

Suicide of a Young Superstar

■ **Tragedy:** Pampered, wild Shannon Wilsey, known as Savannah, was the third actress to take her life.

By JOHN JOHNSON
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UNIVERSAL CITY—After crashing her white Corvette and injuring her much-glorified face on the way home from another night of hard partying, Shannon Wilsey sent a friend out to walk her Rottweiler, Daisy, and then shot herself in the head.

For the 23-year-old sex video superstar known as Savannah, it was the most outrageous act in a short but outrage-filled public life. It was also the third major suicide in the adult video industry, whose most valuable and pampered commodity is beautiful but often troubled young women.

A decade ago, Shauna Grant shot herself with a .22-caliber rifle. Then Megan Leigh shot herself in the mouth after buying her mother a \$500,000 dream house. Now Wilsey, the "adult industry's most celebrated star," according to the monthly Adult Video News, has snuffed out her life apparently to end romantic and financial problems that only seemed to escalate as her fame and income expanded.

Is there a trend here?

Her family thinks so. They gave strict orders to limit the number of Wilsey's porn-industry colleagues attending the funeral.

Asked whether his daughter's problems were worsened by her involvement in the sex industry, Mike Wilsey replied: "Of course. People ask me if pornography is wrong. I say you can judge a tree by its fruit."

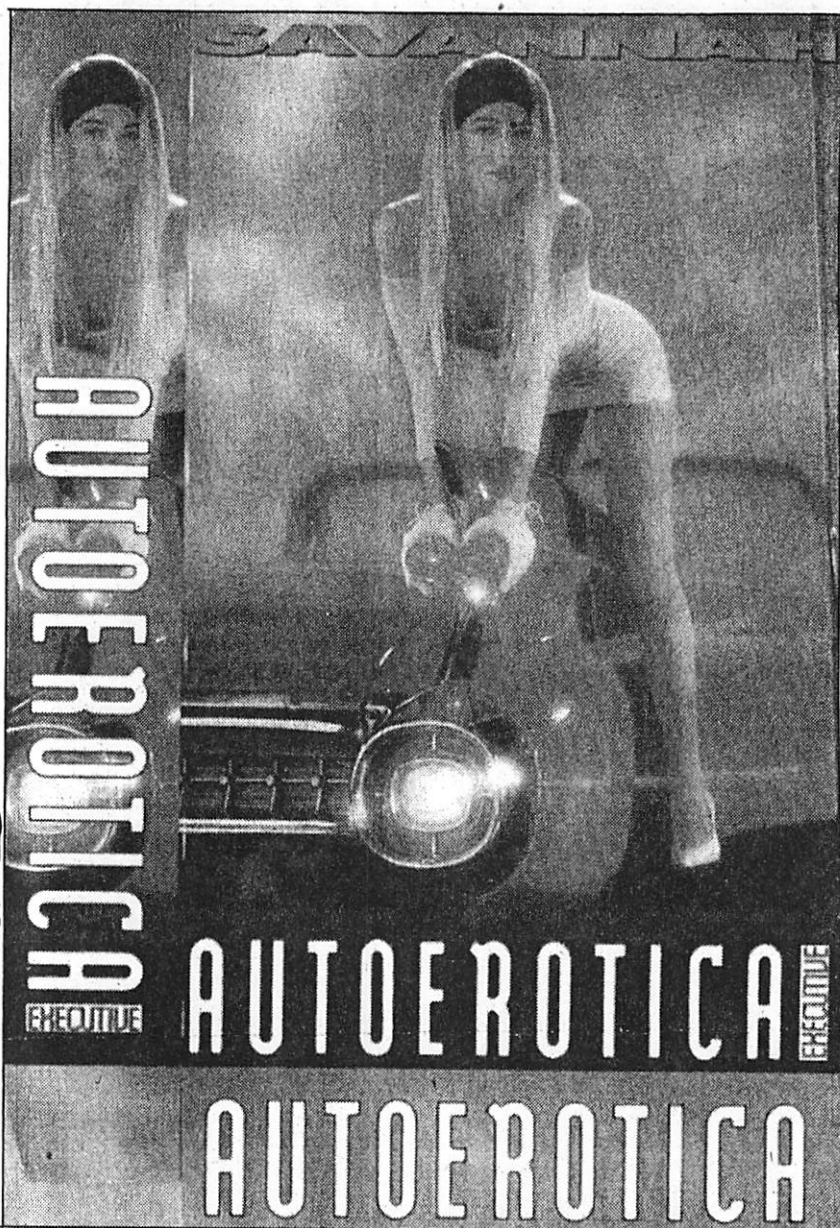
The X-rated industry has begun to respond to the implications of the violent deaths of some of its top stars. Plans are under way to establish a phone help line that performers confronting personal crises can access 24 hours a day.

