

Susie Bright's Interview with Deborah Jeane Palfrey

SUSIE BRIGHT: Has there been any silver lining to the notoriety of being busted so wide open?

DEBORAH PALFREY: Hmmmm...

SB: On the one hand, it seems like it must be the biggest stress in your life, and that maybe you'd give anything to be back in Vallejo, just quietly running your business. But I wonder if there's an aspect that you couldn't have predicted where you're thinking, "You know what? I'm kind of glad this happened!"

DP: Well, first of all, it came as a tremendous shock. (Laughs) I had no concept whatsoever that this was about to hit.

In the beginning — from the time that everything happened to me on October 4 of 2006 until I was indicted five months later... I tried desperately to maintain the status quo. I tried desperately to keep this quiet, to make this go away, and to try to understand what the government was doing. I figured surely there must've been some rational explanation for why they came after me. I can say without equivocation that my civil attorney — Mr. Montgomery Sibley and I — tried in vain to get this to stop.

And we don't know what the rationale has been for them to go forward with the case, other than the fact that we simply wouldn't fold and give them what they wanted. At that time, I think they pretty much wanted to just take my entire life savings from me. So of course they ratcheted it up a notch, and it went into the criminal realm.

It's at this point in time that the status quo pretty much went out the window. We went public for all intents and purposes — although I believe this was made public by the Department of Justice when they leaked this information to the Smoking Gun in October, shortly after my home was raided and the search warrant was executed upon my property.

SB: Who tipped them off? Was it a customer who was really a police officer investigating you? Was it somebody who worked for you and got pissed off and decided to blow a whistle? Why, out of all the zillions of escort services in Washington and Virginia, did they decide to bug you?

DP: I was obviously sitting on a powder keg of information. There is much still to come out. David Vitter is not the sole and substance of my entire 13 years of operation, that's for sure. I was sitting on something — or they thought I was sitting on something. I was under observation — J. Edgar Hoover-style — from as far back as March of 2004, until the trigger was pulled on me early in October of 2006.

SB: Wow.

DP: For 31 months I was being observed! Any good vice cop will tell you that a simple prostitution bust or investigation takes no more than a few days to a few weeks to a few months to put together — from start to finish. It doesn't appear that I was being looked at for prostitution-related activities, as much as I was being watched for my own personal and professional actions. My banking, my business affairs, my personal acts. So as for the question: why me and me alone? I think it's logical to conclude that there was something that I had, or knew, that they found to be very valuable.

Who are they? We don't know. Is it the GOP? Is it this administration? Is it Homeland Security? Is it the CIA? Who is "they"? We don't know who they are...

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SB: Do you feel like your legal pressure strategy of focusing on the customers — do you think that's making the prosecution say, "Oh, god. Just make her go away. Drop everything." Is the fact that you've been so much more defiant than they ever could've imagined helping?

DP: Oh, well... defiant, yeah. I just think they don't know what to do with me any more.

SB: Have they ever suggested, even in a low-key way, "You know what? Just pay us a couple hundred bucks and we'll go away." Or are they still acting really fierce.

DP: When we were quiet as church mice — from last October 4, when the search warrant was executed, until March 1, when I was criminally indicted — we went to them on three occasions. We went to them in late October/early November, again in mid-January after New Year's, and then finally at the last pre-indictment conference in late February. And we did everything — beg, plead, threaten, and cajoled the Assistant US Attorneys in this case. We asked them, "What is it that you want? What is going on here?" But they would not talk to us! They stood us up for an appointment. They did the most rudimentary motions work that they had to do... They wouldn't hand over discovery! They stonewalled, stonewalled, stonewalled. And they were able to do so procedurally in the civil phase of this. We got nowhere.

At the very end, at this last pre-indictment conference in late February, we took the now famous photocopy of one page of that August, 1996 phone bill. And we said, "Look. We've got 46 pounds of this."

SB: Wasn't that what they were after to begin with?

DP: That's the biggest irony. You have to remember — I was under observation for 31 months, and they didn't do anything. So why would they pull the trigger all of a sudden, in October of last year?

SB: I suspect something partisan is going on. J. Edgar Hoover used to watch certain people he was politically afraid of, like Martin Luther King. "I'm gonna get all this sex shit on him, so that I can use it later."

DP: That's what came to our minds eventually, because October was one month before the very crucial November election of last year, when both the Senate and House went Democratic, and the balance of power in this country shifted.

And, here I was, after 13 years, this very routine life... They must've watched me and thought I was the most boring person in the world. And all of the sudden, I start making these rather unusual or aberrant moves. I put my house of 15 or so years on the market. I closed my business rather unexpectedly — it wasn't really unexpected, but if you're watching me from afar, it would be a flag. My 13-year-business was shut down. And then I wire money — \$70,000 — over to Germany, and make a little trip to Germany.

