

## Grace Bellavue: "Social media has given sex workers a real opportunity to be heard"

Syn

con

Laura Parker interviews Grace Bellavue, the closest thing Australia has to a celebrity sex worker.

By Laura Parker Published 27 May 2013 10:03

 From just £299 per couple. Book by 31 May.



*Grace Bellavue, in an Instagram self-portrait (Instagram/gracebellavue)*

 Grace Bellavue, in an Instagram self-portrait (Instagram/gracebellavue)

In Woody Allen's short story "The Whore of Mensa", a call girl service dispatches pretty blondes to clients' hotel rooms. Except there's no sex: the girls are all literature majors, getting paid to sell intellectual stimulation to men who fancy a hurried tête-à-tête on anything from Proust to Chomsky.

Outlandish as Allen's fantasy is, it's apparent that while sex sells, the package deal of sex and brains sells even better.

Grace Bellavue is the closest thing Australia has to a celebrity sex worker. The 25-year-old Adelaide escort is a sapiosexual's wet dream: a brainy ex-digital marketer who's as likely to tweet saucy details of life as a sex worker as she is her opinion on marriage equality.

"Nefarious escort, writer, miscreant and vagabond with a penchant for scotch and hip hop," her Twitter bio reads. Her profile picture is her face – another don't of sex work – layered over a larger image of her lingerie-clad ass. Last week, she tweeted: "Off to a hotel suite for some anal, blow jobs, wine, spa baths and hot sex. Time to go to work."

In person, Grace – real name Pippa – is even more fascinating. I meet her at the Grace Hotel in Sydney's central business district, where she stays each time she's in town to amuse herself. Wearing a mid-length pale pink Peplum dress and tailored black suit jacket, she sits down to a plateful of sushi from the breakfast buffet and apologises for being late. "Housekeeping came early, so I had to run around hiding all the condom wrappers from last night and get out of there as fast as I could."

She's in town for five nights as part of an Australian tour she undertakes at least four times a year to keep her growing list of interstate clients happy. Many of them already know her intimately: with more than 9,000 Twitter followers, almost 70 per cent of her bookings now come through social media. She tweets about politics, gives advice on blowjobs and encourages other sex workers to get online. Her willingness to

discuss the more sobering aspects of her job and her ongoing campaign to improve the rights of Australian sex workers – she’s a regular contributor to Australian women’s blog Mamamia, and last year presented a talk at TEDxAdelaide about the future of sex work – has turned her into the unofficial spokesperson the sex work industry never had.

In a way, it’s all the product of very good marketing. Grace’s personality is her brand. She left the job security of call girl agencies two years ago to start her own freelance escort business, and, using her background in digital marketing, launched a slick-looking website and a Twitter account that quickly found a market. It’s a rare strategy in a line of work long associated with shame and secrecy."

“The idea of allowing your private psyche into a public domain for comment alongside your body is a daunting thing,” she says over breakfast. “We still have a lot of stigma, judgment and backbiting due to the nature of our profession. But social media has given sex workers a real opportunity to be heard.”

It’s an opportunity she’s wanted for a long time. She became a sex worker at 18, lured to a brothel in her home town by curiosity and the promise of passion, a schoolgirl fantasy instilled in her by the Mills and Boon novels she read growing up. Sex fascinated her. Not the fumbling encounters of her teenage peers, but the idea that sex could be art, a thing she could practice and perfect. Her first encounter didn’t live up to expectations: her first client, a 37-year-old first timer, had even less an idea of what to do than she did. But she was eager to see how the experience could change her. She wanted to know whether she would look different in the mirror at home, whether she’d feel more adult. She saw twelve more clients that night, walking out of her first shift with something like \$1,000 in her pocket.□

At home, she couldn’t explain the sudden influx of cash to her parents, telling them instead that she was dealing drugs. It took her months to get up the courage to confess to her mother, who reacted by kicking her out. That she had no one to confide in or ask for advice is part of the reason she’s so open about sharing what she does with the public these days. “This is very much a job that needs debriefing,” she says, not intending the joke.

For the next few years she experimented with desk jobs before deciding on a career in digital project management. She pursued this but, bored of the nine-to-five, took up sex work again, working for escort agencies around Adelaide and Brisbane. She did this three times – from sex work back to the office – to appease the men she dated, all of whom observed similarly rigid views on monogamy. But the itch still wasn’t scratched.

“I was too frustrated in the office, I couldn’t rid myself of the desire to run my own business. So I went back for good.”

The Twitter thing started as an experiment, but has since become her best weapon in advocating for the decriminalisation of sex work in Australia. Alongside national sex workers association Scarlet Alliance, local health organisation SIN and state based sex industry collectives SWAGGERR and House of ASPaSIA, all focused on improving the rights of sex workers, Grace has, in the last two years, become actively involved in lobbying the Australian government to remove all references to prostitution in legal definitions of criminal acts.

(Prostitution in Australia, like in the United States, is governed by each state and territory, and varies across the country: Queensland, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory have adopted models in which prostitution is legalised, while New South Wales (NSW) remains the only state in which sex work is almost completely decriminalised. Because of this NSW is often regarded as the leading model of sex work legislation globally alongside New Zealand, which has also adopted a decriminalisation model. The rest of Australia has seen no change in existing laws that uphold brothels and street workers as illegal, mirroring similar legislation in the UK and the United States, where Nevada is the only state to allow legal prostitution through brothels.)

