

Stories about soaring college costs are perennial media favorites, at once playing to parental anxiety while highlighting a genuine education problem. But this one was different: A Duke University freshman confirmed to her college paper that she was paying her way through school by performing in adult films. All the combustible ingredients for a feeding frenzy were there - sex, privilege, and a controversial elite university with a reputation for gender issues.

The student, “Lauren” was discovered by a classmate who recognized her in a pornographic film he was watching – and couldn’t keep the news to himself. The Duke Chronicle subsequently ran a long story about Lauren, and the 18-year-old sought to defend herself on online forums. National and international media picked up the story, rehashing the Chronicle article and the most appalling reactions to it from some of Lauren’s classmates. For her part, Lauren isn’t shy about talking about the sex and gender aspects of her choices.

But what about the core issue: A student doing porn films to finance her \$60,000 annual tuition and fees to attend Duke. Critics say that figure is outrageous while university officials say it’s a bargain. Could she have attended a lower-priced public or private university and worked her way through college in a more traditional way? What role did financial aid play? Were college costs or lifestyle choices the crux of her financial motivation? And at 18, did she think through the consequences of obtaining a Duke degree through methods that will surely haunt her professionally down the road?

RealClearEducation’s Emmeline Zhao, herself a Duke graduate, discussed those issues with Lauren last week.

What do you major in, what do you do in your free time?

I am a women’s studies major. I hope to be a lawyer – my dream is to be a women’s rights, civil rights lawyer. I’m really into writing, journalism. I’m kind of a creative person, which is a lot of the reason I like doing porn. I really am a person who values my family and my friends, and I am also really into spirituality. I like astrology, Zen, all of that.

How did it cross your mind to get into adult films?

I’ve always really liked watching porn. I started watching porn when I was maybe 11, and it was something I was always very ashamed about, but I really enjoyed watching it. So when I got to college and was faced with all these financial burdens, I was literally sitting in my room one night, and I didn’t know how I was going to pay for all this, and half joking said to my roommate, “Well f--- it, I’ll just be a porn star.” And so we kind of laughed, but then I half-heartedly applied and sent my picture to a bunch of porn agencies. I didn’t expect anything to come of it, but then I started getting callbacks from people saying they saw a lot of potential.

And when I started learning about just how much porn stars make, I realized I could graduate from school free of debt and do something I really love doing without having to bust my ass doing minimum wage jobs that wouldn't get me anywhere. I knew that with my skills -- I don't yet have a college degree -- I knew that all I could get was a minimum wage service job. It didn't seem economically feasible to me. I didn't want to struggle in school while working, and it wouldn't pay my bills. So I just jumped into it, into porn, and really loved it.

What about financial aid? Did you apply for any grants or scholarships?

I have siblings in college, who are being supported by my parents, and my parents are paying \$1,000 a month just for their own student loans and my dad graduated 20 years ago. One of my parents is recently unemployed. I was offered \$13,000 in financial aid. That wasn't enough -- that's \$47,000 still unaccounted for.

People have this perception that if you cannot pay for college, financial aid will take care of you, and that perception is wrong. If you are very low income, you can get a full ride to Duke, no problem. If you are middle or upper-middle class, you will get screwed in the process. So many middle class students have not gotten sufficient financial aid because on paper, their families look like they have money. Just because I'm not poor doesn't mean I can afford \$60,000 a year for college. Other students from middle and upper-middle class families have said the same thing.

When you look at the state of education in America, middle class students are left out, even harmed, by the financial aid process, not helped by it. People need to come to an understanding about that. Financial aid offices should look at their policies and how they help their students.

What about options for student loans? Government loans would have at least deferred payments for a little while after graduation, interest-free.

I wasn't offered any government loans -- my only other option was private loans at 12 percent interest rates and I knew that by the time I graduated college, I'd have hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt. I have seen other members of my family graduate college decades ago still dealing with debt now and I knew it'd give me less mobility. It would also hurt me if I needed to get something like a credit card --- hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt is not something I want to carry around and it's absolutely ridiculous that that's what the state of our nation is, that that's an expectation.

I have a friend who comes from a low-income family and pays \$500 a year for Duke, and when I talk to him about my problems with financial aid, he doesn't understand. It's such a problem to be caught in the middle with financial aid, and people just don't understand.

