

The city that whips

BDSM practitioner Annamarie Stockwell fills us in on one of Portland's latest titles – 'kinkiest city in America'

BY EMILY GREEN
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Annamarie Stockwell stands at the front of a room packed with students on Portland Community College's Sylvania Campus, swinging a single-tail whip.

She has the full attention of the class. "I'm not a doctor," she tells them, "but I play one in a dungeon."

Earlier this year, Portland was dubbed "kinkiest city in America." The ranking was based on the city's total kink population, the number of kink-aware professionals listed in the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom's (NCSF) resource directory, and on pornography purchase data collected by the study's author, BDSM porn site Kink.com.

While Portland scored low in the latter category, it still grabbed the number one spot with 4 percent of Portlanders logged onto Fetlife – a social media network for kinky people. And, according to Kink.com, Portland closely rivals much larger cities such as San Francisco, New York and Chicago in the number of play parties, workshops and other resources available to kinksters.

The definition of kink runs the gamut including any bedroom activity beyond monogamous, missionary-position procreation. But in this context, it's tied tightly to BDSM. Think bondage, dominance, sadism and masochism. There's role playing, fetishes, pleasure mixed with pain and elaborate power exchanges where there are tops and bottoms, ultimate control and no control – although complete submission is an illusion. A scene can be paused at any time by any participant. The most common safe word is "red."

Kink can be as mild as a spanking or as extreme as genital torture.

It's all about exploring boundaries, both emotional and physical, says Stockwell.

She's a switch, which means – depending on her mood – she can be a top or a bottom, a sadist or a masochist. Some people solely identify as one or the other.

And leather. There's a lot of leather.

The largest BDSM membership-based organization in the Portland-metro area, Portland Leather Alliance, has been around since 1998. Along with educational events and fundraisers, PLA puts on Portland's largest annual BDSM event, KinkFest, which brought more than 1,000 people to the Portland Expo Center in February.

Movies such as "Secretary" (2002) and "Fifty Shades of Grey" (2015) have transported BDSM from underground to mainstream, although some critics within the BDSM community say sex scenes in "Fifty Shades" are more about rape and less about BDSM. For those in the kink community, consent is key. Anything other than full consent is abuse, says Stockwell.

At age 34, she's been immersed in Portland's kink culture since shortly after moving to the region 11 years ago. While the local community has been growing as long as she can remember, as BDSM becomes less taboo and more accessible, she says she's seen a marked influx in curious kinksters surfacing for the first time at events in Portland.

Newcomers have plenty to choose from. There are at least three different kink events almost every single day on the calendar Stockwell updates, PDX Kink Events. There are whip practices, rope-tying seminars, strap-on lessons and munches. A munch is a casual gathering for people interested in kink.

While Portland's kink community has a packed events calendar, Stockwell says many people come into the community to learn what they need to learn about BDSM play, and then recede back into their private bedrooms.

"Having a community where you can come meet other people who are doing this stuff, I think, is really important because you get a more realistic expectation for what exploring kink can look like," she says. People can walk away from reading or watching erotic material with ideas about power exchange relationships that just aren't feasible for most schedules and abilities. For example, setting the expectation that a master and slave dynamic is something practiced 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "Nobody does that," says Stockwell.

For kink newbies, Stockwell says munches can be a good place to start. She and her partner founded PDX Queer Munch, which meets at Radio Room the first Thursday of every month, and Vancouver Munch.

"If you go to a munch, it's not a bunch of crazy, wild, kinky-looking people," she says. "It's mostly people sitting around talking about their pets – and also the fact that maybe they had a really good caning last weekend."



PHOTO BY NIK RAPIER

For introverts, there's the PDX Kinky Introverts Munch. In fact, Portland has a munch or party for just about every subgroup of kink culture imaginable.

"We have a group specifically for kinky women, groups for gay men, there are groups for bears," says Stockwell. "We have queer groups, we have straight groups, we have groups that are specific to people who are exploring master slave dynamics, there's rope – Portland is real big on rope."

"There are a lot of events and workshops and groups that meet just to learn how to tie people up."

And while she can't tie a good knot to save her life, Stockwell stands out as a leader in Portland's continuously growing kink community. She hosts monthly discussion panels on kink-related topics – June's topic is dominant-submissive relationship trouble shooting – and she teaches a variety of BDSM workshops from the tamer Introduction to BDSM to Endorphin-Based Needle Play 101.

Stockwell also gets to flaunt her inner geek as a regular guest speaker at PCC and Portland State University. She usually takes over human sexuality classes for a day, explaining polyamory, which she's been practicing with her partner for the past 10 years, or the origins and acronyms of BDSM – there are a lot of acronyms.

She's been a regular guest speaker in PCC psychology professor Cynthia Golledge's classes for the past five years. Golledge says she's seen her students' attitudes toward kink evolve over time.

"I think it's probably fair to say that in the 10 years or so that I've been teaching this, that not only do more people know a little more about kink, or BDSM, but the attitude is generally a little bit more favorable," she says. "There's been a slight shift toward more acceptance of the idea."

Stockwell is also one of the core founders of Sex-Positive Education and Event Center, or SPEEC, a donor-funded nonprofit that sprung up after The Syndicate, Portland's largest dungeon, closed in November 2013. The group is currently focused on finding a space it can lease for large-scale BDSM play parties and other events.

"Although it was born out of BDSM and the people on the board are from the BDSM world, we really want it to be accessible for any sex-positive group in town, whether they're kinky or otherwise," explains SPEEC's board chair, Chris Olson. SPEEC's reached out to more than 50 other "sex-positive" communities in the area for support.

For those who prefer a more intimate