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Ringmaster for the Naked Circus

Justin Kendall
Iowa State University

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Des Moines. Towering above the entire room, the DJ's perch makes everything in the dimly lit club visible. All the gyrating. All the jiggling. And even some booty shaking. This is the hub of everything that happens in the Lumber Yard, Des Moines' newest gentlemen's club, the politically correct term for a strip joint.

Five dancers are spread out on three separate stages, their flesh barely concealed under see-through robes and nipple-covering pasties. Each has the obligatory golden pole at her disposal. Men and women both gawk at the spectacle from the front rows, tempting each per-former with dollar bills. Blue, green, yellow and red strobe lights flash, giving a better glimpse of the exposed entertainers as they place customers' heads between their bouncing, bouncing breasts.

On this Saturday night, the Lumber Yard is a temple of testosterone. Aside from the nearly naked women dancing on stage, the National League Championship Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Arizona Diamondbacks airs on the two-story projection TV. Two billiards games are being played on the lowest level of the club. Beer flows and cigarette smoke clouds the air (the club isn't allowed to sell alcohol so it's BYOB — Bring Your Own Beer). All this to an eclectic soundtrack of R&B, techno and rock. The music fades and a voice fills the void.

"Locate those two hands of yours and show some appreciation for these five ladies. Don't forget that a private dance is a mere 20-spot away. Guaranteed to bring a party to your pants."

Those are Wade Winters' words. He manages and DJs at the Lumber Yard. Winters is slim. In his green paintball jersey and blue jeans, he blends into the surroundings like a chameleon. A few regulars call out to him like a long-lost

* Ethos writer Justin Kendall hangs out with the men who run a strip club. 
 Photos by Nicol Ausen

friend. They offer hearty handshakes and at times, business cards.

At 25, Winters has been DJing for three years in strip clubs with names such as "Foxy Lady" and "Beach Girls." The DJ is the ringmaster of this semi-organized circus. "It's just like a car wreck," Winters says. "You're at the pinnacle of what goes on."

Winters splits his DJing duties tonight with Dan, 30. He shaves his head side-to-side, whipping his black ponytail around and saying, "No last names."

Dan is a well-constructed man with large arms, so his refusal isn't disputed. He's dressed well in a black T-shirt and dress pants. Periodically, he'll wipe down his arms with wet naps in addition to sucking on Halls Honey Lemon Cough Drops and drinking bottle after bottle of water to help fight his lingering cold. He's been at the club since 3 a.m. and is slowly chipping away at a 13-hour shift. But he knows how to survive. "You just have to disconnect your brain and flow," he says.

Dan's philosophy is a "fuck-it attitude." If there's some dead air or a dancer who doesn't go onstage when she's supposed to, he just tunes it out. "You end up doing this a lot quicker that way.

**Sinful Saturday**

On this particular Saturday night, the madness intensifies the later it gets. At 9 p.m., two guys soap a short blonde dancer under two shower heads. The red lighting over the stage matches her red thong.

The shower is at the forefront of everyone's attention again at 10:15 p.m., for a sacrifice — when a bachelor or birthday boy is beaten and humiliated by a dancer onstage for $30 or in the shower for $50. Under the red lighting, "Alisha" is battering a bachelor's backside with her wooden paddle. The bachelor laughs and smiles until the paddle cracks across his bum. Every swing elicits "Oohs" and "Ahs" from the crowd and a grimace from the bachelor. The sight is far from erotic or enticing. It's an exercise in pain.

By midnight a tanned blonde named "Lydia" refuses to go onstage for the rest of the evening. Some of her high school classmates are in the crowd. Earlier she reluctantly took part in her first sacrifice. The 18-year-old's only trouble was tripping off the bachelor's undies from under his blue jeans.

A redhead dancer named "Itsa" shimmies head first down one of the golden poles in a way that would make any devoted married man forget his vows.

Another sacrifice at 1:30 a.m. is that of a balding, beer-bellied, over-50 man named Thad. "Daisy," a leggy blonde, whips him with his own belt and the DJs tear into him. "God, I hope you're married, Thad," Dan taunts. "This will be the only time you have an actual good-looking woman on top of ya," Winters adds.

"My whole purpose in a sacrifice is to get my ass kicked," Dan says. "In five years, it hasn't happened yet."