I think it's very poignant that nowadays if you're middle class, the only way to pay for college is to take out hundreds of thousands of dollars in loans. We need to provide a

better financial future for our students. I shouldn't have to go broke, I shouldn't have to go into debt at 18 years old to pay for an education.

So why Duke, of all places? Why didn't you choose a less costly institution?

I was offered scholarships at a lot of places. I was offered full tuition at Vanderbilt, for example, and was accepted into USC, Wellesley, Barnard, Pepperdine, some others. But I visited Duke last year on Blue Devil Days [Duke's programmed weekend for admitted freshmen], and I remember walking into the Duke Chapel -- I'm a very spiritual person -- and just feeling an energy that told me, "This is the place you need to be." And I felt something in the chapel in that moment that told me that I needed to be here and go to Duke and it was something that would be an amazing experience for me.

Would you still do porn if Duke cost less?

No. If Duke had given me sufficient financial aid, if they had given me the proper resources and made college affordable for my family, I would not have done porn. I would've just gotten through college and been fine. The financial burden that Duke put on me was absolutely enormous and insurmountable with the resources that I had.

Do you worry that the way you paid for this will hurt you down the road? Part of a Duke degree is the Duke brand, but will this tarnish that brand?

I would never want to work for a company that discriminates against sex workers, that is sex-negative, or that shames women and disrespects them. I want to be a human rights and women's rights lawyer, so I would only hope that I would be embraced by that community and they would see my experience as a tool and something good that I can use in my future career. I'm trying to use the platform that I have to turn this into a reflection of society of how to treat sex workers. I hope that when employers look at me, they don't see me as a porn girl, but as someone who is outspoken about her experience and knows first hand about sexism in society, and I would hope that that would help me in my career if anything. I think that my resume and qualifications would speak for themselves.

But as a lawyer, that's not necessarily up to the firm or company. Are you concerned about the Bar Association's moral character determination to become a certified lawyer?

I've done nothing illegal, so I won't be excluded from the Bar. Anita Cannibal, also a porn star, was a student at West Los Angeles School of Law. I was worried about it at first, too, but I've researched the moral character determination and the Bar won't exclude you from being accepted if you've just been deviant -- so long as you haven't done anything illegal. If, for some reason, there is any type of hesitation for me or any other girls who have been in the sex industry and try to enter a formal career, I will raise hell -- because that's absolutely unacceptable.

And going forward: Will you continue to do porn?

I'm not sure what my family financial situation will be, how my aid might change in the next few years. As long as I need money to pay for tuition I will continue doing it.

Do you plan on paying for law school the same way?

One option is that I save a lot of money doing what I do now and use that to pay for law school, or maybe look into entrepreneurship where I can be some sort of businesswoman. I haven't thought that far ahead, but I'm hoping that I won't have to take out any loans or put myself in any debt to pay for my education. I've had people Tweet me saying, "I'm a student and I'm a sex worker, and you really inspire me." I want to emphasize that there are so many other students who do sex work to pay for college, whether it's stripping, phone sex, prostitution, escorting, doing porn. There are a lot of people who are turning to sex work as a means for paying for college.

Why do you say porn is less demeaning than a service job?

Go to the mall and talk to somebody who works at a hot dog stand and ask them about their job. They go to work at 9 a.m., work until 6 p.m., maybe get two five-minute breaks in the day, make \$6.25 an hour before taxes, and they're on their feet all day. They're working in conditions that are physically and mentally draining. So they're making maybe \$100 a day before taxes for doing 9 hours of hard physical work. You look at that and look at what I'm doing, making \$1,000 for two hours doing what I really love doing, which for me is not degrading and is something I feel safe in, you tell me which industry is demeaning?

People say the porn industry is demeaning, but being in a service industry is degrading in and of itself. You're basically being stepped on. Any job I would've gotten as a minimum wage worker would've been exploitative, degrading to me, and not provided the money I needed to make, which was \$4,000 month. So why would I work 80 hours a week, struggle with school, barely get any sleep and be treated like a second class citizen, when I can do porn for 14 hours a day , make thousands, set my own hours, and have a ton of fun doing it?