"We recognize the need for this, so it's going to happen in the name of Savannah and Shauna and the others," said William Margold, a member of the board of directors of the Free Speech Coalition, an industry umbrella group.

As to whether pornography helped destroy Wilsey, the people who knew her best since she burst on the scene five years ago as a cool Elke Sommer look-alike, talk about a young woman who reveled in her outlaw lifestyle, bragged of dating rock stars and was seriously troubled before she shot her first X-rated video.

At the end of her life, she was depressed, in debt and slept with a gun under her pillow for protection.

If the sex industry contributed to Wilsey's demise, they say, it was by turning her into a pampered,



Shannon Wilsey is shown on cover of one of her erotic videos. The celebrated 23-year-old actress was known to her fans as Savannah.

highly paid star whose whims were indulged and tantrums endured. In an industry that shoots on a shoestring, she was known for pulling Hollywood-style stunts such as walking out in the middle of a production when a rock star paramour came to town.

If the Hollywood lifestyle is a fantasy, the sex-video business is even more unreal because it gives its female stars celebrity and wealth but, unlike Hollywood, it can never give them approval in the larger society.

"I don't blame the industry for mistreating her," said a 26-year-old X-rated star known as Danyel Cheeks. "If anything, they spoiled her rotten. They put us on such a high pedestal. The limos are sent out. Anything I want is pretty much done for me. Sometimes it makes the real world hard to deal with."

That's especially true because the audience for sex videos is more fickle and has a far shorter attention span than the mainstream film audience. Most careers are over in a couple of years. Then the re-entry into the ordinary world can be bumpy.

Like others in her world, Wilsey hoped to make the transition from sex star to legitimate actress. Like

others in her world, she did not succeed.

Over the years, many of Wilsey's wounds were self-inflicted.

Shannon Wilsey's parents divorced in 1972 when she was just 2. She grew up in Texas with her mother and then, after a brief stay with her father in Oxnard, lived with her grandparents in Mission Viejo, where she became a high school cheerleader. Wilsey told her manager, Nancy Pera, that her childhood was unhappy and that she had been molested. That is not uncommon for women who work in the sex industry, studies show. Many were abused as children. But Mike Wilsey said his daughter never told him about any such abuse.

Mike Wilsey said she began dating rock star Gregg Allman while still in high school, eventually going on the road with him for a couple of years.

After returning to California and deciding on a career in Hollywood, Wilsey drifted into adult entertainment. She rose to fame in the world of screen sex as fast as anyone had. Her symmetrical good looks, enhanced by two breast enlargements, and her curtains of blond hair brought her to

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the attention of Vivid Video in Van Nuys. The company signed her to a contract and starred her in a four-part "On Trial" series that revolved around a porn star's obscenity trial.

Her growing celebrity and wealth enabled her to indulge her instinct for excess. Her fascination with rock stars endured, according to Adult Video News. "I love sex and I love sex with rockers more than anything else," she said in an interview.

While some of that was probably propaganda for the consumption of naive fans who think, or hope, that porn actresses have insatiable sexual appetites, her exploits eventually filtered beyond the insular world of pornography. People magazine columnist Mitchell Fink reported two years ago that she and one rock star engaged in what Fink called "full hit whoopie" in a crowded New York bar, after which she jumped into a waiting limousine.

It was then that the whispers began: Here was a woman headed for destruction.

Wilsey had the temerity to diss Axl Rose as a lousy sex partner in a supermarket tabloid. Bryn Bridenthal, a spokeswoman for Geffen Records, said Rose may not even have known Wilsey.

While mocking conventional mores, she also began isolating herself from the people who could have been her natural allies: other porn actors.

In 1992, Wilsey was named the industry's Best New Starlet. At the awards show, she became an anti-Sally Field, reportedly saying in her acceptance speech: "I know a lot of you don't like me, but that's tough. I got my award."

She also developed a reputation for hard drinking and drug use. Her father said she used heroin for a time.

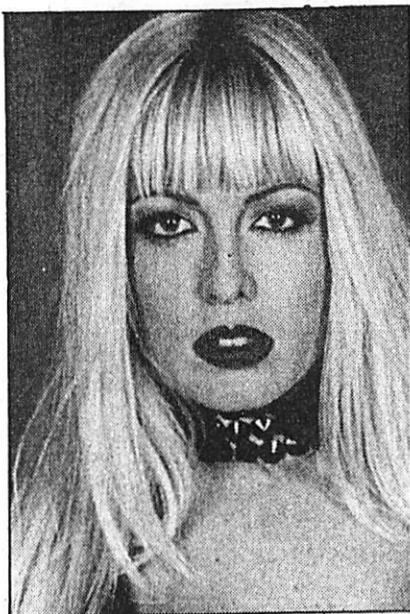
But Pera said this hard, wild veneer was constructed to cover a very vulnerable and lonely young woman who never felt pretty.