At 2 a.m. another sacrifice grabs the crowd's attention. Tonight is the birthday of "London," a blonde dancer. Her gift is a shower dance with three of her co-workers. The scene is enough to make anyone who was beginning to doze off. "I hate social events," Dan says. "It's just another Saturday night at the yard.

**Rockin' the Mic**

A woman in a pink polka-dotted robe enters the DJ booth. Her stage name is "Rio," and her name is listed next on the dry-erase board. Hers is one of about 30 names on a list that includes such strip-club staples as "Baby," "Sky," "Jade," "Daisy," "Jasmine," "Nicole" and "Amber." She glances at the computer screen for her song request.

"He's good," she says of Dan. "I was going to tell him to play [Aerosmith's] 'Pink' and he already has it up."

Minutes and even seconds before a dancer goes onstage, her music is chosen. There is a method to choosing the appropriate music for the time of day and the audience. In the afternoon no hard-core rap and at night no slow songs. "I try to steer away from the slower, put-you-to-sleep stuff that I will allow during the day when the business guys are in here," Winters says. "But in the evening I try to keep it all upbeat whether it be rock, dance, R&B or whatever."

Although there isn't a specific type of music for blondes, brunettes or redheads, there are some determinants. Each woman's outfit factors into her music selection. "Some girls will put on their chaps and a cowboy hat and go out there and get the crowd going," Winters says, which calls for an upbeat country song.

Being a veteran gentlemen's club DJ and having worked with most of the women at previous clubs, Winters knows what types of music
most of the women want. It's easy, too, because the Yard has 7,000 MP3s just a click and a drag away. "I can see an outfit, I know what songs they want," he says. "But some girls will come up every single set and hand me a CD."

The job isn't just about playing songs, though. It's dealing with more than 30 dancers as well as a bouncing staff and front-door people. And then there are the customers. Firing up crowds and getting them to tip is part of the DJ's job.

"You can say, 'Let's make some noise,' and nothing will happen," Winters says. "Or you can say 'Come on, where's the fucking noise?'" He adds, "They're drunk guys;" he adds, "I don't understand a bit of it."

**Livin' the Life**

The general public's consensus is that Winters and Dan DJ for the assumed perks associated with such an establishment. But Winters says he's here for the Benjamins.

"Certain people say, 'I know why you do it. You do it because of the pussy or the hot chicks or naked chicks,'" he says. "I started doing this job because of the money. It's great money. I've been averaging dancer tips of between $800 and $1,200 a week."

The cash also keeps Dan working. "The money's too good to pass up right now," he says, especially since he's enrolled at a local community college.

As for the nudity, Winters says it gets old. "This industry is one big scandalous rumor. You leave the building with a girl, you're fucking her."

That said, Winters is quick to dish his sexual escapades. He boasts of three-ways, of sex during his break, of girls climbing up the fire escape to his apartment and banging on his door at all hours of the night and day. But he's adamant about fidelity when he's in a relationship. "I've never in my life cheated on any girlfriend," he says. "I never have done it, and I never will do it."

But anything goes when he's single. "I'll have as much fun as I can, and it's an environment where if you're single you can have a lot of fun," Winters says. "Almost too much fun."

For Winters, those days have passed since he took on the role of foreman of the Lumber Yard. He's pledged not to date any of his dancers. Winters tired of on-again, off-again relationships with a dancer, but the stress of seeing his lover being groped by random guys was too much. Her lack of trust in him also doomed the relationship.

"It just came down to her insecurity about herself that she wasn't as pretty as the next girl or the girl with the fake boobs or whatever," he says. "She would say I was having sex with this girl or that girl. In her eyes that girl was prettier or whatever, and her thing was, 'Why wouldn't I want to be with this girl versus her?'"

Dan has dated dancers in the past, but it's been "a long, long time" since. He won't rule out future relationships. "If something came about, maybe," he says. "But I don't. To me, it's another work environment. When I'm here, I'm here to work and I actually don't notice it as much anymore. To do your job appropriately and well you have to do it that way."

Most of the dancer's lives are unstable, Winters says. They've been beaten and cheated on by ex-husbands and boyfriends until their self-esteem became non-existent. A few are good at blocking everything out but others struggle. "This job is just an emotionally hard thing for many girls," he says. "That's why they're messed up on drugs, alcohol or whatever. They do it to cope with what they do and they can't handle it because they're constantly getting treated like a piece of ass."

