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Donna Rice Says No Excuses for Net Porn

Gary Hart's ex-paramour has reinvented herself

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Donna Rice Hughes spends a lot of her time leading reporters and legislators through the Internet's red-light district.

From a hotel room in St. Louis, where she is promoting her new book, "Kids Online," Rice Hughes took this reporter on a tour of some of the Web's smuttest sites, ones which are freely accessible to minors.

The images are jarring — one Web site depicts women in sexual positions with snakes and horses; most are too lurid to describe in print. One reporter threw up after "surfing" the Net's netherworld with her, Rice Hughes said.

Rice Hughes calls this "porno stash" her most effective weapon in her quest to shield children from cybersmut.

"This isn't airbrushed stuff you find in Playboy. It is hard-core pornography of bestiality, pedophiles and violence," said Rice Hughes, who is vice president of marketing for Enough is Enough, an anti-obscenity organization in Fairfax, Va.

In 1987, Donna Rice was something of a household name when she was captured in what she calls "the old lap photo" — photographed on the knee of Gary Hart, a married presidential candidate, aboard a Caribbean yacht named Monkey Business. Hart, then a U.S. senator, saw his campaign self-destruct after Rice, then a Miami model, was caught spending the night in his townhouse.

Today, Rice Hughes, 40, is a nationally recognized leader in the battle against online pornography. As one Beltway sage wryly observed, lawmakers now court her for support, not romance. And she, not Hart, speaks before the Senate.

"Donna Rice Hughes has been on the forefront of the

battle to make the Internet safe for our children," said Senator Dan Coats, R-Ind., another crusader against online porn.

Steve Case, head of America Online, calls Rice Hughes "a tireless advocate for children."

"She is a key voice in the debate over how we best build this new medium and make it a safe place for families," Case said.

Indeed, Rice Hughes is a major force behind a new law that would require commercial cybersmut peddlers to establish age-verification systems to keep out minors.

The Children's Online Protection Act, part of a \$500 billion spending package signed last month by President Clinton, levies criminal penalties of up to \$50,000 in fines and six months in jail on commercial Web sites that allow anyone under 18 access to pornographic material deemed "harmful to minors." In addition, it mandates that commercial sex sites require a credit card or personal ID number to ensure that only adults can access them. If not, the sites must pay state and local tax-



Donna Rice

Donna Rice Now Crusading Against Net Porn

Simply put, Rice Hughes and her supporters want the same laws that protect kids from print pornography extended to the Internet, without infringing the First Amendment privileges of adults.

"Most minors are more computer-literate than adults," said Rice Hughes, who is stepmother to two children, now 17 and 20. "They have free and easy access to deviant stuff their parents couldn't find in an XXX-rated book store."

By her own admission, Rice Hughes might seem an unlikely person to wage war against smut.

After the Hart imbroglio, she served briefly as a spokeswoman for "No Excuses" jeans and then "went underground" for seven years — in Los Angeles and later in McLean, Va. She eschewed interviews and kiss-and-tell book offers as she pieced together her life.

Her carefully cultivated Southern perfectionism — Bible-reading Christian, biology major at the University of South Carolina, Phi Beta Kappa, head college cheerleader, pharmaceutical sales rep, model, actress (small parts in "Dallas" and "Miami Vice") — had been obliterated by the scandal.

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"Donna was hunted and frantic at the time; everything she ever wanted was or had been stripped away from her," said Mary Doremus, who with her husband and two children lived with Rice from 1988 until 1992. "She struggled through excruciating pain those four years and eventually fought to become a major success.

"I was impressed by her demeanor and intelligence. It seemed an unlikely match because of her background."

DEE JEPSEN
Former president, Enough is Enough

Donna's story is about redemption."

The turning point came in 1993, when she married Jack Hughes, a high-tech consultant, and met Dee Jepsen, then-president of Enough is Enough.

Although few people at that time had heard of the Internet, Jepsen already saw it as a major new distributor of pornography.



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Donna Rice Hughes (left) talked strategy with Dee Jepsen, former head of the Enough is Enough anti-smut campaign.

Jepsen talked to Rice about the "rape myth," a belief held by some that women who say no to a sexual advance really mean yes. Jepsen, and others, believe that pornography is a major contributor to the rape myth.

Jepsen's views clicked with Rice, who said she had been date-raped in college and believed that incident led to her "destructive" relationships with Hart and others, including musician Don Henley and Prince Albert of Monaco.

In early 1994, Rice Hughes went to work for Jepsen. At first, "it seemed like the opposite of everything I wanted to do, especially after coming from a sexually stigmatized past," Rice Hughes said. But she became passionate about the work because she said she didn't want other women to go through what she did.

"I was impressed by her demeanor and intelligence," Jepsen said of Rice Hughes. "It seemed an unlikely match because of her background. But this woman seemed to have pulled herself together," said Jepsen, who is no longer with Enough is Enough.

In 1995, Rice Hughes made her public re-emergence. At a news conference in a U.S. Senate building,

she addressed a phalanx of reporters about the dangers of Internet porn.

Dressed in a conservative suit, ponytail and glasses, she went largely unrecognized.

"I only got a few 'didn't-you-used-to-be?' looks," Hughes said. "I guess they expected someone with long, flowing hair wearing a red bathing suit."

But her appearance sparked a loud debate on Net porn.

Since then, Rice Hughes estimates that she has given 1,400 interviews and hundreds of cybersmut tours. Her book, "Kids Online," was published in September.

Her efforts helped drum up support for former Nebraska Senator James Exon's bill on pornography, the genesis of the 1996 Communications Decency Act.

Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the act unconstitutional last year, Rice Hughes played an instrumental role in framing its legislative sequel, the Child Online Protection Act.

COPA "is not going to obliterate pornography on the Web," she concedes, "but it holds those who are profitable, the operators of commercial porn sites, responsible for their actions."

That rankles many who consider

Rice Hughes' intentions honorable but unconstitutional.

The American Civil Liberties Union, Electronic Frontier Foundation, and Electronic Privacy Information Center filed a lawsuit last month in federal court in Philadelphia, alleging that the bill stifles the free exchange of ideas.

"The threshold for harmful-to-minor standards has to be my computer, not the federal government," said Representative Christopher Cox, R-Newport Beach. "Dumbing the Internet down so it is suitable for my 5-year-old is not the solution."

Despite the divisive issue, Cox and others have a healthy respect for Rice Hughes. "She is a good spokeswoman who knows the topic and has been deeply committed for a long time," he said.

Even Hustler publisher Larry Flynt has kind words for Rice Hughes. "The most civil, nice person I've ever talked to who was anti-pornography," he told the Washington Times during a recent interview.