Which by the way was picked up on one of those Homeland Security terrorist watch programs — the ones which are supposed to be watching the terrorists?

They were watching me.

And I think when I made that wire transfer, that was the straw that broke the camel's back. Because as soon as I made that wire transfer, on September 28 of last year, the next day this languid, non-investigation/investigation went into warp drive. A few business days later, on Tuesday October 3, I had two postal inspectors who flew out from Washington D.C. to Northern California, standing outside my house, seeing the sale sign that's in my front yard and apparently calling my real estate agent. They identified themselves as a couple being transferred from Washington D.C. to the Bay Area — they loved my neighborhood, they loved my house, could they get in and see it?

When my real estate agent told them no, they could not — because she did not have a key for the property, I was in Germany, they could not get access... We believe it's at this point in time, that they drove up to Sacramento, which is about an hour from where I live. They got a search warrant based on information that was three and a half to five and half years old. To put this into perspective for your audience, rarely is a search warrant ever issued in this country in any kind of case in any jurisdiction based on information that is older than 6 months.

SB: Were you leaving Vallejo because you'd always wanted to live in Europe, and you were just ready for a change...

DP: That's it. You got it right there.

SB: So you were just planning your life.

DP: That's right.

SB: You weren't trying to be a fugitive or anything.

DP: Nope!

SB: You were just moving on to the next stage.

SB: My favorite part of your story is that you had your own newsletter when you were running your service. How did you get the idea of starting a newsletter. I mean, you have a lot to say...

DP: Boy, I have a lot to say now!

SB: And plus, you know, even — when I read your use of the word "misogynist," I think to myself: that's somebody who has a very political point of view.

DP: Oh, I have very definite views about the police. But aside from that, let me say this. Those newsletters have been largely taken out of context and made to seem a little more tawdry than they are.

SB: I'm not interested in the tawdry part. I'm interested in the feminist part!

DP: I understand that. However, they are quite colorful.

SB: Yes they are!

DP: Yes, they — I did make them colorful, because I wanted to get my point across, because I had a staff that was ever-changing.

One of the topics, of course, was misogynists. These cops — the vice cops, you know, the lowest on the food chain at the police department — they love to go after defenseless women. You know, it's, it's... It is something that I want to explore when this is all over -- when my actual civil/criminal case is all over. I am even talking to some folks right now about putting together a documentary on what the police have done, do, and will continue to do to defenseless women in this country involved in the sex industry.

The very first person who emailed me when this all broke was a woman. And the subject header was: "My mother is an ex-madam." She went on to explain who she was, and the terror that she, her mother, and her family experienced at the hands of the police. This particular email was followed up by many many others, all having their own little monikers. Some were very well-known madams who have stories to tell that will make your blood curdle.

SB: You had already had — going back to the early 90s at least — a really harsh experience with the criminal justice system. And you had a prison experience. How come when you got out you stayed in the business? I mean, why didn't you say "That's it! I'm joining bible study groups, I'm becoming a missionary... This was horrible! They just put me on the rack." How come it didn't scare you straight?

DP: Well, first of all... You come out prison with a scarlet F — "Felon" — across your forehead. Despite the fact that I had a four-year degree, and a little less than a year of law school — I was a fairly well-educated, well-traveled, well-read, sophisticated young woman in my mid-30s... there was no chance in hell for me in this society — certainly not back in the early 90s — to go forward, to get any kind of a job, or to do anything. I had no choice. My life was in tatters financially, emotionally...

I came out of prison almost blind, because I have this little hereditary defect in my eyes which made my cornea detach, and it made me kind of go blind for a while.

SB: Oh, god!

DP: Oh it was — it was a lovely experience. The whole ordeal.

So, I was really not in a position to do much of anything but to go back into the business. And to go back into it in a way that I felt — and I believed — I would never have a repeat experience.

SB: And how were you going to feel protected this time?

DP: Well, I was going to not open up a business in San Diego, for starters! I was going to go to the other side of the country — Washington D.C. or New York. And then I was gonna set it up in a way where I hoped no one would do anything that would get me into trouble. And I guess I did a pretty dog-gone good job, because for 13 years, from late 1993 until last August of 2006, we did not have one bust!

SB: I'm glad you brought up the J. Edgar Hoover connection, because — you know, I'm about the same age as you, and I know the era you're speaking of. And it makes me wonder — when you decided "I'm going to set up this service in the D.C. area from a remote location" — was there any part of you that thought, "Oh god, D.C. It's gonna be all government workers! I should go to Chicago or New York or L.A."

DP: Oh no no, no. We didn't live in fear in 1993, Susie. We were only living in fear in the day and age of the Patriot Act.

