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Tricks of the trade
By Karen Milliner

'At the end of the day it's just sex ... I don't think people are too worried about it'

IT HARDLY looks like a citadel of sex. It's tucked away in a light industrial area in inner Brisbane, between an equipment hire business and a vacant allotment. Traffic thunders past incessantly during peak hours.

A fresh lick of paint, a new timber fence around its off-street car park and a small sign on the northern side of the building, beside the more prominent street numbering are the only clues to the nature of this business newcomer in Bowen Hills. This is Purely Blue, Queensland's first legal brothel, and it opens its doors for business at 9am today offering an opening special (quoted over the phone) of \$125 for half an hour, or \$250 for an hour, with one of five girls in a room decorated as a frilly French boudoir or in one surrounded by African animal prints. Purely Blue is the much lauded, squeaky-clean new face of prostitution in Queensland. Yet this week, less than a kilometre from its front door, an uglier, more brutal face was to be seen. On Sunday night, a street sex worker known as Debbie was found bloodied and battered in a vacant allotment littered with syringes and used condoms in Hurworth St. She now lies fighting for life in the Royal Brisbane Hospital.

Sex workers on the streets of New Farm and Fortitude Valley are feeling increasingly uneasy after the vicious assault, which they say comes on top of a number of rapes and attacks on street workers in the past few months.

The common political spin put on new prostitution laws is that the opening of legal boutique brothels, coupled with a police crackdown on illegal operations and increased fines for street workers, will help to stamp out the street trade.

But organisations such as Self-health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry (SQWISI), whose staff have close contact with street workers, say that line of argument is nonsense.

``People who choose to work on the streets do it for different reasons,''

says SQWISI regional co-ordinator Cheryl Matthews. ``Some of them have drug habits and they're working to support those habits. They are not allowed to work in legal brothels. But they're not hurting anyone on the street.

``It's great that we're getting legal brothels, we think the Government has taken a positive step with that, but not everyone can, or wants to, work in a brothel. Much more still needs to be done to provide safe environments for sex workers.''

Workplace health and safety is one of the key components of the code of practice for licensed brothels drawn up by the Prostitution Licensing Authority. It was compiled with input from the nationwide guide to best practice in the Australian sex

industry produced by the **Scarlet Alliance** and the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations.

This guide provides advice on everything from the types of condoms, lubricants and latex gloves that should be supplied, to the need to prevent occupational overuse injuries by ensuring, among other things, that beds and massage tables ``support the back and allow for a variety of services to be performed without strain or discomfort''.

Purely Blue co-owner, licensee and manager, Derek Matthews, has both these documents and he knows, as the first legal brothel to open, his operation will be under close scrutiny from not only licensing authorities but sex industry workers, other potential brothel licensees and the community.

``It's a big responsibility to get it right,'' Matthews says. ``If we don't, that could affect the future of the industry. I guess there is a lot of expectation on us from the sex industry, so to get it right we've tried to build good networks with the industry and community organisations such as SQWISI.''

Adelaide-born Matthews, a former social, youth development and community worker, is the public face of Purely Blue. His co-licensees, company executive Nicholas Elton Bedford Inskip and council engineer Yvette Patricia Skinner, have maintained a low profile, although all three were subject to rigorous checks into their personal backgrounds as part of the licensing process. Matthews, a divorcee with a degree in theology and a diploma in social planning, spent about a decade in local government and community organisations in the Inala and Logan areas. He left his job with the state Department of Family Services to start up and manage Purely Blue.

He politely deflects questions about his personal life, offering only that ``there's nobody in my life at the moment'' and that his family and friends are supportive, and ``in some instances fairly proud that we've been able to get the approvals and (they) think that I will do a good job''.

Many of his former colleagues, who asked not to be named, have praised him as a tireless and effective social welfare worker who lobbied to get the best possible services for the areas within which he worked.

But they said they were gob-smacked when they heard of his change of career.

``I was really stunned,'' said a woman who worked with him at the Logan City Council. ``And quite disappointed. He was a nice guy, very intelligent. I fear for his future, because if this (the brothel) doesn't work out, I think he would have a lot of trouble getting a job back in the welfare sector.''

A community youth worker who had dealings with Matthews in the Inala area said he found it ``quite bizarre''.

``It's hard to comprehend that he's made the shift from welfare to capitalism, especially since he would have seen, through his work, the oppression of women, the homelessness and the patriarchy that exists.''

Matthews, however, sees no contradiction between his previous

and current vocations, and says he has not chosen the brothel business just for the money.

``It is a business, so we are there to make it viable, make a go of it as a business. I don't resile from that.

``But we also are hoping to influence and be part of the reform process in Queensland. I'm looking at the benefits and change I can personally make to the sex industry in terms of being able to provide equity, empowerment for workers, and bringing respect, mainstreaming of the industry.

``I see some very strong similarities working in the provision of services, working with people as I have, and what I'm doing now.''

Prostitution Licensing Authority Chairman Bill Carter says now that Purely Blue is open it will be the subject of ``reasonable scrutiny''.

``Their licence gives them a right to conduct their business and they are aware of the conditions of their licence and what's expected of them, so we wouldn't expect to have someone there every day,' ' he says.

``There are a lot of people not sure about how it's going to work. It will take time. I think there is still a lot of distrust out there.''

Carter says the authority has a further 14 brothel licence applications before it, with about three or four in Cairns, Townsville and the Gold Coast under close consideration.

Matthews says being the first brothel to open has given Purely Blue ``more focus and attention than what we assumed there would be'', but it had not been an impediment.

``At the end of the day it's just sex. I think Queensland is at the stage that in a legal environment, if people are consenting and safe sex practices are being used, I don't think people are too worried about it.''