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## Viva Las Virgins!

Elvis Does the Abstinence Convention, at Least From the Waist Up

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He was a hockey player. It was only a year ago, when she was 16, but Angela Van Berkel talks about the loss of her innocence to a bad boyfriend like some faraway thing. Then the abstinence movement came to her school, with the right words, the right slogans, the perceived mythologies of latex protection, the slide shows of warts and lesions, the character education, the logic of celibacy, and the emotional assurance that yes, she could be a virgin again, if she wanted to.

"Some people can say on their wedding night that they waited. That's something I'll never get to say. But my theory is to have no regrets, just lessons. I want people to learn from what happened to me. It's like, sex, I've done that, and it sucked," Van Berkel says, minutes after a shuttle bus has delivered her and about 75 abstinence activists unto the rosy, blinking, blaring boulevard of modern vice -- the Vegas Strip, in all of its full Friday night splendor, where a sidewalk stroll often brings visitors an array of free semi-porn, stripper ads and call-girl brochures. ("UNLV Student, Help Me Pay My Tuition!"; "April - I'll Relax and Take My Time With You"; "Very Petite, Be Gentle! Call Traci . . .")

"Look at it, it's Las Vegas, people are here, for, like, only one thing," says Van Berkel, who came from Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, to Sin City, which, having sapped up its marketing potential as a family destination, has returned to selling vice and the erotic arts as a coy luxury. (With a new *bada-bing* style tourism motto: "What Happens Here, Stays Here.")

Van Berkel is one of about 700 people attending a three-day convention here for the Abstinence Clearinghouse, an umbrella organization that connects and mobilizes the leaders of the pro-abstinence movement. She also wanted to take to the streets, to tell people it's never too late to say no to premarital sex.

Dressed in a turquoise micro mini, corky platform sandals, a low-cut blouse and with a wild smattering of blond curls (her traveling mate and counselor, also an abstinence proponent, "said, 'Angela, are you sure that outfit is appropriate?' But I'm like, 'yeah, sure,' ") , Van Berkel has a stack of wallet-size "good girl cards" ready to hand out to Vegas's great hordes of pedestrians.

The front of the cards feature pictures of fully clothed, fully abstinent young women; the back, in two sentences, debunks condoms as protection against "most sexually transmitted diseases" and claims that married people "live longer, are healthier, have more money and even better sex lives than their single counterparts." (There were no "good boy cards," says a Clearinghouse spokesperson, because, except for the constant Jumbotron beckonings of Australian Thunder from Down Under beefcake dancers, the Vegas marketplace doesn't advertise nearly as much male flesh.)

"Remember, we're all going to smile! We're happy," yells Leslee Unruh, president of the Abstinence Clearinghouse, to her assembled. Unruh, in a baby blue Nike track ensemble, is a sharply funny Sioux Falls, S.D., wife, mother and grandmother who ran pregnancy clinics and protested abortion and then found herself as something of a lieutenant commander in the current culture war. "Smile! We're not here to judge!"

The virgins and re-virginized (and their happily married monogamous mob of chaperons) march toward the Mirage casino's fake volcano. It feels almost sacrificial. There are drunks, and hoochie mamas and the ambivalent stares. There's that whole Krispy Kreme fryer vat feeling of the place.

Soon enough, at Siegfried and Roy Plaza, Unruh spies a young woman walking with a few men who appear to be military guys. With TV cameras and reporters following her, Unruh pounces on them, cracking jokes about STDs, and sparring with one of the guys about sex and asking them to wait. "It's already too late, I hate to burst your bubble," the man says, while his friends laugh. But she's more interested in his female friend, who has grown suddenly quiet. "You call me," Unruh says, pointing at her. "You call me and we'll talk."

The group walks away. "Did you see the look on her face? Four guys, one girl?" Unruh whispers. "I almost had her."

## 'We Love Sex!'

Fifteen minutes northwest of the glitz, in the perfect, artificial paradise of Howard Hughes's final real estate frontier in the Vegas burbs, in a series of blandly enormous Marriott ballrooms, the abstinence movement is planning its next step.

