

Commentary**It's Summer: Time to Clean Up the Bikini Car Wash**

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WeNews commentator

Underage, underdressed girls' fundraising activities are more than merely tolerated. They seem to be fully sanctioned by the parents. Kimberly Gadette says that if this is the charity that begins at home, perhaps it's time to call in child services.

Editor's Note: The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS)--Ah, the sights of summer: movie lines snaking round the cineplex, kids splashing in wading pools and scantily clad young ladies at busy intersections holding hand-lettered signs reading "Car Wash Today!"



Kimberly Gadette

Bikinis are their work uniforms and their job is to dance, jiggle, wave and sing out; anything to lure customers to the fundraising car wash for their schools, youth clubs or churches. These teen queens' acts of solicitation are more than merely tolerated; they're fully sanctioned by their teachers, ministers and parents.

The men driving by often slow down to a crawl in order to take a good, long look at this show from female teens. But have any of the teens' authority figures similarly taken a good look? At themselves?

If this is the charity that begins at home, perhaps it's time to call in child services.

According to the Web site of Green Girls Global, an international pro-environment, people and animals group, "The car wash fundraiser is about as American as apple pie. I don't know of a student, boy-girl scout, or church group that hasn't participated in one."

But with the young ladies dressed in no more than string-tied halter tops, shorts cut down-to-there while up-to-here, is this apple pie? Or, rather, underage cheesecake?

This supposedly innocent, altruistic activity has recently trickled down to my own sleepy suburban neighborhood. For the past few weekends, I couldn't help but notice a group of teens--a dance team from a nearby high school--performing energetic choreography, signs in hand, at a heavy-traffic intersection.

Arresting Antics

Though I knew they wouldn't be able to hear me over their sing-song shouts, I wanted to say, "Careful, girls, watch all that jumping around in those loose halter tops and teeny low-riding shorts. The goal is to be 'arresting,' not 'arrested.'"

Instead, I walked over to the woman in charge, an enthusiastic mom who seemed happy to answer my questions. But she withheld her name, saying, "I've gotten in trouble from speaking up before."

It turns out that though this dance team had made it to the Top 4 in state competitions in the past, this year the club wanted to capture first place. To do so, the mom explained, the team needed extra dollars for better costumes, an outside choreographer and a rental bus to transport the team to meets. "If we didn't want to be as good, we wouldn't do this."

I pointed to the teens feverishly jiggling at the primarily male drivers cruising by. Was she concerned about the spectacle of the young women dressed in sex outfits, literally working the street for the almighty dollar?

"It's a learning experience"--she paused, struggling for the right word--"in advertising. After all, they're always going to have to market themselves." She smiled broadly. "Besides, the girls are so pretty. People want to help the kids."

Was this her idea? Nope. I found a number of Web sites that offered definitions of the different varieties of car wash available: "manual," "automatic" and "bikini." One, a la a Hooters car wash, is considered commercial, in which bikini-clad young women charge a fee for the entertainment given to the car owners.

Bikini Wash-Out

The other variety was right on the money: "This car wash system is usually done in summer in the United States and Canada . . . A fund is generally raised in the name of a school, sport association or for charity purposes. The pretty school girls in bikinis call by the donors at the roadside with colorful cardboard signs and the cars are then washed by their male and female classmates at a nearby place."

In this case, it was the middle-aged mothers dressed in baggy T-shirts and loose shorts who were assigned to wash the cars. The young ladies were simply used as bait. "You should see how the guys' faces fall when they pull up and see it's us instead of the girls," the mom laughed.

I didn't know which "bad signal" was worse: a) the expectation that the young women were expected to service strange men's cars, doing the literal dirty work, or b) the fact that because they possessed the requisite desirable anatomy, they were exempt from the physical labor. Ignorant of the idea that it's the very act of displaying, strutting, luring that is, in itself, the dirty work.

I wondered at the questions this type of event might leave buried in the mind. (E.g., "Though I get what I want by parading myself, I'm only a body. What happens when I'm older, does anyone credit me for having a brain?")

I noticed a few young ladies assigned to take the donations, cart water bottles to the car-washing moms, replace the dirty water buckets for clean ones, etc. They were a bit chubby, some of them plainer than their streetwalking sisters. I assumed that they probably didn't make the cut. How were they taking that rejection? It's easy to say they were lucky, but many might not take it that way.

Distorted Concepts

Distorted concepts of sex appeal, body image and self-esteem are examined by many female awareness groups, including the National Organization for Women, which is planning a self-acceptance event on Oct. 15 entitled "Love Your Body Day" (<http://loveyourbody.nowfoundation.org/>).

Also available on NOW's Web site is "Sex, Stereotypes and Beauty: The ABCs and Ds of Commercial Images of Women," a get-the-facts project that takes a hard look at over 70 ads that demean the female. In particular Gucci, Dolce and Gabbana, and Lucky Brand cast females in the role of the eager server, bent on catering to the male's every whim.

With that kind of media conditioning, it's no wonder that the guy's face fell when he realized that the Lolita-like teen who waved him in wouldn't be working up a lather while personally massaging each one of his oh-so-impressive rims.

Not that there aren't objections raised about these do-it-yourself carwashes. But these concerns are strictly environmental, with many green-minded groups objecting to the problems of untreated chemical runoff discharging into the storm water system, seeping into nearby streams, rivers and lakes.

If only there were a similar outcry as to a whole other pollution: that of the highly-impressionable, adolescent brain.

Ideally, such an outcry just might drown out the confusing body image concepts bombarding today's young woman. Outcries from her trusted authority figures: her teachers, her minister, her parents. But when they, too, send a mixed message as clouded as the runoff from the car wash, then it's time for them to rethink their priorities. And clean up their act.

A freelance writer based in Hillsboro, Ore., Kimberly Gadette's writings encompass politics, film, sports, travel, dating and dogs (though dogs seldom date). Her twice-weekly film reviews can be found on Rotten Tomatoes.

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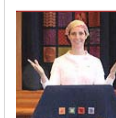
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