

Proselytizing on campus for the church of pornography

By KATHERINE KERSTEN, Star Tribune

February 23, 2008

Craig Gross, the 32-year-old founder of xxxchurch.com, is used to getting attention. No surprise -- he bills his organization as America's "No. 1 Christian porn site."

Gross crisscrosses the country, appearing on camera with porn mega-stars like Ron Jeremy, called by Yahoo! Entertainment "the porn industry's most prolific male performer," with more than 2,400 credits to his name.

Gross isn't joining forces with Jeremy. He's challenging Jeremy's worldview in debates on college campuses and TV network news shows. Their most recent confrontation -- a "Nightline Face-Off" titled "Is America Addicted to Porn?" -- will be broadcast Thursday on ABC.

Last week, Gross brought his message about porn's hazards to the University of Minnesota. With him was Donny Pauling, who spent nine years as a porn producer. Pauling has walked away from the industry and the fortune he made. He met Gross in 2004 at a porn show in Las Vegas and took one of the www.xxxchurch.com "Jesus loves porn stars" Bibles. Though he first mocked Gross' crusade, he says, it eventually led him to abandon porn for a new life and career.

The students in the U of M audience didn't need to be told that America is a porn-drenched society. Pauling estimates that there are about 400 million porn Web pages on the Internet. "And now they've figured out how to get onto your cell phone, your iPod," he adds.

The xxxchurch.com's website has resources for "those struggling with porn." One offering is free, down-loadable "accountability software" that sends a list of the dubious sites you visit to your "accountability partner" -- a friend or spouse who helps you swear off porn.

Pauling's eyewitness testimony brought porn's gritty reality home to his U audience. Glamorous? Sexy? No way, he says.

Pauling started out in pornography as a consumer, then set up his own amateur porn site. Finding women to photograph was easy, he said. He prowled the malls, recruiting college students as "models" and offering girls at Starbucks \$500 to take off their clothes.

At first, he said, "I was livin' large, partying at the Playboy Mansion." But the glamour wore thin as he found it harder to ignore the industry's grim, dehumanizing character.

"People think porn will enhance their sex lives," he said. "But it can actually interfere. Porn bears no relation to sex in real life, to intimacy with another human being. People start to substitute porn for intimacy."

We often think of porn as a free-speech issue, or just one more skirmish line in the culture wars. In fact, it can bring incredible suffering.

Pauling described porn's degradation of women in graphic terms. At shoots, he said, "models" would sometimes run to the bathroom to vomit with disgust at what they had to do.

Pattern was predictable

His encounters with the college women he recruited usually followed a predictable routine. "After two weeks, I'd get a pleading call: 'How can I get my pictures off the Internet?' I had to tell them, 'You can't, your grandchildren may see them.' "

The women, he added, were completely unprepared for the photo shoots' aftermath. One discovered that a jokester had papered her father's car with her nude shots. Another sent Pauling a heart-wrenching e-mail: "My fiancé is beside himself, my career is on the line. I'll do anything to get those pictures off the Internet."

"Models" aren't porn's only casualties. A porn addiction can twist and imprison men, said Pauling. "It's a downward spiral. Porn will take you to places you never dreamed you would go."

But it's the young women who may suffer most from porn, often in silence.

The women at the U of M event, for example, weren't surprised that Pauling had found it easy to recruit college "models."

"It's cool to be sexy, it's the highest compliment today," said Sara, a 20-year-old junior. "I can't get away from it -- hip-hop, TV commercials, Victoria's Secret, 'Girls Gone Wild'" -- videos in which young women, often inebriated, expose their breasts or buttocks.

Pressure from guys

"I've dated too many guys who are into porn," she said. Several have pressured her to engage in sex acts (threesomes, female-on-female, videotaped sex and more) they had seen on the Internet, she said, and friends of hers have given in to the same kinds of pressures.

Why? "Girls want to be noticed by guys," she explains. "The guys make you feel, 'Oh, guys like this, so

we're going to do it.' Girls think they have to do these things to attract their boyfriends.

"At this point," she concluded, "I'm devastated. I've given up on guys."

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