

**Lyn
Ulbricht
Pushed
Herself to
the Brink
of Death
for
#FreeRoss.
Her Last,
Best Hope:
President
Trump**

By Mark Yarm

02.04.2019

When Lyn Ulbricht is home, a 20-minute drive from the maximum-security penitentiary in Florence, Colo., she's frequently up at five in the morning. After fixing herself a cup of tea and doing some devotional reading, she turns to meditation and prayer. She often visualizes her son Ross—who until a recent transfer was locked up in that nearby penitentiary—as a free man. Sometimes she pictures him emerging from prison to be greeted by a celebratory group of family and friends. Other times she imagines feeding him a good, home-cooked meal. Or she envisions spending time with him on the beach, like they used to do on family vacations in Costa Rica, before Ross was arrested and Lyn's life changed in ways she could never have imagined.

But on this early November day, Lyn Ulbricht is in Las Vegas, sitting at a booth at World Crypto Con at the Aria Resort and Casino on the Strip. On the table in front of her are piles of FreeRoss.org stickers and fliers; a clear plastic box for cash donations; a mailing list sign-up sheet; and a pad of purple, butterfly-emblazoned stationery available for anyone looking to write Ross, now 34, a note in prison. Behind her are two banners, one bearing a charcoal-style portrait of Ross and the message "Help free Ross Ulbricht! Our Goal: 500,000 Signatures."

To Lyn's left hangs *Silk Road*, a painting of a caravan of camels by Finnish artist Vesa Kivinen, which is being auctioned off to help support the Free Ross campaign. The work shares its name with the infamous dark web bazaar Ross founded in early 2011, where all manner of drugs and other illicit goods were available. After a lengthy, multiagency investigation, the FBI arrested Ross in 2013, accusing him of running the eBay-like site under the alias the Dread Pirate Roberts. In 2015, he was convicted of seven counts, including distributing narcotics on the internet and engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise, and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Lyn stands out in a sea of young, male conventioners in altcoin T-shirts. A petite, blonde woman in her sixties, she is dressed in black slacks and an unbuttoned white collared shirt over a long-sleeve slate-blue tee. She's wearing a black fanny pack, just big enough to carry her iPhone. Though she was a tech neophyte not terribly long ago—she only got her first smartphone, a hand-me-down, two weeks before Ross's arrest—she now feels, if not at home, at least at ease among all the blockchain and cryptocurrency startups that share the floor with her.

While she's here, Lyn will work the booth, give a talk, and participate in some podcasts and documentaries—all fairly typical activities for her. But she makes sure to leave some flexibility in her schedule to go with what she describes as a "very strong flow." She likens it to surfing, once a pastime of Ross's. Sometimes things happen, or people come her way, that Lyn, a Christian, attributes to a higher power. The flow, or God, can take her surprising places. By the end of her time in Vegas, she will have sat down for a joint interview with a man Ross is alleged to have ordered killed, and snagged a MAGA rally photo-op with Donald Trump Jr.

“My prayer is that I go free and can have kids of my own and show them at least a fraction of the love [my mom] and my dad have shown me,” Ross writes.

This image and main photo courtesy Lyn Ulbricht



At the moment, Lyn is speaking with a grey-bearded man named T.J. Rohleder, whom I later learn is an entrepreneur and prolific author of excitedly titled books (*How to Make Millions Sitting on Your Ass!*). Rohleder, who calls himself the Blue Jeans Millionaire, is wearing wire-framed glasses, an orange Carhartt pocket tee, and yes, blue jeans. He’s an advisor for a cryptocurrency investment group. “I read about you in Rolling Stone magazine,” he tells Lyn.

“Oh God, I hated that article!” she replies.

“Well, it’s the only way I know about this.”

“Well, that’s too bad because it was very distorted. And that guy who wrote it was so horrible. Don’t believe that story!”

Lyn and her husband Kirk regret participating in [that 2014 feature](#), which is the basis for an [upcoming movie](#). She begins to explain how the piece was sensationalized, how it focused on unproven allegations of murder-for-hire. (Look no further than the secondary headline: “It was the eBay of vice, an online hub of guns, drugs and

crime. But its alleged founder soon learned that you can't rule the underworld without spilling some blood.")

The Blue Jeans Millionaire interrupts her. "I actually read that story through the eyes of an entrepreneur," Rohleder says, adding that he believes in freedom and independence and the right to not have the government tell us how to live.

"Well, you saw past the sensationalism," Lyn says. For five years, she has [fought the mainstream media narrative](#)—which she says made "Ross into this monster, this kind of *Breaking Bad* character"—and explained time and again why her son deserves his freedom. She has suffered her share of brutal losses, but this conversation is a small win: Rohleder says he'll sign the [online petition calling for clemency for Ross](#).

Lyn's plan is to, one way or another, present President Trump with the petition once it reaches half a million signatures. (As of this writing, it has more than 128,000.) Her son has all but run out of legal options; the president is the only person who can grant him clemency.

"Mother's love, man, it's a powerful thing," Rohleder says. "It's the most powerful thing."

Lyn smiles appreciatively. "Don't mess with the mama," she says.

Ross was arrested in San Francisco on Oct. 1, 2013, something Lyn didn't learn until the next day, when a Reuters reporter called her and Kirk at their home in Austin seeking comment. The allegation that Ross was the mastermind behind Silk Road came as a complete shock to the couple, the operators of an eco-resort in Costa Rica. "He is a really stellar, good person and very idealistic," Lyn [told Reuters](#). "I know he never meant to hurt anyone." It's a position she hasn't wavered from since.

Things escalated quickly from there. "We turn on the TV, and I'm hearing George Stephanopoulos go, 'Oh yeah, this guy did this,'" Lyn says. "And I'm like, 'What are you talking about?'" Emails poured in, the phone rang relentlessly, journalists kept knocking on their front door. "It was like a siege," she says.

It took a few days before Ross was finally able to reach Lyn on the phone. She recalls him saying, "Sorry to be a bother, Mom."

Lyn was taken aback at how the kind, gentle kid she'd raised was being portrayed in the press. And thus, just a few weeks after her son's arrest, she launched [FreeRoss.org](#). "I believe Ross Ulbricht is innocent of all the charges brought against him," she later wrote [on the site's blog](#). "I often hear, 'Of course you do. You're his

mother.' True, but my opinion is not simply based on emotion. The charges just don't add up. And they are antithetical to Ross' character and how he lived."

"I went in there thinking, 'Okay, this is going to be challenging, but we're in America. We have a justice system that I can rely on to be fair.' And I was absolutely shocked by the trial."

In January 2014, Lyn and Kirk relocated from Texas to Connecticut to be closer to Ross, then being held at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. A year later, they attended Ross's trial in Manhattan federal district court. Lyn says the trial's 11 days, spread out over more than three weeks, were among the worst of her life. "I went in there thinking, 'Okay, this is going to be challenging, but we're in America. We have a justice system that I can rely on to be fair,'" she says. "And I was absolutely shocked by the trial. The defense was shut down time and again."

