

Profile: Craig Gross, fighting pornography

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By Terri Finch Hamilton

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Craig Gross opens his front door on a sunny afternoon to see about a dozen cardboard boxes on his porch, just dropped off by UPS.

He checks the labels and starts to open a couple as his 4-year-old son, Nolan, watches from the doorway.

"Looks like stuff we need for the next Porn Sunday," Gross says, peeking at some pamphlets.

"Don't say 'porn,' Dad," Nolan says from the doorway.

Sorry, Nolan -- Daddy can't help it.

Gross, 31, is The Porn Pastor. He co-founded xxxchurch.com, a 5-year-old online ministry dedicated to helping people who struggle with pornography.

An ordained minister and former youth pastor, he has helped adult film stars get out of the industry by offering financial and spiritual support. He distributes Bibles at porn conventions. He hosts "Porn and Pancakes" breakfasts at churches to share help and hope. His site offers software that alerts an "accountability" friend if you view online porn.

He's also surfer cool. He's often barefoot and in a tie-dye shirt. He has hip, shaggy hair and earrings. He says "dude" a lot.

"That's what makes him so fascinating," says Rob Bell, pastor at Mars Hill Bible Church, where Gross and his family attend.

"He's an odd blend. He's so 'of the moment,' he's cool, but he's also deeply traditional. He hands out Bibles. How much more traditional can you get?"

"This is a man of significant substance," Bell says. "The cool masks an incredible drive."

Now, Gross is sprawled on a leather couch in his Grand Rapids Township home, barefoot and munching a sandwich. His cell phone rings constantly. People love to tell how they can e-mail him at 3 a.m., and they'll get a reply at 4 a.m.

The Web site xxxchurch.com gets a half-million visitors each month, Gross says. About 350,000 people have downloaded his accountability software. Gross travels half the year for speaking engagements all across the country and even got legendary porn star Ron Jeremy to tour the country with him in a debate about pornography, a bizarre pairing that makes even Gross grin and shake his head.

Saturday, he'll be in France, kicking off a European tour.

"He's fearless," Bell says. "Craig will go anywhere, talk to anybody."

"A lot of people want to change the world," Bell says. "There's the high-profile stuff, but it takes grunt work to really help people. Craig just cranks out the work. He's the real thing."

Gross is earnest and captivating when he speaks to a crowd. He has the cheekbones and white teeth of a Calvin Klein cologne model and the passion of a missionary.

One minute, he'll quote the perfect Bible verse to make a point, the next he's saying, "Porn sucks."

A California native, Gross moved to Grand Rapids last year with his wife, Jeanette, 4-year-old son, Nolan, and 2-year-old daughter, Elise. Most of his speaking engagements with xxxchurch were in the Midwest, he says, and Grand Rapids welcomed his mission like no other place.

"It's not about saving the world from porn," Gross says. "It's about creating a safe place online where people can get help."

He says porn creates false expectations about what real sex is like and often ends up substituting for it. Real women can't compete with it, he says. Porn hurts women in relationships and those who act in the films.

You have a right to view it, he says. He just wishes you wouldn't. Jesus, he says, is better than porn.

Gross employs three full-time employees and two interns here, in an office in a house on Four Mile Road NE, where neon-painted walls proclaim "Jesus Loves Porn Stars." It's where he keeps the Porn Mobile, a black Toyota FJ Cruiser with his Web site logos all over it.

"A neighbor said, 'Can you park the car in the garage? I have an 8-year-old,'" he says. "It's because of the word 'porn.' It makes people so uncomfortable."

So why take it on? There are easier causes. The need knocked him over, he says.

Before launching xxxchurch.com, Gross traveled the country with a youth ministry he founded called "Fireproof." He and his ministry partner, Jake Larson, did skits about real stuff teens faced. One day, they did a skit about a teen stealing his mom's credit card to look at porn online.

"Afterward, everybody came up," Gross says. "Kids, moms, everybody. People kept telling us, 'This is

my story.' That porn talk, beyond anything else, was huge. It hit a nerve with people.

"We realized, this isn't gonna go away, the whole porn thing," he says. "This could be huge. We could help a lot of people."

A fellow youth minister, Mike Foster, suggested they start a Web site to help people struggling with porn.

The two of them launched xxxchurch.com in January 2002 -- at a porn convention. When a reporter from The Los Angeles Times did a story on their unlikely booth, "it started a craze of attention," Gross says.

"We push boundaries," Gross says. "Critics say we get too close to the porn world. Is there really such a thing? Jesus says, 'Go out in all the world and tell people about me.' He doesn't say, 'Build a bigger steeple and get more people to come who look and act like you do.' We're just going to where the people are."

Early years

Gross grew up in California with his parents, Brooke and Craig, and sister Stacey. He went to a strict Christian school and Baptist church. He was a cool skateboarder kid who hated his rigid school and his Bible verse homework.

