

The women come and the women go, filling this small, damp, vaguely oniony-smelling room with stories of their pain. They cry so many tears that their faces melt into a giant, peach-colored, blubbery Everywoman. Their pain is so real, it's painful to listen. These women are here to share their pain with one another...to honor each other's pain...to envy each other's pain...to nurture each other's pain...to multiply that pain until all they feel is pain...and then to talk about that pain over donuts 'n' coffee at a fat male social worker's basement in Southeast Portland every Thursday at 3 p.m.

"Xena" (center of couch) has been dancing in Portland strip clubs for three years. "I had a great childhood," she says. "My parents never hit me or molested me, so sometimes it's hard to communicate with other strippers." Xena is shown here at a What About Us? support group meeting with group moderator Tom Roberts (left) and a fellow unmolested stripper named "Tabasco" (right).



I was never raped or abused. Because I'm happily married and don't do drugs. Because I've never thrown a rock through a boyfriend's window or cut off all my hair when I'm upset. Because I'm the weirdo. The outcast. But these What About Us? meetings have given me a new outlook on life, and I've come to embrace the idea that my suffering is every bit as precious as theirs, even though their suffering may have been a little more, y'know, dramatic. It's still my suffering and it's still important to me."

THESE WOMEN, mostly young and attractive, are among an estimated 13 or 14 members of a local sex workers' support group called *What About Us?*, a nonprofit organization whose literature states:

Just because you were never raped or molested doesn't mean you can't feel pain. It doesn't mean you can't imagine what it felt like. It doesn't mean you should be ostracized by other sex workers who've suffered "real" abuse. We are all women, and an essential part of our womanhood is to suffer and then tell everyone about it later.

"NOW I KNOW WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE BLACK," says "Xena," a stripper who dances at Snapper's in Hood River and Bucky Beaver's in Oregon City. Xena's been attending *What About Us?* meetings for nearly two months after suffering what she calls "a miniature-sized nervous breakdown" when other dancers at her club failed to invite her to an all-night slumber party, pizza feed, and clothing swap. "They said they 'forgot' to invite me, but I know why they didn't," Xena says now. "It's because

"I COULD ALMOST CRY when I hear some of the stories these girls tell," Tom Roberts, the *What About Us?* group founder, tells me later as we kayak down the Columbia River under a gorgeous late-spring sunset. An obese man who's perpetually running his tongue along the outside of his teeth, Roberts says he started *What About Us?* after working for two years as a bouncer at a notorious juice bar called The Oyster's Pearl in Molalla. "After a while, I'd see these girls come in, these lost-looking girls, and I could tell just by the way they carried themselves that they had never been molested as children, and that as adults they were tortured by their abuse-free past and didn't want any of the other strippers to know about it. That's when I decided to get involved in helping the nonabused and the underabused."

"Is that so?" I counter. "Several strippers have told me that you run the support group because it's an easy way for you to meet chicks and exploit their emotional vulnerability."

Roberts says nothing. Instead, he makes a loud coughing sound, continues paddling the kayak, and softly breaks wind.

"I HAVE TWO WORDS for these whiny, unmolested, unassaulted bitches: WHAT and EVER," says Fondue, a stripper who boasts of having been sexually, physically, mentally, and spiritually abused by both parents and all four grandparents and is widely known as The Woman Who Brought Naked Spaghetti Wrestling to Portland. "That's right: *Whatever*. Yadda yadda yadda. See ya, wouldn't wanna be ya! I could care less."

"I think you mean to say that you *couldn't* care less," I politely suggest to Fondue in between sips of my Shirley Temple as we sit at the Ship Ahoy bar in Southeast Portland.

"What?"

"You *couldn't* care less. If you *could* care less, that implies you must already care some."

"But dude—I *could* care less."

"I don't think you understand what I'm saying," I tell her.

"Whatever, dude," comes her sharp-tongued retort.

WHAT ABOUT US?

A SUPPORT GROUP FORMS TO ADDRESS THE UNIQUE EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF STRIPPERS WHO WERE NEVER ABUSED AS CHILDREN

THEY ARE THE LOST SHEEP of the sex-worker flock, these unfortunate dames and lasses who suffer discrimination and emotional estrangement due to a lack of compelling, graphic, disturbing, sympathy-engendering "abuse stories" from their past. Our industry should pull together and quit making the nonabused and underabused feel ashamed. While the lion's share of industry workers can recount childhood events that make the most jaded among us blush with horror and envy, some girls weren't nearly so lucky. We all suffer in various ways and degrees, but few forms of suffering can match the suffering one suffers from never having suffered enough.



"Ginseng" (left) has been a lingerie model for only three months but says she's "shocked at the lack of empathy" she receives from other sex workers when she tells them she was never raped or assaulted.