Prosecutors portrayed Ross as a digital kingpin who had run Silk Road as Dread Pirate Roberts, or DPR, for the entirety of the site's existence. According to the government, there were more than 1.5 million transactions on the site—all using bitcoin—and nearly \$183 million in illegal drug sales. Prosecutors said that Ross had taken in millions of dollars in commissions from deals made on Silk Road and accused him of ordering the murders of half a dozen people he perceived as threats to the site. (The prosecution said it did not believe any of those killings had been carried out.)

The defense admitted that Ross, who did not take the stand, had created Silk Road, but argued that it was merely an "economic experiment" and that he had handed the reins off to other individuals after only a few months. During closing arguments, lead defense attorney Joshua L. Dratel told jurors that the incriminating information authorities seized from Ross's laptop could have been created by others and called Ross the "fall guy" for Silk Road's actual operators.

Prosecutors countered that the evidence, including a journal and chat logs taken from Ross's laptop, showed that he was indeed DPR. "There's no dispute when the defendant was arrested, he was logged in as Dread Pirate Roberts," prosecutor Serrin Turner told the jury. "There were no little elves that put all of that evidence on the defendant's computer."

It took a jury about three and a half hours to convict Ross of all seven counts against him. When the verdicts were read in the courtroom, Lyn shook her head slowly. "It was devastating," she says.

The sentencing was even harder on her. In late May 2014, Judge Katherine B. Forrest handed down the most severe sentence possible, more than even prosecutors had sought: two life terms plus 40 years, with no chance for parole.

“The stated purpose [of Silk Road] was to be beyond the law,” Forrest told Ross. “In the world you created over time, democracy didn’t exist. You were captain of the ship, the Dread Pirate Roberts. You made your own laws.” During the sentencing, Forrest cited the murder-for-hire allegations, although Ross had not been tried for them.

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Lyn has many words for the sentence: “egregious,” “barbaric,” “draconian,” “outrageous,” “unbelievable.” “I think about it now, and I want to start to cry,” she says. She stresses that Ross was a first-time offender, convicted of all nonviolent crimes, and says that the judge was seeking to make an example of him. “If District Court Judge Katherine Forrest has her way,” Lyn [wrote on her son’s most recent birthday](#), “Ross will spend all his future birthdays [in prison] too, until he is carried out as a corpse.”

Last summer, upon news of Forrest’s retirement, Ross publicly wished her “[happiness and peace](#).” Lyn is by no means at that stage yet. “I’m asking God to help me forgive this woman,” she says. “I think she was really horrible.” Yet Lyn says she hasn’t become bitter. “I’m angry,” she says. “There’s a difference. I’m angry at the system.” She’s disciplined herself not to dwell on what she sees as a miscarriage of justice. “It’s only going to hurt me and enervate me and stop me from being effective,” she says. “So I try to focus on what’s positive: What can I do? What can I get done?”

Lyn LaCava grew up in a good neighborhood in Bronxville, N.Y., just north of Manhattan. Her mother was a homemaker who, Lyn says, “felt the pain of other people”; as a college student in North Carolina in the mid-’40s, her mom rode in the back of the bus with the black passengers in a show of solidarity. Lyn’s father was a Madison Avenue advertising executive and the son of entertainers: Beryl Morse, a Broadway actress and distant cousin of the inventor of Morse Code, and Gregory La Cava, the Oscar-nominated director of 1930s films *My Man Godfrey* and *Stage Door*.

The oldest of five sisters, Lyn says she had a “big mouth” from an early age. This wasn’t unusual in her family; Lyn and her next oldest sibling, now Kim Reisinger, both use same word—“verbal”—to describe all the women of the household. “Lyn read, and she was articulate, and she would stand up and challenge people—kind of like she does now,” Reisinger recalls.

After graduating from Skidmore College, Lyn attended journalism school at the University of Missouri, where she honed the writing and editing skills that she uses so often today. From there, she relocated to San Francisco, working for a time at a small public relations agency—more training for Free Ross. In the late ’70s, Lyn moved to Los Angeles with plans to write a book about her famous grandfather.

She didn't get far with that project, but she did meet a laid-back Texan named Kirk Ulbricht, in town visiting his son from his first marriage.

Lyn, Cally, Ross, and Kirk Ulbricht

Photo courtesy Lyn Ulbricht



She and Kirk got married and moved to Austin in 1978. The next year, the couple had their first child, a daughter named Cally, who now lives in Sydney and works in marketing. Ross was born on March 27, 1984. He was “a healthy, happy, unflappable Buddha of a kid,” Kirk has said. Ross would follow in his father’s footsteps, becoming an Eagle Scout. (It’s a detail both Lyn and the media have emphasized, to different ends: She to illustrate Ross’s good character, the press to better establish his story arc.)

Lyn describes herself as a “pretty big pushover” when it came to parenting. Ross saw it differently. “[I’d call] her ‘overprotective’ when she’d insist I wear a helmet when biking, skating, or surfing,” Ross says in a handwritten letter to BREAKERMAG. Lyn encouraged him to play outside or develop his talent for drawing. “I hated it when she would say, ‘Break the spell,’ and click off the TV,” he writes. Lyn would respond, “You’ll thank me when you’re older.”

To outsiders, Lyn was the mother they wish they had, according to Cally. “All my friends would stay over at my house, and everyone was like, ‘Oh, your mom is really cool.’” It’s a dynamic that continues to this day. At the conference, Lyn is orbited by a handful of younger female friends, all of whom she’s met in recent years: crypto attorney Sasha Hodder, singer-songwriter [Tatiana Moroz](#), and film producer Mimi Riley. “I live far away from my own mother,” says Hodder, who hosted Lyn at her home in Florida last year. “Having Lyn there was like having my own mom around.”

Now that he's older, Ross says he does indeed thank Lyn for clicking off the TV. Likewise, he appreciates that she keeps on him about flossing and taking his vitamins in prison. Though Ross admits he sometimes took his mom for granted in his youth—what kid doesn't?—today he considers himself and Lyn "more like friends." Ross sees, through adult eyes, the depth of her affection for him and their family. "I think she loves us more than she loves herself," he writes, adding a footnote in the margin: "Maybe more than we love ourselves."

Lyn first began getting invited to cryptocurrency conferences last year. It's a good fit: The cryptosphere is, to put it in political terms, the Ulbrichts's base. Bitcoin.com CEO Roger Ver, ShapeShift CEO Erik Voorhees, Litecoin creator Charlie Lee, and antivirus pioneer and crypto evangelist [John McAfee](#) are all supporters. At World Crypto Con, Civic CEO [Vinny Lingham](#) made an onstage bet with Standpoint Research founder Ronnie Moas that bitcoin's price won't hit \$28,000 by the end of 2019. The amount of the wager: a \$20,000 donation to the Free Ross campaign.

The crypto community owes Ross a great deal, his backers argue: Silk Road was the proof of concept that the then-fledgling bitcoin needed, dramatically speeding up the adoption of digital currency. Plus, some in the space empathize with Ross because they're intensely distrustful of the government that brought him down. "I think the U.S. government is one of the biggest threats to world peace *ever*," says Ver, who has corresponded with Ross. "And so, of course, they're busy throwing good people like Ross in jail."

