

Friar's Club Honors Larry Flynt and Dishonors Us

By Jackson Katz, Ph.D.

The Friar's Club of California is set to honor Larry Flynt with its Lifetime Achievement award in an "X-rated roast" in Los Angeles on July 13.

The Friars are famous for hosting raucous testimonial dinners, frolics and roasts in New York and Los Angeles. They used to be all-male events; the Friars first admitted women in 1988. Some of the biggest names in show biz have taken part in Friar festivities, starting with Irving Berlin and George M. Cohan in the early twentieth century, all the way up to Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, and Chevy Chase in the modern era.

It is well known that Friar's events often push the boundaries of good taste and propriety. Many Friars revel in the "politically incorrect" nature of their entertainment. Over the past century the Friars have had other controversial moments, including the incident in 1993 when Ted Danson came out in blackface to introduce his then-girlfriend Whoopi Goldberg.

But honoring Hustler publisher Larry Flynt is a low point in the venerable institution's colorful history. Why? The Friars take pride in their irreverent humor, and honor it in others. But like Holocaust "humor" and lynching "jokes," what Larry Flynt has wrought is not funny. His achievements and personal triumphs have come at a huge cost to women and girls - and to the men who care about them.

It is willfully naïve to dismiss Flynt's pornography as harmless "adult" entertainment. How can it be considered harmless to consistently portray and talk about women and girls in a sexually demeaning and degrading manner? From the infamous Hustler cover portraying a woman's body going through a meat grinder to countless racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic jokes and cartoons, Flynt has made his name (and fortune) by passing off old-fashioned misogyny and bigotry as somehow sexually liberating. Is this the "achievement" the Friars want to celebrate?

Larry Flynt's defenders often argue that his porn is for "consenting adults," and that therefore no one is hurt by it. But the effects of porn are more complicated than the phrase "consenting adults" implies. How?

Whenever we discuss the effects of pornography - and regardless of how we feel about people's right to produce or consume it - we have a responsibility to acknowledge the social context in which it exists. Flynt hasn't built his porn publishing empire in a vacuum. Our society has some of the highest rates of gender violence in the world. The numbers are staggering: one in four women will be raped or sexually assaulted. One in five teenage girls have been in a physically or sexually abusive relationship. Most women won't even walk alone after dark.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of these crimes is how often children are the victims. 67% of all sexual assault victimizations reported to law enforcement are people under the age of 18. Child sexual abuse used to be shrouded in secrecy.

These days it's in the news all the time. Consider last summer's horrific series of abductions and rape-murders of young girls. Or the Catholic Church's ongoing sexual abuse scandal. Are we supposed to

believe that all of these incidents are "isolated," that the broader culture within which they occur plays no role whatsoever?

When men are arrested for sexually abusing young girls (or boys), feverish media coverage of the crimes often includes reports that police have found an extensive collection of child porn videos, magazines, and downloaded pictures in the suspect's apartment.

Most people are rightly outraged about such crimes and repulsed by the men who commit them. But here's where it gets tricky. Realistically, at least some of the men who are genuinely outraged by sex crimes and would never purchase child pornography have likely purchased Hustler Magazine, or rented Hustler-produced porn videos. In other words, they have financially contributed to the Flynt empire.

This is an empire -- let's be clear -- that actively participates in the crude sexualization of little girls. Among his many magazines, Flynt also publishes Barely Legal, an online porn magazine whose raison d'être is the commodification of young girls' bodies. The male consumers of Barely Legal would likely insist that naked 18-year-old models with bows in their hair, spreading their legs wide for the camera, are technically "consenting adults." But everyone knows that the intent is to create the illusion that they are much younger.

For years a popular feature in Flynt's signature publication, Hustler, was a cartoon that followed the exploits of a fictional serial sexual abuser of young girls, Chester the Molester. The cartoon was discontinued only when the cartoonist, Dwayne Tinsley, was convicted of sexually abusing his real-life daughter - who claimed the art was a chronicle of her actual victimization.

Granted, it's not possible to draw a linear causal chain from the purchase by hundreds of thousands of men of a magazine like Barely Legal to sexual molestation of eight-year-old girls by middle-aged men. Nonetheless, is it credible to maintain that there is no relationship whatsoever between our society's pandemic of child sexual abuse and the widespread availability of products like Barely Legal, where adult men can purchase pictures of young girls' bodies for their masturbatory pleasure?

You don't need to argue that legal porn causes illegal activity in order to assert that it contributes significantly to a culture where younger and younger girls are made into sexual playthings, and hence set up to be the objects of adult men's sexual desires and pathologies.

We can take comfort in the idea of child sex offenders as horrible aberrations. They're monsters. We're nothing like them. And in fairness, purchasing and masturbating to images of "consenting adults" posing as young girls is not criminal behavior. But one need not be a criminal accomplice to share some moral responsibility, or feel - if we're honest with ourselves -- a certain degree of moral complicity.

For years, Flynt's apologists - in Hollywood and elsewhere -- have sought to portray him as a First Amendment hero, courageously battling the likes of right-wing Christians like Jerry Falwell and other forces of puritanical hypocrisy. It's a brilliant - if highly misleading - PR strategy. Framing Flynt not as someone to be shunned but as someone to be respected has effectively silenced many of his would-be feminist, progressive and liberal critics, who don't want to be seen as being on the wrong side of a "free speech" issue.

It has also silenced a lot of men who detest Flynt but are uncomfortable criticizing him. But it's time for us to break the silence. It's time for more men to stand up and say "not in my name." Tolerating Flynt's misogyny in the name of free speech is one thing. But when our cherished institutions go so far as to honor such a man, we not only send an unmistakably sexist message to our sons and daughters. We also dishonor ourselves.

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