

WHAT do you think about when you think about prostitutes? Do you think: women in high heels, standing under red street lights? Do you think: women so damaged and drug-addicted, they must have no choice other than to sell themselves? Well then, meet Nikki Cox.

Nikki will this year celebrate – quite literally, since she loves her job – her 17th year as a sex worker (it's a term she – and all the women in this story – prefer, since "prostitute" has negative connotations.)

Nikki is out and proud about her profession. Her whole family knows what she does: she's been taking money for sex since she was 23 years old; she's now 42 and she has no plans to retire any time soon.

"I used to own a hairdressing salon," Nikki says. "I wasn't making much money. I was doing tax returns to make extra. Then I got engaged, and I was going to get married, but the guy I was engaged to had never had sex before. I was worried he might stray after we got married, so I sent him to see a local sex worker."

It worked out pretty well – one might say, it worked out far too well, because the next thing Nikki knew, her fiancé was dating that sex worker on the side. Nikki marched down to the brothel and demanded to see the manager.

"She was as outraged as I was," Nikki says, "It's absolutely unprofessional! But anyway, we got talking and I really liked this woman – she was strong and confident, independent and really good fun."

The two women became friends. "We'd hang out together, and one Friday night, we were at her place watching videos and a call came in: two blokes wanting two girls."

Nikki's friend said, "Are you game?" and Nikki thought, "why not?" and it was more pleasant than she expected.

"The two guys were quite young – definitely over age, but young – and their parents were home, so we had to sneak in and they were saying, 'Shhhh!' because they didn't want to wake their Mum and Dad," Nikki says.

"The session was half-an-hour, so 40

Working girls (from left): Sandi Adams, Rachel Wolton (on sofa), Artemesia de Vine, Laurell Sands and Nikki Cox.

When SEX IS YOUR DAY JOB

The Weekly has always been famous for its divine cakes **Pamela Clark** has created these delicious treats for more than 30 years, from the simplest



Motel sex ban appeal

Sex worker wins case

A SEX worker has won an anti-discrimination case against motel owners in a Queensland mining town who refused to rent her a room.

minutes later, I was back at my friend's house, sitting on the couch with money in my pocket. And my friend said, 'What did you think of that?' and I said, 'I loved it!'

She started work the next day, and has never really stopped. She told her parents pretty much immediately. Her Dad said, 'But why?'

"And I said, 'Well, why not?'," Nikki says. "And Mum was absolutely fine. In fact, she told me that one of my ancestors, during the war in England provided servicemen with favours in exchange for rations. So it runs in the family!"

Perhaps you're thinking: well, that's all very well, but Nikki has ruined her life. How does she ever hope to have a proper relationship? So here's the next surprise: Nikki is married. She met her husband, Mark, in a bar in San Diego in 1997. He was in the US Navy and she was on holiday.

"He didn't know I was Australian when he came over to talk," Nikki says, "but he'd been to Australia with the navy. We hit it off. I didn't tell him I was a sex worker straight away. We went for a walk together that evening. The next day, we went to Sea World."

Nikki's upfront about what she wanted – "I was looking for a one-night stand!" – but Mark said no. Worse, he was due to ship out in the next few days, "but then he was calling me from every port," Nikki says. After about two weeks, she told him: "I'm a sex worker."

His response? He said, "That's cool. He'd been around. He's in the Navy! And he understands that what I do is not who I am."

That was 1997. The couple got married

in 2001, and they're still together. Nikki says her husband has "never, never, never" been jealous, "just like I'm not jealous of the trucks he fixes. For us, it's normal. I will come home and he might say, how was your day? I'll say, 'busy, I saw four people, or five people' and he'll say, 'wow, that is a good day!' The most important people in my life don't discriminate against me. They love me for who I am."

Nikki's friends and family may not discriminate, but other people do. "Sex workers face discrimination every day," says Nikki. "I don't hide what I do. I have a website. I show my face. But there are risks: I've heard of women being evicted from their homes. I know women who been told that they're going to have their children taken away from them. And what's happening in Queensland at the moment is a disgrace."

What's happening in Queensland is that the government decided, last November, to make it legal to discriminate against sex workers, in particular those who choose not to work from home, but from hotels and motels.

The issue came to a head in Queensland basically because sex workers tend to know a good business opportunity when they see one. The mining boom is an excellent example: large numbers of men are currently working on a fly-in, fly-out basis in Queensland's mining towns. They don't have much in the way of female company, which encouraged some sex workers to do a little FIFO work of their own.

On June 28, 2010, a sex worker by the name "Karlaa" checked into the Drover's Rest Motel in Moranbah, Queensland, in the hope of making some good money.

She advertised her arrival in the local newspaper and texted some regular clients to say she'd be in town. She had quite a few appointments, but insists that she was quiet and respectful of other guests, but when she went to pay her bill, she got a frosty reception.

Motel owner Mrs Joan Hartley told Karlaa she wasn't welcome back. When Karlaa asked why, Mrs Hartley said, "because we think you're a sex worker."

Karlaa didn't deny it. On the contrary, she said: "I am a sex worker, but you can't discriminate against me. Sex work is legal in Queensland and, under the Anti-Discrimination Act, you are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of lawful sexual activity."

Karlaa was quite right: in June of 2010, it was illegal to discriminate against somebody on the basis of lawful sexual activity. The clause was bought in, at least in part, to stop homophobic motel owners from turning away gay men who wanted a double room, but since prostitution is legal in Queensland, the clause equally applies to sex workers.