Blockchain journalist David Gerard, however, argues that such distrust blinds people to what he sees as Ross's certain guilt. "They had this big hope, and the hope didn't work out, and they're sure that it's all a scam—that the government and the courts are all in it together to crush the vital spirit of rebuilding the world in the anarchist ideal," Gerard says. He adds that it's "worth pushing back on" some issues with the case ("Like, was the evidence tainted? Was Ross really just railroaded into buying murders?"), but thinks that Ross's supporters tend to dismiss or discount the facts. "There's a lot of wishful thinking in the Free Ross movement, and the wishful thinking does the movement no credit."

No matter what you believe Ross did, it's hard to hold anything against his mother. "I especially don't want to be harsh on Lyn Ulbricht," Gerard says. "Of course she's going to pursue this." Lyn says she's fielded some challenging questions at talks, but rarely gets attacked personally. Says Ver, "There are maybe two people in the crypto community that pretty much everybody likes. One is that guy Dorian Nakamoto"—the hapless older gentleman whom Newsweek [famously misidentified as bitcoin creator Satoshi Nakamoto](#)—"and the other is Lyn Ulbricht."



Among some of the Free Ross crowd, there's also a sense of "there but for the grace of God go I." (As Ver is quick to volunteer, he himself [has served time in prison](#).) At one point, a lean, middle-aged computer-services business owner named Alan stops by Lyn's booth to share his own story. As a young man, he tells Lyn, he engaged in "exploratory" hacking. "I did that for many, many years, and I got into hundreds and hundreds of systems I shouldn't have been into," Alan says, crouching tableside. "And the line is *so fine* that, if the circumstances would have been just *ever so slightly different*, you know..." He trails off, his lower lip quivering.

Lyn hears this kind of thing all the time. But she realizes the limits of the case's emotional appeal. "My talks are much more 'This is the precedent, this is why it matters,' because I figure there's just so much of 'My poor son, please feel bad for me' people can take," she says. "Also, they don't know Ross, so why should people care after a while? But if it's something that affects you, or affects your future, because of the precedents that are being set, that's different. When it's about your privacy or due process, that's different."

Director [Alex Winter](#), who interviewed Ross's parents for his 2015 documentary *Deep Web*, says he was immediately struck "by just how quickly and how astutely" Lyn had grasped the complex issues at play in the case. "She became an expert in surveillance, privacy, First and Fourth Amendment," Winter says. Lyn has adapted to our digital era better than many, Ver says: "The fact that she figured out how to set up PGP encryption for email really shows just how smart a lady she is. I wish my mother would learn how to use PGP email."

Lyn also has become a vocal critic of the drug war, which has been filling the prisons with nonviolent offenders for decades. "I've met some of the inmates in the visiting area," she says. "I've talked to their families. Gotten to know their children. I see the damage it's doing to those children and the likelihood that they will end up in prison too—and that it's a big money-making, power-grabbing machine."

As Lyn tells me this in Vegas, Ross is being held in the SHU, aka "the hole," at the prison in Florence for protective reasons. She says he refused to participate in the

assault of another inmate, which made him a target. (“It’s never ok to initiate violence,” Ross relays to his followers via [@RealRossU](#), a Twitter account run by a friend of the family who communicates with him by phone and mail.) He will finally get out of the SHU in late December, after a total of 105 days. A few weeks later, he is transferred to what Lyn describes as a much safer penitentiary in Tucson, Ariz. She likely will move to Arizona in the spring to be closer to him.

When Ross is released from prison altogether—it’s always “when,” not “if”—Lyn says she will take a nice long vacation, then resume speaking out on criminal justice and prison reform. “Because you can’t forget it once you’ve seen it,” she says.

On the second full day of the conference, I meet Curtis Green, a heavysset 53-year-old Mormon grandfather and former semi-pro poker player from Utah. Green thinks highly of Lyn (“She’s a fantastic lady”) and signed the Free Ross petition as soon as he found out about it. He says he’d sign it twice if he could. “Whether you think Ross is guilty or not,” he says, “the one thing that I think everybody agrees with is the sentence that he received was overboard.”

Green’s attorneys, on the other hand, can’t believe he’s taking Ross’s side. “They’re like, ‘He tried to have you killed. Why are you doing that?’”

Green was a Silk Road moderator-turned-paid administrator who went by the screennames Chronicpain and Flush. His story is a complicated one—he’s written [a book about it](#)—but the gist of it is this: In January 2013, the authorities battered down Green’s door after he opened a package of cocaine delivered to his home. DPR learned of the arrest, and fearing that Green would cooperate with law enforcement, allegedly took out a hit on him through a Silk Road confidante named Nob. Turns out that Nob was a DEA agent named Carl Force, and that Green was, in fact, cooperating with the feds. Nob sent DPR a photo of Green—face smeared with chicken soup to make it appear he’d been asphyxiated—to prove that the murder had been carried out.

Ross was charged with plotting to kill Green, but the case was ultimately [dismissed last summer](#). He was never charged in the other alleged murder-for-hire plots, which apparently stemmed from an elaborate blackmail scam targeting DPR. Lyn argues that prosecutors prejudiced the jury by bringing up the unproven murder-for-hire allegations at trial. “It should not have been permitted,” Lyn tells me. “It was almost like, ‘Well, he did it, just trust us.’”

Green has met Lyn in person once before, in 2017 at a New York diner, where they discussed particulars of the case over breakfast and found they liked one another. Today, in a large convention conference room, they’re meeting again, to make [a joint appearance on *The Crypto Show* podcast](#). The unlikely pair, both dressed in black, sit across a table from silver-haired host Danny Sessom, who proves extremely well-versed in the Silk Road saga.

The Crypto Show host Danny Sessom (left) interviews Curtis Green and Lyn Ulbricht

Photo by Mark Yarm



A good deal of the podcast discussion revolves around Carl Force and Shaun Bridges, a Secret Service agent on Force's team. In 2015, Force was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for stealing bitcoin during the Silk Road investigation and attempting to extort DPR. Later that year, Bridges got nearly six years for stealing more than \$800,000 worth of bitcoin from Silk Road during the probe. In 2017, [Bridges was sentenced to two more years](#) for stealing additional Silk Road funds.

Lyn expresses dismay that none of the allegations against the corrupt agents—whom, she points out, “had the ability to change all kinds of things on the site”—were allowed to come up at Ross's trial. Green and Lyn talk about how there were seemingly multiple DPRs; Green says he himself acted as DPR on occasion, and Lyn points out that someone apparently logged in as DPR [after Ross was arrested](#). They agree on most everything, though Green hedges when Sessom asks whether there's any part of him that thinks Ross ordered the hit against him.

“Some days I would say, ‘Oh, yes. It has to be,’” Green says. “Then other days I would wake up and say, ‘No, it couldn't, because of this.’ And I was just killing myself trying to figure things out. And I decided, you know what, I'm not gonna ever know for sure. You know, we will all never know for sure.”

