

PROFILE

Pleasure-trove

Holly Mulcahey spreads the gospel of sexual self-empowerment and entices converts with a panoply of women-oriented wares

by Anndee Hochman

Holly Mulcahey shrugged off the corporate life because she wanted to sell vibrators in a clean, well-lit place.

Mulcahey used to work as national operations manager of Check X-Change check-cashing stores. She drove a BMW, flew all over the country and had a closet full of custom-made suits.

"I wanted to do something where I could call the shots myself," Mulcahey says. "I'm a pretty outrageous and radical person. I didn't know any place you could go to buy a vibrator without feeling icky about it. I started going to some of the men's X-rated bookstores, and they were so intimidating and awful.

"My other inspiration was [the pet novelty store] The Cat's Meow. I thought, why doesn't someone do a women's theme shop of things by and for women? The next thing I knew, I decided to take the risk and do it."

That was more than five years ago. Today Mulcahey presides over It's My Pleasure on Southeast Hawthorne—a shop about as far from the typical image of shadowy, dingy sex shops as Disneyland is from Dante's *Inferno*.

At It's My Pleasure, there are no darkened windows, grimy floors or neon lights congealed above the entrance. Instead there's a high-ceilinged, colorful corner shop. A circular rack of secondhand leather jackets stands near a display that includes rainbow-striped computer mouse pads. There are chocolates shaped like penises, candles shaped like labia, Chocolate Mocha Love Cream and sandalwood incense, Tarot cards and calendars. There are two requisite resident cats, Pumpkin and Sappho.

Even the back room, which houses the leather harnesses, anal beads and magazines with titles like *Lezzie Smut* and *Bitches with Whips*, has the earnest, whimsical feel of a toy department, with all the gadgets plugged in and ready to shimmy or twirl in your hand. After a few minutes, a shelf of silicone dildos in various shapes, colors and sizes—porpoises, whales, marbled pink and white—start to look almost goofy, objects more likely to provoke laughter than libido.

"Sometimes people say, 'A women's shop? What have you got there? Vacuum cleaners?'" says Mulcahey. "I say, no, we have mirrors decorated by members of a women's development center in Nepal, and massage oil, cards, books, jewelry, almost all women-made."

By women, for women. Nearly 90 percent of

Mulcahey's customers are female. Some straight men come in to shop for girlfriends or wives. Occasionally a daughter in her 20s will bring in her mother—and less often, a mother will escort her teenage daughter. One elderly man who came in with his wife explained that they were looking for "a little something to spice things up" since he'd lost some of his sexual stamina.

"I get phone calls every now and then from elderly-sounding women who say something

"Oh, that's an anal toy," or "That stimulates the clitoris."

"I try to do education without becoming personal. We try to normalize sex education. We try to demonstrate that in our actions. Almost all of us don't know it all."

Mulcahey herself knew next to nothing, growing up in a northern Illinois farm town so small it didn't have a traffic light. Nobody talked about sex. It wasn't until she was in college at the



Holly Mulcahey

like, 'My husband's been dead for eight months and my daughter said there's a wand you have...' There's something sweet about a woman finally feeling good enough to want to pleasure herself."

Customers ask about safer sex—and It's My Pleasure carries a wide range of condoms, finger cots and dental dams. They ask about the best sex toys. They ask for advice about what their partners will like. And some emerge from the back room with a gadget in their hands and a puzzled look on their faces and ask Mulcahey, "My God, what do you do with this one?"

"I love the genuine curiosity," she says. Mulcahey will wait a moment while the customer's mind races through the possibilities, then say calmly, detached as a Safeway clerk explaining the difference between bibb lettuce and romaine,

University of Illinois that Mulcahey saw a detailed illustration of male anatomy, in a book her roommate had sneaked from her physician-father.

"I married my high school sweetheart. Both of us were virgins on our wedding night. Our marriage lasted three and a half years and dissolved because he wanted me to have children and stay home and be a housewife, and I didn't want that."

Mulcahey moved to the San Francisco Bay area and found herself immersed in the late-1960s counterculture. Free love, open relationships. "That was a very strong influence on my personal sexual liberation," she recalls. For years she quietly called herself bisexual; she didn't come out as a lesbian until she was in her early 40s.

Now 54, Mulcahey seems part no-nonsense businesswoman, part sexual evangelist. She sits

on the couch in the store's roomy meeting space, wearing black and white palazzo pants and a jacket the color of French's mustard, a rainbow pin on one lapel and a cat pin on the other. On the walls are dozens of fliers, advertising a free home-buying seminar, MoonSisters Drum Camp, Basic Animal Communication workshops.

Cary Smith, who works part time at the store, comes in with a question: "Do we have any passionate-breathing-sounds kind of music?"

Mulcahey doesn't miss a beat. "Try Gabrielle Roth's cassette *Ritual*. Put the demo on." Then she grins. "That one speaks to me below the belt."

Despite the store's unthreatening ambience and multitude of nonsexual wares, Mulcahey says, women still hesitate to walk in.

"We're so saturated with sex, and we see it everywhere, but we are frozen somehow when it comes to our own sexuality. When you walk into a store, you are taking some responsibility, acting upon some curiosity or choice. People think, 'What if I ask a dumb question?'"

"The word 'dildo' is not spoken by many people. It's a rare person who can even ask for a vibrator. One of the things we try to do is normalize the words. We use humor to relieve the tension."

To further that goal, Mulcahey leads free monthly Sex Toys 101 workshops for women. The store is also the site for numerous ongoing groups and meetings, including the Lesbians of Size support group and a coming-out group. Chiropractors, massage therapists and a therapist have office space in the back.

Mulcahey, whose partner, Ann Duffy, is a United Church of Christ minister in Gresham, describes her own work as a "ministry." It's an apt word, because Mulcahey speaks of her store with near-religious enthusiasm. Her catechism is one of sexual openness and pleasure. And she promotes it with the savvy of someone who used to fly around the country clinching business deals.

"I think we're all hurt," she says, "and a lot of it is connected with our bodies. We've been taught we're not good enough, that there's something wrong with us. It comes up in sex."

"Look, if you were going to make a banana cake, you could call someone up and say, 'I've never made a banana cake,' and they wouldn't say, 'What, you've never done that—at your age?' But what if you want to learn how to do oral sex? I'd like us to be able to call our friends and ask for information. I'd like to make this sex stuff be like making a banana cake."

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