Wilsey believed she had no friends and had trouble trusting anyone. "She was very discriminated against because she was so big and didn't take any shit from anyone," Pera said. "She made big money. She knew her value."

Yet her lavish tastes outstripped even her six-figure income. She bought designer clothes and decorated her leased hillside home overlooking Universal City with thousands of dollars worth of art.

Her spending on friends was just as mercurial. She spent \$3,000 on a birthday present. Pera said her idea of economizing was buying a pair of designer shorts on sale for \$173.

There was no apparent single event that precipitated the suicide, although some said her career had started to slide. More likely, she had been frustrated with her inability to break away from the work, as she told Pera she would,



Sex industry star Shanon Wilsey committed suicide Monday.

or break into legitimate acting.

Even though Wilsey dated Hollywood celebrities, she could never be a part of that world. Wilsey's famous pals routinely trashed the sex industry to her, "but the whole reason they were with her was because she was a porn star," said Jeanna Fine, a former sex star and friend of Wilsey's.

Pera, 46, who considered herself as much a second mother as a manager, said Wilsey had been depressed for months over her breakup with rock guitarist Slash, like Rose of the band Guns 'N Roses.

Bridenthal of Geffen Records denied that Slash had a romantic relationship with Wilsey. "If she was [carrying a torch], it was completely one-sided," she said.

Of late, Wilsey's problems had been intensifying. "Maybe I should kill myself," she told friends on more than one occasion. Police said she owed money to the Internal Revenue Service and her savings account was so depleted that she had arranged to send Pera money to cover checks from Nyack, N.Y., where she was booked for a nude dancing engagement at a club called Lace.

While videos launch careers in the adult entertainment business, dancing is where real money can be made. As a featured performer, Wilsey would earn as much as \$5,000 a night.

The engagement was due to start Monday of this week, but Pera said Wilsey was out late Sunday night partying and riding around in a limo with a young man who was house-sitting for the band House of Pain. Pera said Wilsey had been dating one of the band members.

Wilsey drove up the winding road to her home just after 2 a.m. so erratically that her passenger complained.

"I'm fine," she replied. Then she crashed her Corvette into a picket fence, taking out part of it.

Pera was awakened a short time later by Wilsey's hysterical call. "I've just had a horrible car acci-

dent," the woman wailed. "I broke my nose. It's bleeding really bad and I've hit my head. You have to take me to the hospital."

Pera dressed and drove to Wilsey's house, not too hurriedly because she was used to late-night calls from the sex star. When she arrived, she found Wilsey's body lying in a pool of blood in the garage.

Pera saw the exit wound from the bullet. "It looked like she had a big flower on the side of her head," she said. When emergency personnel carried Wilsey out, Pera grabbed her foot and screamed: "Savannah, stay with us!"

Pera said Wilsey got the gun from a friend for protection against prowlers, and slept with it under her pillow.

Police ruled the death a suicide. "She was not happy with her life as a whole, everything in her life," said Los Angeles Police Detective Mike Coffey. "I think her whole life caused her suicide."

Pera speculated that the injury to her face from the car wreck could have seemed like the last straw, because it would have prevented her from making the nude dancing engagement.

Underscoring the need for counseling in the industry, Pera said Wilsey was in great conflict over her lifestyle, despite her public bravado. She bragged about doing crazy things, yet she told Pera she wished her mother had tried to stop her from performing.

"She felt bad because her mother didn't say anything about her being in the business," Pera said.

Mike Wilsey had tried to mend fences with his daughter recently. After her death, he found an unmailed letter she had written to him. "Where was I when she was dating Gregg Allman when he was 25 years older than she was? Where was I when she was on heroin? Where was I when she started doing porno movies?" was now Mike Wilsey paraphrased it.

He said he would have been there had she only asked.

Like many in the business, Paul Fishbein, the publisher of Adult Video News, resents any implication that the sex industry could have played a role in Wilsey's death. "Porn didn't do this," he said.

Still, Fishbein said he recognizes that it is time for the industry to face the problems young actresses bring with them. He said the help line is "still in the formative stages," but insisted "it's happening."

Weighing on Margold's mind these days are not the deaths that have already occurred, but those waiting to happen. "Six weeks ago at 3 a.m. I got a call from an actress who said the business has no soul. She said four years ago, somebody told her that and then that woman killed herself."

Staff writer Josh Meyer contributed to this story.