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## 'THE DRIVE' TAKES COMMERCE TO THE EDGE

BY FINBARR O'REILLY

VANCOUVER • If you think the government has no influence on what goes on in our bedrooms, think again.

"We only have one slow week a year and that's the week before taxes are due," says Janna Sylvest, co-owner of Womyns'Ware, a sex toy shop for women, located on Commercial Drive where an outdoor sign advertises "vibes, dills, lubes, latex" and where books with titles like *The Ethical Slut* are sold. "Our peaks are when student loans are given out and when people get their tax returns."

Despite its more than 100 silicone sex toys — the world's most complete inventory, apparently — Womyns'Ware is not your traditional adult novelty store.

"The distinction between us and adult novelty stores is that 95% of what we sell would not be found on their shelves," says Ms. Sylvest.

What Womyns'Ware sells, in addition to specially designed probing products made from silicone instead of plastic or rubber, is nipple clamps, harnesses and certain other S&M devices.

"Adult stores are more tacky and joke oriented," says Ms. Sylvest. "We're selling things that help you reach your objective — we're not selling plastic boobies."

Just as interesting as the merchandise is the store's location in a neighbourhood known as "The Drive."

"We fit in because people who come to Commercial Drive consider themselves eclectic and cutting-edge," says Ms. Sylvest. "People come to Commercial Drive because it's rejecting the mainstream globalization of marketing. It's one of the few places left in Vancouver where the businesses are small, independent or family owned."

A unique store, Womyns'Ware accurately reflects the nature of a neighbourhood which is probably one of the few places where a Starbucks appears to have less business than the little coffee shop next door. It's a street where a rag-tag bunch of communities collide, from the Italians and Greeks to the gays, lesbians, punks and drug dealers. Here, lurking in funky coffee shops, restaurants and laundromats that serve beer and "Big Ass Hunky Nachos," you can find every kind of person except for puppies with cell phones.

It's as close as Vancouver gets to any real sense of true urban character. Harley Davidson's roar up and down the street with a frequency matched only by the number of fat ladies in lycra walking impossibly small dogs. The local park is the only one in the city with a civilian patrol. Around here, it's the pot-heads smoking dope at the Grass Roots hemp store who don't want the

neighbourhood to go down the tubes and they're the ones who call the police when they see crack-cocaine dealers working the streets.

Everyone seems to get along, but even in such a free environment, people are still bound by the city's affinity for regulating pleasure. Perched on a window sill between a restaurant and its patio, a cigarette in one hand a beer in the other, one diner explains his legal predicament. "You can smoke out there, but you can't drink. And you can drink in here, but you can't smoke."

The Drive has grown a bit trendy in recent years and Womyns'Ware could also be seen as a sign of creeping gentrification. When you look at the store's display cases you notice that they echo the commercial symbols of yuppie-dom: Little vibrator gift packages are wrapped in small galvanized buckets and made to look like Body Shop products and the standing wooden bin containing dozens of different dildos is an exact replica of the glove bin at Mountain Equipment Co-op. The same goes for about 20 dildo harnesses dangling from metal rack. Presented in such a way — along with MEC-style information signs that say things such as, "Thigh harnesses are good for people who have lower back problems" — they could just as easily be climbing harnesses, and at \$64, they cost nearly as much.

And while Commercial Drive maintains its own view on reality, as one resident says, "the dynamics of the community are definitely changing."

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