These are heady times for the wait-till-marriage crowd. They're being invited into schools and getting teens to sign virginity pledge cards, exploring that virgin territory between preaching and teaching. They speak of a new cultural revolution, an antidote to the 1970s.

Emboldened by a friend in the White House and a record amount of federal funding to abstinence-only educational programs -- \$135 million this year, nearly half of it available in Health and Human Services grants to a melange of faith-based and secular counseling programs that adhere to a strict, eight-point abstinence doctrine, the other half tied to Title V welfare reform -- the virgin advocates are now going for bigger money. Unruh's Abstinence Clearinghouse is networking in Africa, with a third of President Bush's \$15 billion Global AIDS Bill earmarked for the abstinence message.

"It's rebellious, what's going on here, absolutely," says Keith Deltano, 39, a traveling abstinence comedian and motivational speaker from North Carolina, who sells his shtick to churches and school districts. (He can swing either way. Like most people in the abstinence biz, Deltano can excise religious content from his routine when federal or state dollars are paying the bill.)

Deltano served in the Army, then taught middle school for several years. When a sixth grader showed up in his class pregnant, he says, he sort of flipped. "I couldn't get them to bring a pencil to social studies. How's a condom going to help them?"

Now he's here, manning his booth in the convention's exhibit hall, a refugee from what he sees as a dangerous world of easy sex and the hopeless lies of "comprehensive" sex education that hands out condoms and -- it's never a very far leap for the abstinence believers to extend this point -- contributes to a social ruin of Internet pornography, casual sex, Christina Aguilera, teen moms on welfare.

"Overweight, 45-year-old housewives," Deltano observes, looking around at his fellow cultural vanguards. "Never underestimate them. These people are tough, they're tenacious, and they're changing the world. We are lean and mean. This is true grassroots. There's no stopping us."

Abstinence has found its own sense of vogue. The Marriott convention center is decked out with slick, pro-virgin advertising, and a hip-hop beat. Big-screen TVs play pro-abstinence commercials on a continuous loop, where doe-eyed models talk about the pride of purity. There are logos everywhere: Virginity Rules. Passion & Principles. Abstinence in Motion. Project Reality. Worth the Wait. Truth 4 Youth.

"We love sex!" screams Unruh. At a Thursday luncheon, she is up on the podium now greeting the conventioners. She has changed from dark pinstripes into a white pantsuit, and is tossing her sandy blond, chin-length bob.

She looks 20 years younger than she probably is. (She won't reveal her age.) She's a Christopher Guest mockumentary subject waiting to happen. Catherine O'Hara (or maybe "Saturday Night Live's" Jan Hooks) should play her. There is lots of touching the arm of whomever she's talking to, big cackly laughs, and chaste flirtations. Lots of sound bites, and jokes, some you don't get. ("Hey, it's like prime rib or the lobster, ya know," she says in a flat Midwestern bark, during an interview. "Like, give me the lobster, right?" And you think she might be talking about sex, but you just can't figure it out.)

"We love sex, don't we?!" she says to her army. "And the best sex is in marriage! Abstinence comes to Sin City! Abstinence meets Temptation Island!"

(Vegas is nothing, observes Unruh's chiropractor husband, Allen. Leslee will always go where she can get the most attention, and trouble. "We had the convention in Miami two years ago, in South Beach, you know, which is the Sodom and Gomorrah of Florida," Allen says. "We were at the Miami International Hotel and every room had what it called an 'intimacy kit' with condoms right there on the nightstand. Then, there's people nude at the swimming pool. We complained and [the hotel] said it was an international, you know, a 'European culture.' Well, what about American culture?")

Leslee Unruh says Vegas makes people think of sex, so that's where she needed to be. She wants as much media along as she can get. She fights Hollywood with Hollywood. "I got to do all the shock jock shows," she brags, "which is exactly where we want to take this message. Look, you've got that Strip which is two miles long of sex, sex, sex. You've got buses coming and going to the ranches, the brothels. But you've also got the sixth-largest public school district in the country. You have parents who need a lot of help.

