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MOVIES



Vicky Funari (left) and Julia Query, directors of "Live Nude Girls UNITE!," got some air at a friend's house in the Mission.

DAVID PAUL MORRIS / *The Chronicle*

UNION ACTIVITIES UNCOVERED IN 'GIRLS'

Stripper turns her advocacy into a labor of love

By Edward Guthmann
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

As a union activist and shop steward, Julia Query is tenacious and committed. As a stand-up comic and exotic dancer, she's loquacious and seemingly fearless.

When it comes to telling her mother that she strips for a living, though, Query is like every other nervous daughter seeking Mom's approval.

Query, 32, works at the Lusty Lady, a North Beach peep show where workers established the first union strip club in 1997. That battle, which gained national recognition and became a Jay Leno monologue zinger, is now the subject of "Live Nude Girls UNITE!," a documentary that Query co-directed with San Francisco filmmaker Vicky Funari.

In the film, which opens Friday, Query confronts her mother, Joyce

Wallace, a New York doctor known for her pioneering work with street prostitutes and AIDS. The occasion is the First International Conference on Prostitution in Los Angeles, where mother and daughter will each be speaking on separate panels. Wallace already knows that her daughter is a lesbian but has no idea that she gyrates for men in a San Francisco skin palace.

Onscreen, the tension is fierce: Wallace comes from the anti-porn feminist faction that views sex workers as victims, while Query represents the opposite side that considers sex work empowering, a legitimate way to earn a living.

Predictably, Wallace isn't happy. "I don't want it known," she tells Query, "that I, an expert in the field, have a daughter who's in the smut business."

After that meeting, Query says, "my mom didn't talk to me for three months. And then there was a family

disaster and we were back to being mother and daughter to some degree. But it bugged her. And it wasn't until the film was completed and she saw how audiences responded — and saw that I hadn't made a fool of her or painted a large red A on myself — that things were OK again."

Query still works four to 16 hours a week at the Lusty Lady, where she has sick pay, a guaranteed pay scale and job protection through the Service Employees International Union, Local 790. The club's management can no longer force a dancer to work when she's sick or discriminate on the basis of race or body type.

And Mom? Query says she has adjusted to her daughter's line of work and has even participated in Q&A sessions at two screenings of the film: "She's very funny at the Q&As. And she really wants me to make more movies."

When the Lusty Lady workers voted to unionize, Query says, she had been stripping there for eight months. Work conditions had already deteriorated when the dancers discovered that customers were secretly videotaping them through one-way mirrors and distributing the amateur porn on the Internet. The club's manager and co-owner, both women, tried to deny the problem.

Once the strippers gained national attention, she says, "and we made it onto the national joke monitor with Jay Leno, we all started feeling very protective of our story. So I started videotaping."

"Live Nude Girls UNITE!" captures militant strippers chanting on picket lines ("Two! Four! Six! Eight! Don't go here to masturbate!"), a three-day lockout and women with names like Decadence and Velvet negotiating at the bargaining table. It shows tattooed dancers putting on wigs and makeup in the Lusty Lady dressing room and then performing for men who sit in tiny booths and feed quarters into a slot for a peek at them.

At first, Query thought she could do the film alone ("I was completely delusional"). Two years ago, she recruited Funari, who had directed the documentary "Paulina," as editor and co-director. "It's just a miracle, and through Vicky's triage work," she says, "that we ended up with a film."

Funari, 37, says audiences respond well to "Live Nude Girls UNITE!" because it's funny. "All the women are cracking jokes. No matter how serious they are about unionizing, there's a willingness to take the work with some lightness and levity. That's such a different way of portraying the sex industry than people are used to."

In part, the film is a rejoinder to the feminist faction that decries sex work as demeaning and oppressive. Funari says the whole point of the film is "there's another way to look at this. We feel like we're doing a job and we're in control. And why should we be seen as victims?"

And yet, Funari's own experience at the Lusty Lady in 1992 wasn't so pleasant. "The reason I didn't stay didn't have to do with the fact that it was the sex industry but the fact that it was really deadening, numbing work," she says. "It's the same thing I didn't like about working in an office."

"We're the slags at the Woolworth's of the sex industry," Query jokes.

Funari disagrees: "It's the McDonald's of the sex industry. You punch your time clock, serve up your fast food, and when you're done, you punch out and go home."

The work "isn't as boring as some jobs," Query says, "but it's still pretty boring. Basically I go out there and it's gyrate, smile, move to the back, drop to the front, gyrate, smile. I have fun because I can entertain myself. I make jokes with the customers all the time."

Funari had another problem with the Lusty Lady. "I'm bisexual," she says, "and I had primarily been with women. But at the time I was work-

ing there I was in a relationship with a man who I'm still with. Working there and being with a man made it a lot more complicated than it would have been if I'd been working there and been with a woman."

According to Query, most of the men who patronize the Lusty Lady "are nice guys who come to have a good quick sexual moment. Then there's the 5 percent who are mean and look at you nasty and want to pretend they're powerful because they can evaluate you. And then there's a large percentage with no facial expression, who don't want to interact with you as a person and are just trying to look at a single part of your body."

Query says "Live Nude Girls UNITE!" is inspiring women at other strip clubs to organize. Although no others have done so successfully yet, she says, "there've been very good campaigns that have won short-term benefits. I think we'll see a big increase in the number of campaigns in the next couple of years due to the film, especially if it were ever broadcast."

She also claims her film had a strong impact on a workers' strike at the New York Museum of Modern Art. "It let them know why union security is important," she says. "To me, that was the best news I've had in months: that the film is really working as a union film." ■