

Newsweek

What Would Jesus Say About Pete?

**A NEW PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT WAS FILMED BY THE
ODDEST OF COLLABORATORS—TWO PASTORS AND A PORNOGRAPHER**

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Pete would prefer that parents pass on pornography. Pete is repulsed by porn, and he's prepared to proselytize. But Pete's not a person--Pete's a puppet. Meet Pete the Porno Puppet, coming soon to a Public Service Announcement near you.

Part "Sesame Street," part "Odd Couple," Pete is the brainchild of two pastors and a pornographer. It may sound like the beginning of a bad joke, but to hear Craig Gross, Mike Foster and James DiGiorgio tell it, it could just be a match made in heaven. Gross, 28, and Foster, 32, are the founding ministers of Fireproof Ministries, a nonprofit Christian outreach group that has launched a crusade against the multi-billion dollar pornography industry. Not content to preach to the converted, the duo took a more unorthodox tack: they launched XXXchurch.com, a "Christian porn site" to educate Web surfers about the addictiveness of porn and the damage it can do to a person's life. (Their first PSA ran on cable featuring a cast of dwarf actors, but the nonprofit organization Little People of America demanded Gross and Foster kill it because they found the tag line--"porn stunts your growth"--offensive.) They also host booths at adult film industry conventions in Las Vegas. "We debuted our site at a porn show," says Gross. "We're not yelling at people...We kept going back to these shows because they kept asking us back."

Enter James DiGiorgio. Known to his fans as Jimmy D., DiGiorgio is the man behind Smash Pictures. Over the past 10 years he has shot such titles as "Sopornos #3" and "Nutjob Nurses," but after seeing Gross and Foster quietly hold court at industry conventions for more than a year, he decided to find out what they were all about. He was charmed. "They're kinda wacky, but they've got a great sense of humor," he says. "It reminded me of the story of Jesus walking with the lepers." After hearing about their first failed PSA, he offered his services for free. Their discussion went from filming a strictly anti-porn spot--a stance DiGiorgio (whose livelihood relies on a robust smut industry, which recently suffered a setback due to the discovery of HIV infections among some of the actors) could not wholly embrace--to focusing on keeping children from encountering sexually explicit images. "Now they were talking about something I can get 100 percent behind," he recalls. "I have a grown daughter and an 8-year-old son who spends a lot of time online. So I said 'hell yeah, let's go for it. I am way, way, way behind that.'"

And so Pete the Porno Puppet was born. In the spot--filmed on DiGiorgio's porno set with his porno camera and his porno crew--Pete, a scraggly haired skater boy puppet, pops up onscreen and announces "I'm here today to talk to you about pornography...Have you gone into your daddy's closet and found a bunch of magazines with naked mummies in them? Did this make you feel yucky inside?" The ad is cute, if a touch creepy. It's got a children's show flavor with a no-brainer message for adults: If you have kids in your home, get rid of your stash. And the fact that it was filmed by a pornographer for an anti-porn Christian group should make it a surefire hit with the media. Comedy Central's Daily Show with Jon Stewart did a brief piece gently mocking everyone involved. On May 4 TechTV, a cable network devoted to quirky technology will air the director's cut (which actually features simulated puppet sex and masturbation) and interview Gross and Foster. But Pete may just be too hardcore for prime time. The PSA is meeting resistance at just about every network and local cable outlet.

Nobody wants to air it as it was intended--as a free public service announcement, says Gross, who is prepared to raise the \$5,000 to \$10,000 needed to air it on television. The Christian Broadcasting Network's flagship program The 700 Club planned to run a segment on it last week, but it was killed at the last minute by evangelical host Pat Robertson. The reporter who prepared the piece wrote in an e-mail to Gross that, "It seems when Pat saw the promo today, he made the comment that Jesus would not go into a porno shop."

It is particularly this resistance they have been getting from religious leaders that rankles Gross. "They think for the most part we have gone to far," he complains. "We disagree and think Jimmy D. is a guy Jesus would hang with." Ironically, it is the pornography industry itself that has been the most supportive of XXXchurch's mission to keep children sheltered from obscenity. Indeed, DiGiorgio is mulling the idea of putting the spot in his own releases as a warning to kids and a reminder (or potential buzzkill) to parents before the hardcore action begins. Provided there are no children in your home, watch for Pete the Porno Puppet at a DVD player near you--perhaps ahead of the next installment of "The Sopornos."

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