"One woman from Nevada called in and said she was so happy we were coming, and she said, 'I don't know how or why you're coming here, but you've given us hope.' She told me her daughter, who is 18, just got a job in one of the casinos and had brought home the nothing little outfit she was going to be wearing, and [the mother] was so worried. She said, 'It barely covers her. I was sick.' So that's why we're here."

So that's why Abstinence Elvis comes rushing up to the stage, between the squash salad course and the sliced-turkey entree, shouting out a few sentiments about waiting until marriage. Unruh starts dancing with him to an exceedingly mediocre rendition of "Viva Las Vegas."

Unruh actually met this Elvis, aka James Rompel, last year, when she came with Allen to a chiropractors' meeting and saw him perform at dinner. She just had a hunch he was a virgin, or would be pro-abstinence. She marched up to him and asked, after the show.

Elvis, knowing a job opportunity when he sees one, said he'd be happy to be the Abstinence King. Unruh converts wherever she goes, believing even in the revirginization of the icon who symbolically deflowered America in the late 1950s. "See how these things just work?" she asks.

## Follow the Money

These things work, in part, because of the refined art of conventions and organizing. Most attendees wanted to learn more about getting federal grants and how to diffuse the sex-ed mainstream ("the latex crowd," in shorthand, or "the safer sex message") which dates back to the Johnson administration and is now commonly regarded here as a bloated, weakened, ineffectual government enemy. Workshops range from "Didn't Get Your Grant -- Now What?," which is being held in one meeting room, while the skeevily named "How to Handle Media Effectively" unfolds in another.

But, the more you look for a right-wing army hell-bent on jamming religious-themed messages into schools, the more it looks like just another Vegas convention and trade fair, or a really big Pampered Chef cookware gathering. The world is a well-behaved "Star Trek" convention now, a dental hygienists confab, or a bunch of faith-based groups ready to take on MTV.

Relentlessly cheerful women are everywhere (outnumbering the men a bit), squealing hellos at one another, giving each other standing ovations in every speech or workshop. There is no adversary of the movement that can't, in theory, be killed with kindness. These are the nicest people on the planet, who only want what's best for you. Their lives are filled with anecdotally broken souls: The seventh-grader with genital warts. The teenage boy with two kids by two different girls. The 11-year-olds proficient in fellatio. The sorority girl with HIV. They love a good, tearjerking story about sex; they are most comfortable in a Dr. Phil compartment of problems and solutions. Life, as complicated as it looks in the PowerPoint presentation of Health and Human Services data or Centers for Disease Control statistics, is actually quite simple.

Naturally there's a former Miss America afoot -- Tara Dawn Christensen, the one who married Jon Christensen, the former Republican congressman from Nebraska, and was a 26-year-old virgin on her wedding night.

An entire industry of speakers, comedians, performers and other quasi-celebrities-for-hire has sprung up around the movement, especially once federal and state money became available. Schools now need instructional videos and guest speakers in a way they've not needed them before. They need T-shirts and keychains and "ATM" (abstinence-till-marriage) Visa cards. They need books about the dangers of porn, about the sanctity of man-woman marriage.

In a parallel universe, as the abstinence convention is going on, Canada has okayed gay marriage, and the Supreme Court overturned the sodomy ban, and a "Charlie's Angels" sequel is, in movie parlance, "opening wide."

Amy Stephens, a former Focus on the Family counselor from Colorado Springs, who now works full-time as an abstinence consultant, chipperly describes her enthusiasm for the movement's success in schools. When asked if the movement will ever teach gay teens to wait until they too can get married, she smiles, blinks twice, as if her brain reboots, then says she doesn't

see how abstinence-only programs are going to be able to do that. "But isn't that an excellent question," she gushes, then proclaims: "Whew! I need a Starbucks!"

In the exhibit hall, newlyweds Jason and Crystalina Evert stand at the booth of their employer, Catholic Answers. Jason, 27, an honest-to-God theological apologist, has been on the chastity lecture circuit for four years. He met his wife at an abstinence conference in the Bahamas and they began dating. He was a virgin; Crystalina, 23, had reclaimed her virginity as a teenager.