Anything that threatens his dancers physically, emotionally or psychologically isn't tolerable, Winters says. "I try to treat my girls like solid gold," he says. "Encourage them, help them, get my ass out there and work my best to get guys to tip better."

"Granted they're taking off their clothes for the almighty dollar, but they're still fucking people," he adds. "Some of them are bitches, I'll give you that too, but most of them are very sweet girls and they just do this because a lot of them are high school dropouts. I'd bet that 75 to 80 percent of these girls have a kid."

When a dancer approached Winters because her young child was home sick, he told her to take off work and take care of her kid, practicing what he preaches. "Just treat them like a human being."

Winters' and Dan's shoulders are often cried on. The pair expresses human regard for women who are treated as sexual objects rather than people.

"I tend to be that one person who in some manner, form or way cares," Winters says. "They tell me everything. Shit, I would never tell anyone, but they just give it up."

The duo isn't heartless, but they are realists. Their demeanor likens a doctor/patient relationship, except for the playful flirtation. They avoid getting too close to protect their own mental health. It's simple self-preservation.

"I try to keep a certain amount of distance," Dan says. "So you care, but you don't. You can't save the world."

The schedule is employee friendly at the Yard. Rather than the usual 13-hour dancing day, Winters gives them five- or six-hour shifts, with the longest being an eight-hour shift on Sundays. "They can work that shift and make their $400 or $500 and go home, go to their other job or study for school the next morning, versus making these girls into slaves," he says.

None of the women are required to return the next day or night. The dancers serve as independent contractors and can work for any other club. But there's never a fear of a dancer shortage. "There are always women who want money," Dan says.

And there's a lot of money to be made. A dark-haired dancer named "Destiny" says she likes to make at least $20 an hour. But her
overall goal for the evening was even loftier. “My goal is to bank $300 or $400,” she says.
She knows why the customers are here and she knows why she’s here. It’s a simple three-step formula. “They’re here to look at your tits, your ass and your face,” she says. “I love to dance, and I love to entertain people.” It’s the best of both worlds.

Sinful Saturday II

Two weeks later the scene remains unchanged. Winters and Dan are back on duty, and most of the same dancers are as well. Dan is still chasing his butt down and taunting sacrificial boys almost every half hour.
“Yes, Mike, that’s what boobs look like without the stapie through them.”
“For proving that white people have no rhythm, thank you, buddy.”
“Yes, I know the last time anything like this happened to you, you woke up.”
“Forgot the close to an actual woman before have you, Clint? Are you a virgin?”
At the count of three the entire crowd screams, “Virgin!” But Dan isn’t even close to getting the fight he’s chasing. When asked, the man’s reply is quick. “Fuck, no!”
Each offering is left with beer-soaked pants, shredded underwear and reddened chests. One bachelor even tossed his red skivvies away after they were no longer operational.
Winters’ pledge to quit dating dancers is beginning to waver. “She approached me,” he says before dropping the subject.
On a normal Saturday, sacrifices are the night’s highlights, but tonight there was an incident. One of the dancers lost control and began screaming at Winters. As the bouncers tried to restrain her, she removed her silver platform heel and chucked it at him. Winters dodged decapitation by ducking, and the heel smashed against the giant gray doors leading into the club.
She continued in a fit of rage kicking two bouncers in the groin and ripping the white “Staff” shirt off a burly bouncer with the longest mullet ever. Winters’ demeanor remained unchanged. He stood calmly, collected and watched as two bouncers finally carried her up the stairs to the dressing room. “She was disrespectful to a customer,” Winters says. And so her career at the Yard ended.
At 3:45 a.m., a crowd of 30 lingerers. It’s closing time. The dancers who previously graced the stage have begun to file out into early morning. They’re barely recognizable in street clothes. Each drags her oversized luggage behind helped by the burly bouncers who follow them into the parking lot just in case.
Three soldiers in camouflage approach “Destiny.” She’s nearly unrecognizable in a black leather jacket and blue jeans, a drastic change from the American flag tube top and spandex shorts she wore earlier in the night. The soldiers’ request is inaudible, but her response says volumes.
“I’m not working anymore.” And the fantasy ends.

Justin Kendall is a senior in journalism and mass communication. He is managing editor of Ethos. This story also appears courtesy of Ethos at www.knetmag.com.