Later, Lyn asks Green if he'd be worried to hear Ross was getting out of prison.

“Oh, heck—heavens, no,” he says.

“Or would you be willing to have him over to dinner and hang out?”

“Yeah, I—”

“OK. Thank you!” Lyn smiles, satisfied. It strikes me later that she’d make an effective courtroom attorney.

“I wanna go talk to him,” Green adds.

“Wait a minute,” Sessom says. “Would you be worried when Force and—”

Green cuts him off before he can say Bridges’s name. “I am worried as hell,” he says. Lyn throws back her head, letting out a hearty laugh and clapping her hands.

“I’m counting the days when they get out,” Green adds. “That’s when I’m gonna seriously think about my safety. Not so much Force, but Bridges. He scares the bejesus out of me.”

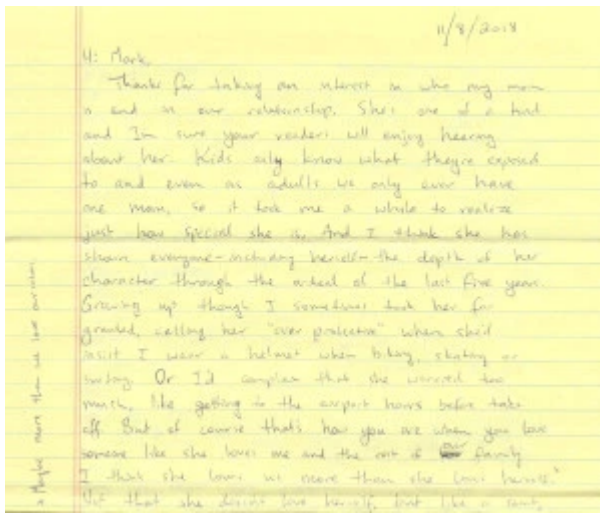
Lyn’s point has been made. It’s another small win.

T hose who know Lyn often use the word “tireless” to describe her. Which is true in spirit, but not entirely accurate. All the traveling, in particular, is exhausting. The stress can be overwhelming. In fact, it nearly killed her once.

Lyn started feeling ill in September 2015, during a speaking tour of Eastern Europe. “I remember thinking to myself, ‘Dear God, she’s playing the Ross Show on loop all day, every day,’” says Tatiana Moroz, the singer-songwriter, who was traveling with Lyn at the time. “It was just nonstop, from morning till night, fear and pain and misery.” By the time Lyn reached Warsaw, she was incapacitated. “What’s happening is I’m having heart failure and I don’t know it,” she says. Lyn returned home, to Connecticut, where she ended up in the ICU for a week before being released.

The next day, back at home, with her sister Ann Becket and Ann’s husband Peter visiting, Lyn collapsed on the couch. Her heart stopped completely, and she began turning blue. With coaching from a 911 dispatcher, her brother-in-law, an ex-Marine, was able to administer CPR, keeping her alive. Lyn was helicoptered to Hartford, where she was hospitalized for about three weeks. Doctors determined that she had suffered takotsubo cardiomyopathy, heart failure brought on by emotional stress. Its more common name: broken heart syndrome.

Lyn says that she, to the amazement of her doctors, experienced no lasting damage. “I guess I’m meant to do more stuff,” she says. In the wake of her illness, she quit working for the family’s Costa Rican resort to focus exclusively on Ross’s case. (Kirk now runs the business with assistance from a property manager.) Ross believes his mom has slowed down—“in part because she recognizes she can’t help me if she’s dead!”—but Lyn says that she probably works just as hard as she did before. Back in Colorado, she spends long hours in front of the computer, emailing with lawyers, volunteers, the press, you name it. (She’s involved in running the Free Ross social



Excerpt from Ross's letter to BREAKERMAG

media accounts, but a good deal of that work is now done by Cally and some volunteers.)

Ross describes his mother's grief as so deep that she feels like she has nothing left to lose. "She feels the loss and separation every day," he writes. "So she does what she can every day because she can't go on [otherwise] while I'm in here. She says, 'What am I going to do, go to the beach while you're still in there? I've got emails to follow up on.'"

In May 2017, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit upheld Ross's conviction and sentence. Last June, the U.S. Supreme Court [refused to consider](#) Ross's case. Today, what's known as a habeas petition is his only legal recourse. His lawyers are still pursuing that avenue—an extreme longshot—but Lyn has increasingly focused her efforts on shifting the political tides. "It's people and paperwork," she says. "The president is a human being, I'm a human being, Ross is a human being, and the paperwork is a commutation—a piece of paper with a signature on it. It's not like I'm trying to physically move a mountain. You know, it's possible."

She's made some progress on the political front. One victory came at last summer's [Libertarian National Convention in New Orleans](#), where conventioners unanimously passed a resolution calling upon Trump "to issue a full pardon" for Ross. On the face of it, Libertarianism, with its emphasis on free markets, seems an easy fit with the Silk Road case. (Also, Ross himself is a libertarian.) But the resolution was still hard-won, says party member Jeffrey Tucker, the editorial director of the American Institute for Economic Research.

"Once a murder-for-hire charge made the New York Times, libertarians dropped him like a hot potato," says Tucker, a friend of Lyn's. It was left to Ross's mother to "flip the script," he adds: "With enough speeches, enough traveling, enough interviews, and enough podcasts, she was able to convince people that are interested in human rights that he was a worthy cause of support. That was entirely her doing."

What matters most to Lyn now is not whether you're a Libertarian or a Democrat or a Republican, but whether you want to Free Ross. Which means she'll gladly accept support from some controversial political figures, like [InfoWars](#) host Alex Jones, [whose show she's been a guest on](#). "I really can't be picky," Lyn says. "But let me get clear: I'm not saying I would align myself with someone that I thought was evil or extreme."

Shortly after I leave World Crypto Con, Lyn strengthens her alliance with another divisive figure: Mike Cernovich, the alt-right social-media personality and Pizzagate conspiracy theorist. A crypto enthusiast and vocal Ross advocate, Cernovich connected with Lyn at the convention and suggested she make a video appeal to President Trump. Cernovich shot Lyn on his phone and tweeted [the 26-second clip](#) out to his nearly 450,000 followers.

That evening, Cernovich took Lyn to a rally for Republican congressional candidate Danny Tarkanian, at Stoney's Rockin' Country, a honky-tonk bar at the south end of the Strip. The draw: an appearance by Donald Trump Jr. After his speech, Trump Jr. was swarmed by the MAGA crowd—"It was pretty much a madhouse," Lyn says—but she managed to grab a quick photo with him. She had no chance to plead Ross's case, but she has that picture, which she tweeted a few days later, tagging the president and members of his family.