"I didn't get in any major trouble, but the teacher was always calling my mom," Gross says. "I made a teacher cry once. But my mom worked at a school for kids who were kicked out of regular school. My mom once got a knife pulled on her. So I'm sure she was thinking, 'This chick wouldn't last a day at my school.'"

"He was always out of the box," his mom, Brooke Gross, says from her home in Sacramento. "He was never a follower. He was never predictable. But he has always found things that fit him."

Gross lays down on his couch and puts a pillow behind his head. He might be the most relaxed driven guy in town.

"I didn't think I'd ever be a pastor," Gross muses. Then he went on a three-week mission trip to Venezuela the summer before his senior year of high school.

"It was people my age, all fired up, telling people about God," he says. "I felt this nudge. Like 'You're supposed to do this.'"

"I came back home wearing earrings."

"He got off that plane a changed young man," his mom says. "He seemed different. He seemed moved. He gave his dad and I a note that said he loved us, he appreciated our support, and he wanted to be a pastor. I still hadn't gotten over the earrings!" She laughs. "His dad wouldn't even let our daughter get her ears pierced."

His mom tells how he picked a college "20 minutes before classes started," then graduated from Pacific Christian College with a bachelor's degree in church ministry. He got a job as youth pastor at a nearby church and later was ordained by the church.

When he started his mission against porn, Gross had little experience with it. His first encounter with pornography was a magazine he paged through with a friend in sixth grade.

"His parents caught us," he says. "I ripped one page out and hid it with my baseball cards.

"For me, porn was never really around until college," he says. "By then, I was getting married, I was gonna be a youth pastor -- it was not something I was gonna do."

Now, it's all over the Internet, a couple clicks away on the family computer.

"This is a whole new beast that never existed," he says.

But the church wasn't buying his battle against the beast.

"No one would give us Sunday morning," Gross says.

Until Rob Bell. The pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville says it made perfect sense to him.

"To me, a church is the first place you go to talk about issues of the soul," Bell says. "It's a place where you can talk about things nobody wants to talk about. If not that, then what are you talking about?"

He calls Gross' first presentation at Mars Hill -- to 13,000 people -- "legendary. "He was absolutely electric."

Move to the Midwest

Gross grins at the memory. The support was so overwhelming, Gross packed up his family and moved here in April 2006.

"I felt God," he says. "He was saying, 'I want you to be around people of like minds where you can do this.'

"We took a gamble," Gross says. "I thought, 'I'm moving my whole family from California to Michigan?' I was scared to death. Then I thought, 'If God's doing something here, what am I so scared of?' There's no denying this is where I'm supposed to be.

"Besides the horrible weather," he says with a smile, "this is a good place to be around."

His son, Nolan, wanders in, followed by Elise, rubbing her eyes.

"Hey, did you guys have a good nap?" he says, scooping Elise up. He sniffs her diaper. "Oooh, smelly Ellie," he teases her.

Nolan brings him a piece of plastic pizza from the play kitchen, and Gross pretends to munch it.

"Got any doughnuts?" he asks Nolan.

His family travels with him about half the time. Last year, he was gone almost 200 days.

"I've been telling Jeanette for years, 'Things are gonna slow down.' But they haven't," Gross says. "I told her the other day I want to coach Nolan's soccer team. She said, 'You're crazy.' I said, 'No, I'm gonna do it.'"

The ultimate supportive wife and good sport, Jeanette, 32, has donned a rabbit costume at porn conventions and portrayed Rex the Rabbit, a chaste counterpoint to the Playboy Bunny.

"I know a lot of women could never be married to Craig, because of the xxxchurch thing," she says after getting the kids tucked in one night. "I asked him just last week, 'Aren't you tired of talking about porn? Of saying that word every day?'"

She asks people to shorten it to "P" when they're around their kids.

"When I'm at the Mothers of Preschoolers group and everybody's saying what their husbands do, I'm not jumping up and down to tell everyone," Jeanette says. But she talks proudly of his passion: "He works so hard at what God has put before him."

She says he's a closet computer geek who can fix anything electronic. He loves music and wake boarding. He's a renowned practical joker. He talks wistfully of watching football on Sundays. But his mission is consuming.

"But at the end of the day, I don't just want to see people free from porn," Gross says. "Porn is just a symptom. Porn is what we're scratching the surface with."

Last month, he launched an online ministry with Jon Bell, brother of Mars Hill pastor Rob Bell. It's called "Heart Support," and focuses on suicide, depression, addiction and self-injury.

"People bring me ideas, and I can't say no," he says.

"I'm going on a preschool field trip Friday," Gross says. He grins. "I won't show up in the Porn Mobile, though. I'll be a regular family guy."

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