SB: (Laughs) Okay. Well I just wondered, because there is going to be a certain kind of style of person you're going to be dealing with in Washington.

DP: True. And in the beginning, I alternated between New York and D.C. And I ultimately ended up choosing Washington. I still do believe, to this day, that it had a higher brow base of clients — as does New York — without that Tony Soprano element.

SB: (Laughs) Okay. I see what you mean. It's kind of — yes. I get it exactly.

SB: From my own experience, I know there's a lot more to an escort business than the woman who's entertaining the customers. Did you decide "I want to be a manager, I want to own my own place," because you yourself had been an escort? And were you always thinking, "I could do this so much better, and this is so stupid..."

DP: I knew some people in San Diego who owned and operated an escort service many years ago. I looked at what they were doing and I thought, "My god. They're nincompoops."

SB: What did they do that was so nincompoop-y?

DP: (Laughs) I thought they were trashy people. No business sense! No ability to just run a simple business operation. That's exactly how I saw the situation — a simple business operation. And if they could just run it like a commercial enterprise, it'd do so much better.

So I got into it more or less that way. As I've often said, I got into it because the money attracted me — just like it does with each and every other person who ever enters the escort service business.

You know, the classic male question, and the hoped-for response is...

SB: Is that you're a nymphomaniac? (Laughs)

DP: Yes, yes... Nobody does it for that. Everybody looks at it as a business opportunity. I just chose to take it on as a real business opportunity, and to cultivate it accordingly.

I think a lot of these men enjoyed women who were strong personalities. Who were smart and engaging. That is what they were looking for. And that's who I hired.

SB: How could you tell that someone was tough enough to handle the secrecy, or ready for the pressures and the risk.

DP: Well, you know — up until last October, there was no pressure. We had a great gig goin' on, let me tell you. We all had a great gig! I did, the clients, the girls — We were not under pressure. We all had a happy life. We were all happy.

SB: So you didn't feel like, when you talked to someone, that it was like interviewing them for the Marines — "Are you tough enough to handle this? You need to be mentally tough..."

DP: Well, I made sure that they understood that there was a sexual component to this business. Albeit legal, again — you know, I've got to stand up for my attorney, who is not here at the moment, to jump in and make sure everybody understands... "albeit legal." There was a sexual aspect to this, and I needed to make sure that they understood — was this their cup of tea? They had to know that they weren't just going to go out and be wined and dined at the best restaurants in D.C. and given hundreds of dollars when the night was over. They had to know that there was an aspect to this where they would have to earn their money...

SB: When women interviewed to work for you, what were the things you looked for or didn't look for?

DP: Let me say this. Even though I'm heterosexual, I have excellent taste in women. I've been told I have excellent taste in women. I thought like these men did, a lot of times. I'll tell you what they're looking for — and that's the same thing I was looking for.

You don't have to be particularly pretty, but pretty doesn't hurt. You have to have a nice figure, but you don't have to have a rockin' body, by any means. Weight is important. It's an indicator of health more than anything. Education. Sophistication. Good sense of humor. A charming disposition. And not someone who's particularly a sap.

SB: Did everyone already feel really comfortable with kinky fantasies and eroticism? Did you feel like you had to vet people to make sure they weren't gonna be shocked or disgusted?

DP: Yes. I told them in general what the business required, and made sure this was something that they could go along with? And many times, the answer was "God, yeah! This is hardly anything compared to what my boyfriend would've expected of me!"

SB: (Laughs) And that was the right answer?

DP: That was the right answer.

SB: "My boyfriend already has himself in diapers...."

DP: Okay, well, we were not going down that road...

SB: Oh, come on. It's so funny.

DP: Well, yes.

SB: I mean, when I think about... It's almost like everything these people rail against becomes the very thing that they're into. It's almost as if they're revealing themselves by their preaching. Whatever they're screaming about...

DP: What is that word when you beat yourself up?

SB: Self-flagellating?

DP: Yes. Of course, I'm just a regular gal from southwestern Pennsylvania, you know, growing up in the '60s like you. I just, for the life of me — professionally, personally, and any other way — I could not possibly imagine the sexual kick out of that one.

SB: Some of my friends who haven't had experience in the sex business will say to me, "Well, what's in vogue? What's the top thing people want to do?" But I think most guys just want someone to listen to them and be charming and deferential. And, you know, provide very basic stuff. That was my guess. That it wouldn't be, like — "Everybody wants you to be in a French maid's outfit."

DP: My girls can probably give you a better answer than I could. But I would tend to think that a lot of it has to do with companionship. I absolutely would agree with that. I experienced it myself. I became quasi-friends with many of these people over the years.

SB: And they would want to have, you know, like, phone time with you, just to be chatting...

DP: Just chatting. And we weren't talking about sexual things. We were simply talking as one person to another.