Free_Ross
@Free_Ross



Met [@DonaldJTrumpJr](#) in Vegas at a big [#MAGA](#) rally Sat. So many supporters surrounded him, I didn't get a chance to talk about [#FreeRoss](#), but hope to sometime in the future. Thanks [@cernovich](#) for getting me there. [@realdonaldtrump](#) [@Surabees](#) [@IvankaTrump](#) [@jaredkushner](#)

♥ 183 3:21 PM - Nov 5, 2018

💬 47 people are talking about this



Who knows what could happen because of that one tweet? “One of the benefits of the chaotic nature of the Trump presidency is that you feel like as an individual actor maybe you can get seen,” Cernovich says. Both he and Lyn cite the fact that last summer Trump [commuted the sentence of Alice Marie Johnson](#), a 63-year-old woman serving life in prison for a nonviolent drug conviction, after Kim Kardashian met with him in the White House and lobbied on Johnson’s behalf. (Ross has written to Kardashian about his case, hoping for a similar assist, but has heard nothing back.)

“Rather than being like, ‘What’s Kim Kardashian doing at the White House?’ I think the better approach is Lyn’s, which is, ‘How do I get in the White House?’” Cernovich says. “‘How do I just get five minutes of his time and maybe pull at his heartstrings?’ She gets it.”

Back at Lyn’s convention table, she and I had discussed just how unpredictable Trump can be. “I like that,” she said, smiling and pointing an index finger skyward. “The Justice Department’s extremely predictable, so at least with someone who’s unpredictable there’s hope.”

Ross holds out hope, too. He hopes, in part, to someday emulate his mother. “My prayer is that I go free and can have kids of my own and show them at least a fraction of the love she and my dad have shown me,” he writes. “They will be lucky kids if I can live up to that.”

Lyn would love grandchildren from Ross, though she acknowledges that she may not live long enough to see that happen. Again, she refuses to dwell on such dark thoughts.

“You know, things can change,” Lyn says at the end of our last phone conversation together. “Laws can change. Decisions can change.”





She returns to her mantra: “It’s just people and paperwork.”

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3	Blockchain Science-Fiction Premiere: “Byzantine Empathy”
4	Four Days Trapped at Sea With Crypto’s Nouveau Riche
5	Lyn Ulbricht Pushed Herself to the Brink of Death for #FreeRoss. Her Last, Best Hope: President Trump



Skin in the Game: Uncovering the Adult Industry’s Crypto Fetish

By Jessica Klein

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Stormy Daniels enters the room Cleopatra-style, on a golden litter carried by six shirtless men. In front march several figures wearing long, red capes and white headpieces. They look kind of like the handmaids from Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel turned Hulu series *The Handmaid's Tale*. The procession brings Daniels, clad in a royal blue gown, up to the stage, where she assumes her position as rightful queen of the evening's proceedings.

Her subjects, a sea of adult performers, producers, and directors, payment-processor executives, and sex toy-makers, laugh good-naturedly at her extravagant entrance. Compared to many in the audience, Daniels is dressed demurely—no pasties or assless, sparkling jumpsuits for the host of this year's XBIZ Awards in Los Angeles. Still, it's a spectacle worthy of not only the biggest name in porn in early 2019, but one of the biggest names in the U.S. political discourse over the past year, period.

*Stormy Daniels arrives at the
January 2019 XBIZ Awards.
Courtesy of XBIZ*



The choice to have Daniels host mid-January's XBIZ Awards, an adult industry awards show that's like the Golden Globes to the AVN Awards' Oscars, signifies a more political XBIZ than usual. Generally, it's an insular, self-congratulatory industry showcase. But this year, the porn world's progressive, anti-Trump political stance is made particularly clear: Mid-show, there's a video of several porn actors performing passages from Daniels's book, *Full Disclosure*, mocking everything from the president's alleged spanking proclivity to his supposed penis size.

Daniels is up for crossover performer of the year. One of her competitors is Brenna Sparks, who has been called a "[crypto evangelist](#)." She's sitting at a table right in front of the stage with a host of other cam models who use the website MyFreeCams.com, the main sponsor of this year's show. Most cam models do livestreams on multiple sites, and for Sparks, one of those sites is SpankChain—a

platform for webcam performers that doubles as a mini, crypto-based economy on the Ethereum blockchain, to which Sparks is also an advisor.

Sparks was initially surprised by her nomination, which stems from her involvement with cryptocurrency. “Even though I’ve been in the industry for like two and a half years, I still feel like an underdog compared to a lot of talent I work with,” she says. She’s certain that Daniels will win the crossover category because “she had a way better year” (spoiler alert: she does), but this isn’t the first time XBIZ has paid attention to Sparks for her interest in crypto. She’s been interviewed for its online publication about her work with SpankChain multiple times—she even [wrote an article](#) of her own on blockchain basics—and she has a good idea of why.

Cryptocurrency makes sense as a payment method for the adult industry.

“People think porn stars don’t really do other things besides porn,” she says. “I think XBIZ likes to highlight that we are normal people that do other things.”

I’m here to see how much these normal people are using cryptocurrency and blockchain, and what that means for the technology at large. Having covered blockchain for about a year, I’ve found that adult entertainment is one of the only industries that’s used cryptocurrency to a meaningful extent. Technological trends often start in adult, so if the industry is adopting crypto, maybe the rest of us will, too.

After all, everybody watches porn.

Sparks is not the only one at the awards with a crypto connection. At the next table over sits the SpankChain team. The company has [been nominated](#) in three categories: Innovative Web Product of the Year, Emerging Web Brand of the Year, and Marketing Campaign of the Year. SpankChain is there as a trio—CEO and cofounder Ameen Soleimani in a suit jacket over a pink shirt; Allie Knox, community manager and cam model wearing head-to-toe black; and Kiara Skye, social media head/model manager and fellow cam model, in a shiny dress and cat ears.

Earlier in the night, I wait in line with them to walk the red carpet. We barely talk about the awards. Instead Soleimani tells me about his involvement with Ethereum. Soleimani recently spent time in Singapore as Ethereum cofounder Vitalik Buterin’s protégé. Buterin would get up super-early to bang out an [impossibly technical post](#) for his personal website, which Soleimani would later edit. They talked scalability—a key concern for SpankChain and the blockchain community at large—and worked on an open-source project called the [Plasma Group](#).

Several other blockchain-based companies have been nominated for XBIZ awards this year, including Stroken Tokens, [AV Secure](#), and VeriMe, but only one is nominated in the same three categories as SpankChain. It's an enterprise-level payments and reputation service for the adult industry called Intimate.io. Of the various blockchain-based efforts to improve transactions and interactions in the adult industry, SpankChain and Intimate.io stand out for having attracted significant attention in the worlds of both adult and blockchain. Both companies boast a solid product with actual partners and users (in crypto, these *are* standout qualities).

Cryptocurrency makes sense as a payment method for the adult industry. Traditional banks [have a history](#) of banning adult companies and sex workers. Even PayPal has cut off users in the adult industry, in some cases keeping the money sex workers had been holding in their accounts. Entrepreneurs like Soleimani and Intimate.io's cofounder and chief marketing officer, Leah Callon-Butler, have recognized this, and in turn, the adult industry is finally recognizing them.

