

Selling sex in America's holy city

The seeds for my latest book were sown some 20 years ago, when Linda visited my small marketing firm.

Settling into a chair in my office, she described the business she was starting. When I asked how she'd funded it, our conversation took something of a detour. That can happen when the person seated across from you says, "I make a lot of money as a call girl." I'd expected something more along the line of "I took out a second mortgage," "I borrowed from family," or "I have investors."

I was fascinated. Linda lived in what was to me and, I suspect, to most people, an unseen world. In Salt Lake City, no less. Where all it takes to become the object of steamy gossip is to have a member of your ward catch you holding a cup of coffee.

Like most religions, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, aka the Mormon Church, has plenty to say about sex. Hardly a General Conference of the church goes by without stern warnings about the importance of modest attire, the terrifying consequences of porn, and, of

course, the devastating ravages of illicit sex. That a sanctified place like Salt Lake would have quite the prostitution industry comes as a surprise to many a Mormon and non-Mormon alike.

It takes no more than a casual internet search to come face-to-face with Salt Lake's considerable supply of sexual service providers. As I write, one website lists 83. Another site lists considerably more, along with 129 "reviews" submitted by Salt Lake area "clients" during the past month alone. These numbers do not include providers taking a day off from advertising, providers advertising on other sites, streetwalkers, massage therapists who provide "extras," strippers, and providers who rely only on word-of-mouth.

I pursued the topic with Linda's permission. "You saved enough to start a business," I said, "so I gather the money is good?"

Linda replied, "I charge 500 for an hour. Regulars book me for two to four hours at a time. And they give me booze and cocaine. It's one of the perks." In today's dollars, that would be more like \$750. Plus booze and cocaine.

I asked why she would trade such a lucrative business for the one she was starting. "I'm not trading it," she said. "Not yet. I'll do both for a while. I want something to fall back on when I get tired of the game. Or when I'm not hot anymore."

"I bet you could get a lot of people in trouble," I mused aloud, figuring that men who could shell out one to two thousand dollars for a few hours of entertainment would be of some standing.

"You have no idea," Linda replied, rolling her eyes. She entertained politicians, police officers, judges, defense lawyers, prosecutors and doctors. All or nearly all of her clients were married. And nearly all of her clients were practicing Mormons. Some were rank-and-file church members, but not a few held leadership positions ranging from lower to higher in the church's hierarchy.

I'm a former Mormon. I'd worked with church members, bishops, stake presidents and other leaders. I still respected and liked these men. It would not have occurred to me that some might hide secret lives in which they



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frequent sexual service providers.

"But I would never get them in trouble," Linda continued. "It would be wrong. Confidentiality is an unwritten rule in this business. Besides, I don't want to hurt anyone. I'm not cruel."

"Suppose someday you were busted," I said, "and suppose the judge or prosecutor was one of your clients. Then would you out him, or threaten to?"

"I'd keep quiet," Linda said.

Her integrity struck me. Here were powerful men sneaking off to pay her for sex, who in their professional lives and church duties railed against the likes of her and, even more hypocritically, the likes of her clients. Yet, even in the face of prosecution at their hands, Linda would guard their secrets.

I asked Linda if her family knew she was a sex worker.

"My ex-husband knew," she said. After her work as a provider had

put him through college, he called her a common whore and abandoned her and their two daughters. "You can't imagine how it hurt," Linda said, her hazel eyes moist.

I could feel my perspective shift. Hearing Linda's experience was fast humanizing a population that to me had always been little more than a concept, an object, a caricature, a TV and movie stereotype. Linda was a real person. An individual. She had depth, intelligence, manners, perseverance, moxie, business acumen, hopes, dreams, trials, concerns, boundaries, disappointments, achievements — and feelings. She was a mom who, like all moms, worried about and wanted the best for her kids. She had been deeply hurt by an ex-husband. She had a mortgage and a car payment. And now, she had an extra business to run and employees to manage.

Prostitution was what Linda did. It was not who she was.

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