SB: Did you get a sense of how many people want a "girlfriend experience" versus how many people want a one-night stand — a "Don't tell me your name"-type experience?

DP: Yeah, there was a lot of that going on. And I would always tell these folks, as kindly as I could... "Look. This is not Match.com." It's just not! It's another animal.

So many men were confused, thinking that this was the way they could do it. You know, like they could go to Russia and buy a bride! It just wasn't that way.

SB: Well, what do you think of having personal relationships, particularly with men, when you're in this business?

DP: Well, I was not in the business. I ran the business from California. To clients who said, "Well gee, can't you come see me?" I would say, "It would be a heck of a transportation fee."

SB: I mean, does romance become sort of ridiculous...

DP: I would have to explain myself and how I make my living.

SB: I would think that you probably didn't feel like you could just be somebody's wife and act like nothing had ever happened, or that you didn't understand what you understand about men's sexuality.

I mean, you probably don't believe that monogamy is very possible. I would think you couldn't have an "Ozzie and Harriet" point of view about heterosexual relationships...

DP: Actually, in an odd sort of way, I do. Doesn't everyone want to find their soul mate?

SB: Well soul mate, yes. But that could mean so many things.

DP: Let's put it like this. Now that I am freed from the chains of this business, in a way that I never thought I would be free... I have great hope, in the coming months, as I work my way out of my current predicament, to end up in another place, obviously. And in that place, I hope, indeed, to find a nice man.

SB: I just can't wait to see who it's gonna be!

SB: What were your thoughts about sex when you were young? And what changed as you started growing up and opening your mind up to new ideas?

DP: Well... I had to have to somebody explain to me what the word "queer" meant because I had no concept that such a thing could ever occur. That was in the ninth grade. It was explained to me that that's when two boys kiss each other like a boy would kiss a girl.

And then, I never — it wasn't until I got out of high school that I connected that girls could do the same thing. So that might give you a really good basis of where I was at sexually.

SB: You were sheltered.

DP: I had no concept of sexuality on any level, or in any way. Uh... I was — I will say this on air — I was absolutely a virgin in high school. I was a virgin.

SB: I've seen the picture somebody ran of you on some kind of a prom date, and you look like a virgin. You look like a girl who's nervous about her prom, but trying to look her best. But you don't look like somebody who's a wild-haired, bra-less hippie.

DP: No. I was not a hoochie cootchie girl, that's for sure. So, you know, my understanding of sex really was very limited. I grew up in such a loving home, with doting parents. I was completely shielded. I had no concept of sexuality.

SB: What were your thoughts about money?

DP: I grew up in a very nice, very good blue collar household. I did all the odd jobs to earn a few extra dollars, like most kids do in junior high and high school. And when I got out on my own, I was working like a dog, like most people, trying to go to school, doing two-or-more jobs... killing myself! In high school I'd done a great deal of food waitressing, in these family-style, Denny's-type restaurants. I advanced from working as a food waitress to a cocktail waitress position. Because you could make so much more money.

And then I figured "This is ridiculous!" By then I had become somewhat pretty. I wasn't the mousey little thing I might've been in high school. And I thought — you know, well why not? This is ridiculous!

And then that led to the next jump. To my foray into the escort service world. Also — it should be pointed out, it was never about greed. I think it's about leveling the playing field a little bit financially — and that was certainly true when we were coming up in the 70s and then into the 80s...

SB: (Laughs) When I think of the prominent people who've been revealed in this whole escapade so far, do you feel like you've made your point? You can say, "Look. These people are hypocrites. It just exposes the whole nonsense of the prosecution. Back off." Or do you look forward to a future where you can discuss more of the names and the politics on the list, because there's a further point to be made.

DP: I don't wish to ruin anyone's life. However, I do share the same mindset as Larry Flynt: expose the hypocrites. And for those few dozen to a hundred or so that ultimately will be revealed — like David Vitter — I go to sleep very easily at night without any guilty feelings whatsoever about the David Vitters of the world.

He has the ability to send us to war, in part. He has a vote. We don't have a vote, but he has a vote. So these people not only are hypocrites — they're kind of dangerous.

And these people can and should be exposed, as far as I'm concerned. And that's the very reason I let the records go as I did, in the very end.

SB: I heard from one of Randall Tobias's staffers, who is an international aid worker, working with AIDS — after his name was made public, and he had to go away, quickly. My friend had to listen to this man pushing his "abstinence" policy all around the world...

DP: Mmm hmm...

SB: And they were just, like, "Thank god. He's out of here." Everything about public service and what decent people here are trying to do was being ruined by people like this.

DP: I am so happy you told me that. I had not heard that. Because that's exactly why I released the records.

Thank you to David for the transcription.