Soleimani and Callon-Butler also bring a fresh perspective to adult entertainment. Neither were involved in the adult industry before starting their current companies. Soleimani used to work at ConsenSys in Brooklyn, where he briefly lived in the same warehouse-style building as the Ethereum company's flagship office. Callon-Butler, who is from Australia, used to work in sustainable energy. She learned about blockchain through the decentralized [Brooklyn Microgrid project](#), before deciding it was a technology best applied to adult.

SpankChain, left to right: Allie Knox, Brenna Sparks, Ameen Soleimani, Kiara Skye; courtesy of XBIZ



"I've been working in emerging tech all my career, always in very early-stage startups that are still looking for their first customer," Callon-Butler says, "and I thought, 'This is great. Blockchain needs me.'" She's at the awards with Intimate.io's CFO Alex Dohi—both looking awards-show glamorous—and some friends she's made in the adult industry.

I wait hours for the blockchain companies' categories to be announced. The winners of those categories appear, anticlimactically, in a scroll on a projection screen at the very end. None of the blockchain companies win.

This doesn't seem to bother or surprise the SpankChain or Intimate.io teams. "It's very naïve of me to think that we could come in and already start taking the industry

by storm,” says SpankChain’s Knox. “The people we were up against have done this for decades.”

Callon-Butler barely seems to register the loss. Intimate.io won another award the week of XBIZ, anyway. At the Cybersocket Web Awards, which honors “the best gay adult websites and service providers in the world,” it was recognized as the “best new company” of 2018—generous, considering their product hadn’t launched yet. Plus, days after the awards show, Callon-Butler is named an official community ambassador for XBIZ’s Reddit-like forum.

“The other people who were community ambassadors at XBIZ have been in the industry for like 20 to 30 years,” she says, clearly honored. “I had no connection to this industry when I started in October [2017], and they welcomed me with open arms.”

The adult industry has long been ahead of the technology curve—and well before technology went digital. In *The Players Ball*, a new book about the internet’s rise, author David Kushner explains how showcasing erotica has always been [one of the first uses of new tech](#). Sumerians wrote “sonnets to vulvas” on clay tablets; a Gutenberg press printed a sort of early *Kama Sutra*; and more than 75 percent of tapes sold to the owners of home VCRs in the 1970s featured porn.

Today, the adult industry represents one of the only sectors that has adopted cryptocurrency at a significant scale. The “[world’s first bitcoin brothel](#)” popped up in the U.K. in 2013, and sex workers started [posting online bitcoin tutorials](#) not long after. CamSoda, a website for cam models (performers who livestream explicit videos, usually from their own homes), has been [paying a chunk of its performers in bitcoin](#) for more than a year; AV Secure is working on a blockchain solution to verify porn viewers’ ages [ahead of the U.K.’s “porn block”](#); and Pornhub has accepted crypto in exchange for its premium service since April 2018.

“With most areas that blockchain has entered, adoption has been an enormous problem,” says Stephanie Hurder, an economist with Prysm Group, a blockchain economics and governance design firm. Given the choice of how to pay for something, people won’t normally opt for crypto. But industries that have trouble with traditional payment methods, like sex and cannabis, are “the most likely to get a fully functioning mini-economy [in blockchain] off the ground,” she says.

This optimistic sentiment isn’t exactly reflected in XBIZ’s [crypto panel](#), two days before the awards ceremony, at the Andaz hotel in West Hollywood. Callon-Butler and Soleimani are the only panelists. A third announced panelist, Vice Industry Token CEO Stuart Duncan, fails to show. This may have something to do with the fact that in August, [Playboy sued VIT’s parent company](#), Global Blockchain

Technologies, for allegedly failing to live up to an agreement they'd made about implementing VIT on Playboy's platforms. (It never happened.)

XBIZ's senior tech editor, Stephen Yagielowicz, is the moderator. With only about 20 people in the mostly male audience, it's nothing compared to last year's crypto panel, which took place in May during the week of the XBIZ Awards in Miami. That panel, called "Billing Battle: Credit Card vs. Crypto," pitted established payment services against crypto proponents.

"It was standing-room only," Yagielowicz tells me after this year's modest version concludes. "It was hyped up. Traditional billers were telling the crypto guys that their money was not going to be worth anything: You put real money in and nothing but fantasy comes out." The most exciting moment in this year's crypto panel takes place when a man in the audience asks whether SpankChain and Intimate.io's respective tokens will appear on the major crypto exchange Binance. Both Callon-Butler and Soleimani shrug. The man [leaves the room in a huff](#).

Yagielowicz has been in the adult industry for decades—he's made adult websites, shot porn, produced it, even starred in it. The porn industry was such an early adopter of crypto, Yagielowicz says, that a lot of companies gave crypto payments a shot and realized it didn't justify their time or energy. "Not necessarily because it was difficult," he says, "but because nobody is necessarily using it." One of the only things persuading him of crypto's staying power is Callon-Butler's "enthusiasm."

"I'm eager to use my 75 Intimate tokens," Yagielowicz says. He just has nowhere to use them yet, he tells me. It will be a few weeks until Intimate.io's payment processor goes live with an industry partner.

Callon-Butler first tells me about her fascination with blockchain via video chat from the Philippines, where Intimate.io's developer team is based, in December. "I became really obsessed with this idea that blockchain was a technology crying out for a use case," she says, recalling when she first learned about the tech a few years ago.

Then Callon-Butler met her eventual Intimate.io cofounder, fellow Australian Reuben Coppa. He was the inventor of an app called Rendevu, which lets users book escorts in real time (an activity that's either legal or decriminalized in much of Australia) with the aim of making it easier for sex workers to screen their clients before meeting. At the time, Coppa was also working with a company that installed Australia's first bitcoin ATM.

"The amazing thing was, he saw that adult and crypto had exactly the same issues," Callon-Butler says. Namely, both had been relegated to society's fringes. Respectable citizens weren't sure how to approach them, or whether to approach

them at all. Both seemed taboo; both had issues with banking and payments. “Ironically, [the two] could kind of solve each other’s problems,” says Callon-Butler. People working in adult, having been shunned by big banks, could use crypto for payments, and crypto finally had a solid use case.

Men walk around in Hugh Hefner-style bathrobes and unicorn jumpsuits. Women wear much less. But besides the outfits, it’s a pretty lame party. We are, after all, at a four-day business conference.

Today, Intimate.io works with sex education and women’s reproductive-health apps, dating sites, a “[Japanese love hotel group](#),” queer porn sites, and even the “gaming site” Hentai Heroes (it’s like an interactive, pornographic comic book featuring particularly veiny sex organs). The company is also working on a “trust and reputation system,” whereby sex workers and clients can track past experiences and note whether, say, a client paid on time or was abusive.

Shortly after XBIZ, Yagielowicz finally has a place where he can spend his Intimate tokens—he can use them to buy vibrators and lubricants through Intimate.io’s Singapore-based partner Smile Makers. Like all of Intimate.io’s partners, Smile Makers has had issues with people buying their products through traditional financial means, like credit cards, but something else sets it apart. “Launching with ecommerce”—as opposed to escorts—“was really important for us,” Callon-Butler says, “because it’s a way we have to show the breadth of issues with payments and the opportunity that exists in this market.”