The current battle is being fought on Grace's home turf in Adelaide, where the South Australian government is debating the introduction of a new parliamentary bill – introduced by Labor MP Stephanie Key – that would see the state adopting an almost pure decriminalisation model, something sex work advocacy groups have been attempting to introduce in the state since the 1970's. If successful, the bill will allow brothel owners to run their business in accordance with pre-existing consumer laws, reduce penalties for street based sex work and clear sex workers in the state of any previous prostitution-related offences.

Think of sex work like the hospitality industry – a transitional job where not everyone has the same skill set. But those who want to stick around and legitimise their skills can do so with the aid of a professional framework. In the same vein, decriminalisation gives sex workers the freedom to develop their own professional networks and code of ethics aimed at increasing sexual health and education in the industry.

“Decriminalisation works,” Grace says. “It allows sex work to be socially contextualised and regarded as a valid profession to be afforded the same human rights as workers in any other job.”

It also helps destigmatise the purchase of sex, making us that much less likely to be shocked or outraged every time a politician is caught in flagrante delicto with a sex worker.

“Clients get demonised more than we do. If you want a decent blowjob or want to try something new in a safe space, it should be okay to feel unashamed about going to a sex worker.”

Part of the problem is the lack of a united voice in the industry. Sex work can be an alienating job: where brothels are banned, it is illegal for sex workers to work together. The majority of sex workers spend most of their time alone, or in hotel rooms with clients, with little opportunity for peer bonding or large-scale coordinated efforts. This is why Grace has been so adamant to get other sex workers to follow her lead on social media: as she sees it, platforms like Twitter can provide a global support network for the sex work industry, aiding the spread of information and, when the need calls for it, act as a warning bell.

In May last year, Grace used Twitter to reveal the identity of a paroled rapist who attacked her in an Adelaide apartment. A former client, the man had threatened her a number of times before she had finally insisted he no longer call her. Using a false name, he lured her to the apartment where he pinned her against the wall by her throat and threatened to rape her. A well-timed scream saved her. □

She reported the incident to police, but unconvinced she would be taken seriously, tweeted a photo of her attacker as a warning to sex workers in the area.

“It’s 2012. No human should have to face assault and attempted rape at work,” she told her followers.

The decision to report the man to the police was “not made lightly”, Grace says. In Australia, any sex worker who files a police report faces declaring his or her status as a sex worker. This information can be officially recorded, and can thus be potentially accessed by anyone who has the right to demand and obtain a criminal background check. As a sex worker with her own business and a huge following, she is lucky: there’s no real need for her to try and hide who she is in fear that someone she knows will discover what she does for a living. But most sex workers have a lot to gain from keeping their identity secret: many of the men and women Grace knows have family, friends and relationships that would undoubtedly suffer; a lot of sex workers also have children.

This is why Grace hesitated to report the violence against her, and why most sex workers choose not to report similar attacks to the police: a permanent police record affects everything from parental custody to access to housing, employment and community services. What landlord would lease his property to a registered sex worker? What company would hire someone who used to – or might still – be a sex worker?

“No one thinks about this stuff. Imagine being in a situation where someone is trying to do you harm, and you can’t report it or tell anyone about it. It’s shameful.”

Grace’s arguments about the ills of a non-decriminalised legal system are compelling, but they’re not convincing everyone. In particular the “white educated females” who Grace says harbour a deep dislike of the sex work industry and who – as the target demographic for Mamamia, where Grace has written about her parents’ reaction to her confession of wanting to be a sex worker and posted a chilling account of her encounter with the paroled rapist – regularly attack Grace by bringing up sex trafficking and the sticky morality of sex work by way of rebuttal to her posts. (She says sex trafficking, whilst a valid problem, is often mistaken for “sex migration”: sex workers moving to countries with better rates of pay and working conditions.)

“I wonder how many of the prostitutes care about how their profession affects the lives of the wives and children?,” wrote one commenter on one of Grace’s posts. “Oh I know: they could care less, as long as they get paid...”

Her resolve remains steadfast.

“At the end of the day, it’s true that we are fucking their husbands,” she says, suppressing a smile. “But it’s all part of changing the way we look at sex: when to do it, how to do it, and with whom.”

“If I just manage to convince just one or two people to see things from my perspective, then it’s all been worth it.”

It’s working. Since joining Twitter, Grace’s clientele has not just grown, but also significantly diversified. Her female and couple bookings have “gone through the roof”, and the number of bookings from first-time clients doubled.

“I feel a little like a My First Escort doll. I’m getting so many people who have never seen a sex worker before and who are curious to try it out. They always start out by following me on Twitter, talking to me and finally building up the courage to make a booking.”

“It’s great to see more girls: I think for them it’s not so much being comfortable with me but getting some intellectual stimulation. Girls need personality and genuine conversation to be turned on.”

The fact her clients know her so well has also significantly changed her own experience of the job. For one, more and more clients are asking her to tweet about them. There are daily declarations of love, marriage proposals and invitations to elope. And almost every client turns up with a bottle of Scotch.

□“They know I love Scotch because I’m always talking about it on Twitter. So they bring a bottle and they want to sit and drink and talk and ask me about my day.”

“So I ask them about their day and they tell me and we share this moment. I’m kind of like the therapist and they’re the patient.”

More and more, the term 'sex work' seems an inadequate description of the kind of service that Grace provides. □

“It shits me, sometimes, but the fact of the matter is I seem to be having less and less sex. Who would have thought, right?”

Laura Parker is a freelance writer based in New York. Her work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Economist* and *Time Out*. She tweets @lauralovescake.

---

*New Statesman Ltd*