch of sick perverts anymore," he said. ``I don't see this going away."

And back into the booth he went, book in hand, his arm outstretched toward the crowd.