When I run into Callon-Butler at XBIZ for the first time, I don’t even bother saying hi. She’s busy networking with practiced ease among a sea of booths that remind me of a college campus event, where everyone’s trying to get freshman to sign up for their clubs. (I later learn this is called the “meat market.”) Callon-Butler’s constant smile and high energy draw industry executives to her booth, where she poses engaging questions about the state of fees in adult billing.

The same major players—like Segpay, Paxum, and Netbilling—have processed payments in adult for years, so Callon-Butler has to make an extra effort to ensure Intimate.io gets attention. Besides tirelessly attending conferences in both blockchain and adult, she endeavors to make the Intimate.io brand memorable. Today she’s handing out tight, Intimate-branded T-shirts with juicy, red lips splashed across the chest. They match her lipstick shade.

The next evening, Callon-Butler and I take refuge from the conference in a neighboring hotel. She tells me about some of the challenges she faces as a woman working in both adult and crypto.

“I get frustrated at some of the crypto events by how often men will show real interest in my project, and then later find out that I have a partner, or they’re not going to get any sex out of me, and they’ll be like, ‘I’m not going to talk to you anymore because I’ve figured out that you’re unavailable,’” she says. “I don’t give a shit if that’s what people want. I just wish they’d be upfront, because it wastes my time.”

Then there’s the question Callon-Butler gets all the time from potential (male) investors in the crypto space. “What’s your background in adult? What’s your, uh, connection with the industry?” they’ll ask carefully, until the drinks start flowing. Then they’ll get to the point: “Were you a sex worker?”

Callon-Butler was not a sex worker, and neither were her two, male cofounders, Coppa and Nathan Smale, the company’s COO—but they never get asked. So she’s come up with a diplomatic way to answer the question: “Actually no, I wasn’t, and I know your next question would be for Nathan or Reuben, ‘Are you former sex workers?’ The answer for them would be no, as well. But you know, Nathan and Ruben sometimes do webcam,” she pauses and laughs. “Not really.”

Callon-Butler and I plan to meet up again at a pajama/lingerie party on the Andaz hotel’s upstairs lounge later that night. It’s the first time, prior to the awards, that XBIZ looks like it merits its X. Men walk around in Hugh Hefner–style bathrobes and unicorn jumpsuits. Women wear much less. But besides the outfits, it’s a pretty lame party. We are, after all, at a four-day business conference.

Then Callon-Butler arrives, upbeat and beaming, with Intimate.io CFO Dohi and Brad Mitchell, the CEO of MojoHost, a widely used adult web-hosting service founded in 2002. When I tell Mitchell I’m at XBIZ to see whether cam performers are accepting crypto, he replies, “I can answer that question for you: No.”

*Leah Callon-Butler and Alex Dohi;
courtesy of XBIZ*



Still, this is the only non-blockchain event I've been to where I can strike up a conversation with just about anyone and find that they've at least dabbled in cryptocurrency. A man who has been in the industry since 2007 tells me he sold his crypto when he heard people talking about it at Starbucks—he figured it had gone too mainstream then. He runs a paywalled hardcore site and laments that there's no longer the kind of money in adult that there used to be. This makes sense. These days, anyone with a webcam can undress live for the wide world of the internet, and Pornhub and countless other tube sites disseminate other creators' porn for free. People aren't paying what they used to for adult content.

This is part of why adult has to remain competitively innovative. "People in [the industry] are so forward-thinking and on the greatest, new groundbreaking technologies before anyone else would know," says Callon-Butler. Maybe the man who runs the paywalled hardcore site reflects the industry at large—maybe, as Yagielowicz suggested to me the day before, crypto has come and gone in adult.

But cam performers don't seem to feel the same way. During the week of XBIZ, I speak with several who either regard it as yet-uncharted territory, or have been finding new ways to profit from their crypto tips.

"I've been dabbling with pop-ups and trying to figure out how much CPU usage I can use," says porn actor Chad White of getting customers to mine crypto for him. He's been getting crypto payments for about five years now, mostly as micropayments, with roughly four to five customers per month asking to pay in crypto. And there's no place where tipping with micropayments is more prevalent than on cam sites.

There's one story Yagielowicz tells me after the crypto panel that makes me think about SpankChain's potential to succeed. It's about a video on the tip-based camming site Chaturbate (one of XBIZ's many sponsors), starring a woman whom Yagielowicz describes as a "math whiz."

"The nerdy boys are making her rich because they give her math problems to solve on camera," he says. These aren't easy problems, but complex, college-and-beyond-level calculations. While she's solving these problems, she has a vibrator inside her. Whenever she gets a virtual tip, it vibrates. As she gets closer and closer to solving the math problem, the viewers keep tipping her more and more to distract her.

In the golden age of digitized social interactions, where influencers have begun to overshadow the typical, Hollywood-made celebrity, the cam industry has flourished.

Camming is a social medium, so finding models who share your interests—like math, or crypto—can be an even bigger draw for viewers seeking not just sexual gratification, but also specific types of companionship. In the golden age of digitized social interactions, where influencers have begun to overshadow the typical, Hollywood-made celebrity, the cam industry [has flourished](#). Performers based out of their own homes, or sometimes professional studios, can create regular content to drum up followings and get paid directly from viewers.

However, most cam sites—centralized companies that host models’ live video feeds take a large cut of performers’ profits, usually somewhere between 30 and 70 percent. SpankChain takes just five percent of performers’ pay.

“When SpankChain came about, I decided to boycott the non-crypto platforms I’d been on before,” cam performer Ben Lawson tells me. Lawson, whose unassuming Brooklyn hipster look may suggest otherwise, has been in the adult industry for just over 10 years. He identified as an anti-tech anarchist before discovering crypto, buying in long enough before the crypto bubble burst to not “get rekt.” Today, he’s reveling in the generosity of “Ethereum millionaires.”

“When SpankChain launched, a lot of the people who were early investors in their token wanted to see the platform be successful, so the first wave of models who got on there, we all got tipped, like, ridiculously before we even did anything,” Lawson says of the company’s closed beta phase, which ran from April to June 2018. (The site is now in public beta.)

One of the other models participating in the closed beta was SpankChain’s community manager Knox. A fetish performer, Knox received her first bitcoin in 2014. “A member came into my cam room and said, ‘I’d like to pay you, but I don’t want the site to take half. Would you take bitcoin?’” says Knox, who had heard about the digital currency and figured, “Why not?”

Knox’s early use of bitcoin drew attention. A team from a Showtime series called *Dark Net* [featured her in an episode about sex workers using bitcoin](#). The episode included a scene showing her Coinbase address. This alerted Coinbase to Knox’s profession, and in turn, the company shut down her account and banned her from the platform. She’d violated the company’s [terms of service](#), which don’t allow payments for “adult content and services.”



This is a common issue for people working in the adult industry. Months before Coinbase shut down Knox's account, PayPal banned her—and it was way less friendly than the crypto exchange. While Coinbase let Knox keep the money she'd been holding on the platform, PayPal did not, taking the \$6,000 she says she had in her account.