They were married three weeks ago and just got back from a nine-day honeymoon in Bora Bora. "We're ready for lots of questions," Crystalina says. ("There was a lot of frolicking," Jason says about the trip.) So articulate and happy-seeming -- the BBC couldn't resist, and sent a camera crew to film their wedding. "Virginity was so strange to them," Jason says, imitating the reporter's British-accented questions about petting, nudity and inexperience.

"You have to figure out what [the school] needs," says Carole Adlard, a Cincinnati mother of four, who made an instructional video with a small grant from the Ohio Department of Health, reaching for her list of motivational speakers she works with, and the personal darkneses they overcame: "Eric, white, 26 . . . sex, drugs, alcohol" or "Evan, black, 26 . . . sex, drugs, alcohol" or the value-added "Holly, white, 32 . . . STDs, abortion, pornography, teen parenting."

The quiet hero of the Abstinence Movement is a shy, pear-shaped man with a slight salt-and-pepper pompadour, large glasses and a thin mustache, who wears a dark gray business suit and red power tie even to the virginal sojourn to the Strip.

He is Robert Rector, a conservative authority on poverty, and an analyst for the Heritage Foundation, who, back in 1995, was one of the chief architects of Title V welfare reform, which advocated and funded efforts toward premarital chastity.

"I love Robert Rector," Leslee Unruh says about the wonk of her dreams. She loves to tease him, embarrass him. At a conference in Sweden, she made him go with her to a red-light district to look at the horror, the horror, in a country where marriage rates have plummeted.

Rector spends part of the conference delivering still more freshly crunched data on the links between American poverty, welfare and casual sex. He's no Elvis, but the movement swoons for him anyhow.

Peter Van Dyck, an associate administrator from the Health Resources and Services Administration, conducts a workshop encouraging more groups to apply for a current level of \$55 million in abstinence-only grants, with another \$18 million proposed by President Bush in 2004. In government dollars, that's chump change, but Van Dyck believes there are strong links between the rise of the abstinence movement and the encouraging 28 percent decline, since 1990, of teen pregnancy rates.

"While there are no proven links [between abstinence-only and the teen pregnancy decline]," Van Dyck tells the crowd, "you should not be bashful about giving yourselves credit."

At night, there's a karaoke party upstairs. A few of the youth are timid about singing. (Leslee Unruh to the rescue, yet again, grabbing the microphone and singing herself hoarse to "Shout.")

Gail Dignam sits at a faraway table. She's here with the state of Louisiana's Governor's Program on Abstinence, which in 1998 began using state and federal funds to put abstinence-only education in every school, withstanding a church-state separation challenge from the American Civil Liberties Union.

"I was doing abstinence education work when nobody else was. It used to be all old people like me," she says. "My generation has a lot to answer for. I tell other baby boomers, look, we had a part in breaking down society, but you're not dead yet. You can still put it back together. . . . Look at all these young people here. Look at the kids . . . -- who are currently dancing, if anemically and sort of bored looking, to "I Will Survive" . . .

"They're going to be looked at as the cool kids, eventually."

## Going to the Chapel

Vegas renews and sacrifices its virginity over and over again, revirginizing whole city blocks with detonated implosions of old hotels, making way for more and fancier kinds of allure.

Leslee Unruh feels sort of at home here. There's another errand she needs to take care of, as soon as the conference is over. She wants to do her wedding again at the same place she got married in 1972.

"Chapel of the Bells," she says. "There I was, in my bridal gown, the whole thing, full length, with the train."

"Can you imagine?" Allen, her husband says. "The queen of abstinence married in Vegas?"

It's true, Leslee says. His family didn't like her very much, so the couple ran away to Vegas. And lo, their marriage was blessed, and it took: "Five kids, two of my sons are doctors. Abstinence works, people. My daughter saved her first kiss for her wedding day. I'm here to tell ya."

So she wants to go back, start it all over again. She loves weddings. For a moment she will choose to not see that the motel down the street from Chapel of the Bells offers 26 channels of free porn. No culture war, at least not tonight.

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