Soleimani first learned of this problem in the adult industry through a different cam performer who had been kicked off of PayPal. At the time, Soleimani was working as a micropayments expert at ConsenSys. "I was wondering, where are [micropayments] going to happen first?" he says. "And I was like, everything starts in adult."

In SpankChain, Soleimani ultimately came up with a business that both facilitates micropayments for cam performers and safeguards them from financial

deplatforming. Tips made through SpankChain—in the form of its Ethereum-based BOOTY tokens—go directly into performers’ own digital wallets, so there’s no threat of a central authority taking control of their earnings.

Soleimani tells me this over lunch one day during XBIZ, at a burgers and beer place right next to the hotel. We’re also with Knox, Skye, SpankChain’s lawyer Allan Gelbard (Twitter handle: @XXXEsq), and the company’s head of product/cofounder Wills de Vongelaere.

I ask Soleimani how many users SpankChain has.

“Right now we have...” he trails off.

“How many were you going to say?” asks Knox.

“I was going to say like 500.”

“Five hundred is what I was going to say,” says Knox. There are about 50 to 100 active tippers on the site, they add, and it has a transaction volume of about \$10,000 per month. It’s not a lot of money, and none of the cam performers on SpankChain make a living from the platform alone.

Then Soleimani goes into his crypto history. He first discovered bitcoin in college, in 2012, when he bought mushrooms off the Silk Road. He learned how to code and did bitcoin arbitrage, making \$1,000 when the price of bitcoin had its first steep rise in 2013. With [Mt. Gox’s infamous collapse](#), Soleimani lost it all. “I left crypto for like two years,” he says. “I was like, ‘Fuck this.’”

He changed his mind in early 2016, when he saw people online starting to talk about Ethereum. While bitcoin did just one thing—transfer money—Ethereum let users build features and programs on top of its code, opening up endless possibilities for what the blockchain could accomplish. He’s now deeply involved in Ethereum’s development. Besides working as a “disciple” of Buterin’s, he’s built grants-focused Ethereum guild [MolochDAO](#).

When presenting SpankChain to others in the Ethereum community, Soleimani often has to explain why he’s entered the adult industry. “A lot of people are like, ‘That’s just porn, dude, right?’ And it’s like, we’re doing cutting-edge research in scalability, and at the same time, we are putting it towards an actual use case,” he says. “I didn’t want anybody to come to me again with questions like, ‘What problem are you solving?’”

That’s a common question in the blockchain space, known for people desperately trying to find the elusive “[killer app](#)” that will finally showcase the technology’s true

potential and unlock adoption. Not many people land on a use case as solid as SpankChain's.

When I first meet Brenna Sparks, she has just flown in from her home in Vegas. She's getting ready to prepare for an anal scene the next day, which means soon she'll have to start fasting. Sparks is incredibly friendly in spite of her insistence that she's media shy, but admits to having already started drinking when we grab some wine in the hotel.

Sparks has ample reason to be shy of the media. At the end of last year, Coindesk named her among the Top 10 [most influential people in crypto in 2018](#), and it backfired. Crypto enthusiasts scoffed at her inclusion, hurling vicious insults at her via social platforms, saying she'd gained weight and even calling her "Miss Piggy."

"People were upset that a sex worker made it into the Top 10," she tells me. This is a bit hypocritical, she thinks, for a libertarian-leaning industry that talks constantly about inclusion. Sparks admits she's no techie—she's an entertainer. "I push crypto in my space to the everyday, normal person," she says. Arguably, that's a lot more valuable for adoption than the perpetual circle jerk of crypto diehards.

People may look down at porn, [but] the adult industry remains a safe haven for those with progressive thoughts and novel ideas.

Still, Sparks has become the pornographic face of crypto to the point that she's getting recognized for it at XBIZ. She's done so by promoting projects she's actually investing in, like Ethereum, and encouraging people to do their own research before choosing what coins to buy. She's also made some crypto-themed porn. Sparks masturbated to a picture of Vitalik Buterin on camera. "I'm sure he saw it," she says of Buterin, because someone from the Ethereum Foundation retweeted the video. She's considering making similar videos with other crypto names, like [Roger Ver](#).

Nerdy requests often come Sparks's way, such as "hot babe sucks coder boy's dick." It's a scene she's done before, and it overlaps with her type in real life. Sparks learned about crypto from her past "coder boy" boyfriends, the most recent of whom talked about crypto "80 percent of the time," she tells me. "I realized that there's a lot of sex workers that date guys in crypto," she says. She can think of at least 10 couples. I ask her why this might be.

"I guess it's because some of them work long hours? I don't know," she pauses, evaluating her answer. "That's not hot."

It wasn't until 2015 that Sparks got her first bitcoin payment, and it wasn't until Ethereum that she got really into crypto. "There's a stereotype that you cannot get out of the [adult] industry and do something else, such as cryptocurrency," she says. Her nomination at the XBIZ awards this year proves that you can be in adult and also break into other industries, but doing so still isn't easy.

Crypto is a largely white, male-dominated industry, and Sparks is a woman of color (she's of Laotian descent) working in adult. "Believe it or not, I feel more respected in the adult industry than in crypto," she says.

Back in the real world, outside of the XBIZ bubble, Callon-Butler gets a similar taste of male prejudice. It's not unlike what she often gets from men in the blockchain industry, but this time it's piled on with skepticism toward crypto. When speaking about her work with people outside of adult and crypto, she has to defend the legitimacy of both. Callon-Butler is basically fighting a war on two fronts.



Callon-Butler

This is made particularly clear when Callon-Butler is back in the Philippines at an Anzac Day party in late April. The holiday commemorates Australian and New Zealand Army Corps soldiers who served in the Battle of Gallipoli during World War I. It's a big deal for Australians, so a number of ex-pats who are in the Philippines have come together to celebrate. Callon-Butler ends up making small talk with a man who asks her what she's doing there.

"We have a software development team up in Clark," she tells him. He gives a wink-wink, nudge-nudge about the prevalence of sex work there (it used to be home to a U.S. military base), then presses on. What is her team working on? Payments, she says. What kind of payments? "We do cryptocurrency."

"That's your bitcoins, yeah?" he replies. He doesn't trust it, he says, and calls it snake oil, but he still wants to know more about her work. "We're all about financial empowerment and income inclusion, and our specific use case is the adult industry," Callon-Butler says.

With that, the mood changes. "I might as well have just turned on the CD player with some 'bow-chicka-wow-wow' music," she tells me, because that's when the man starts leaning in extra-close. "He just turned into this major creep, asking

inappropriate, weird questions,” she says. “Just because I’m in the sex industry, doesn’t mean I’m free game.”

Those outside of the crypto and adult industries still hold their assumptions about both—that crypto is snake oil, and people who work in adult are promiscuous. And while a lot of crypto people may look down at porn, the adult industry remains a safe haven for those with progressive thoughts and novel ideas, like Callon-Butler.

“I’m at this Anzac Day party wishing I could go back to L.A. and be at the porn conference,” she recalls, “because I knew I wouldn’t be harassed there.”

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