Mrs Hartley, who owns the hotel with her husband, Evan, said: "So sue me" – and so Karlaa took her case to the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal – and, last August, she won on appeal, after first having her claim dismissed on a technicality.

The Hartleys were dismayed. So, too, was the powerful Accommodation Association of Australia, which represents the hotels and motels, big and small, who could hardly believe that they'd now have to accommodate any sex worker at any time or be in breach of Australia's many Anti-Discrimination Acts.

In defending the Hartleys, the association's CEO, Richard Munro, was



LOUNGE FROM COUNTRY TRADER

careful to say that motels did not want to discriminate against sex workers, per se. They merely didn't want people setting up a business, within somebody else's place of business. Of course, the idea that other people – journalists, salesmen – don't work in their motel rooms is obviously fanciful. As Karlaa told the Tribunal: "You can use the motel phone for business, you can use the Internet connection. They just don't want you to use the bed."

In any case, the association won the support of Queensland new Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Jarrod Bleijie, who in November bought in a new law – the legislation in question is formally known as the Youth Justice (Boot Camp Orders) and Other Legislation Amendment Act 2012 – that enables hotel and motel workers to turn away sex workers.

"It is about levelling the playing field so the laws suit the majority not the minority," Mr Bleijie said. He believes the law has the support of the wider community – and that may well be right – but Nikki was appalled.

"Today it's sex workers they want to ban from their motels, but who will it be

next week?" she says. "Gay men? Aboriginal people? Are we going to go back to the days when it was okay to discriminate against anyone who looks different or acts differently?"

Nikki petitioned the government to have the new law scrapped – and she is now part of a much wider network of people who are trying to improve the rights of sex workers more generally. The Weekly flew five of the activists – all of whom are also sex workers – to Sydney to discuss their concerns.

The most passionate of the group was probably Sandi Adams. She's 64 years old, and she's been a sex worker for more than 40 years (and yes, she does plan to retire next year, just as anyone might do at the age of 65.)

Sandi arrived at the photo shoot wearing a pretty pink blouse, with a paperback copy of Kathy Reichs' latest crime novel under her arm, looking for all the world like somebody's grandma, which she is.

"I was 23 when I started out," she said. "I was living in Melbourne and against everybody's advice, I'd taken out a hire purchase on a TV-radio-stereo system. People were telling me I was crazy – that

I would get into debt and get a bad credit rating. So I started out doing erotic massages, but you could make more money if you also had sex.

"I spoke to my husband about it. He said, 'it's up to you.' So I did it. And the first time, I hated myself. To be a sex worker in those days, you were the lowest of the low, like a snake with its belly on the ground.

"But now? Now I think, it's brilliant. It's given me money and freedom. It's totally different to how it used to be. There's no shame in it. And that's all because of decriminalisation. They used to make you feel ashamed of yourself, because it was illegal. The police would deliberately set you up and throw you in the cells.

"They'd threaten you with taking your children off you (Sandi has one son, and three grown step-children from three husbands). You'd have cops doing 'sex-for-favours' – you'd have to give them freebies so they didn't throw you in the cells. There was so much corruption and hypocrisy."

Sandi is now what's known as a "sole operator" in Queensland. There's no requirement for her to be registered, but

she has to be careful how she advertises her services. During the Indy Carnival, for example, she wanted to put an ad in the Gold Coast Bulletin saying: "Let Sandi take you to the chequered flag" but that got banned, as did: "An oldie but a goodie."

"The amount of restrictions on us is ridiculous," she says.

Sandi tends to see "older gentleman, people who have grown up in the same era as me. They don't want to be having sex with somebody the same age as their granddaughter. And they don't want a bag of bones. But I'm not allowed to say what I am, and what I can do."

She never feels exploited by her clients. "If anything, I feel like I'm exploiting them. From an early age, I found out that men want sex and I've used that all my life, she says."

Like Nikki Cox, Sandi believes the Queensland government is "dragging the industry back to the bad old days. (The attorney general) Mr Bleijie was still in nappies when I got into the industry, and has no concept of the crime and corruption in and outside of the Queensland police (when prostitution was illegal.)"

"I have toured and stayed in motel/hotels we do not put a flashing sign outside the premises stating "Hooker Available" – exactly the opposite. We are very discreet usually having our booking's pre-booked before our arrival in the selected town, and usually only seeing 3-4 clients a day and never into the late evenings – you would not know we are there."

Laurell Sands, 42, is also part of the campaign, not just to reverse the law but to change people's perception of sex work. She got into the industry when she was in her early 20s.

"I had a government position," she says, "and I came home from work one day to find my flatmate with two girls.



Rachel Wotton has been a sex worker for 15 years and regularly sees people with severe disabilities.

And I was fascinated. I said, who are these girls? And he told me they were from an escort agency down the road, and I said, right, I'm going to go and get a job there, and they signed me up straight away."

How did Laurell know what to do?

"I was lucky in that my first client was a virgin!" she laughs, "So he didn't know either! But over time, I learnt from my peers and that's been one of the best things about sex work being legal and becoming more open, you can learn from other sex workers."

For many years, Laurell kept her day job, picking up sex work shifts only when "the big bills came in,

like one of the kids needed dental work. I've worked in child services, I've done research into SIDS, but I've kept my two worlds separate", until about two years ago, when Laurell took a job working for Respect Inc, an organisation that advocates for sex workers in Queensland.

Laurell says the anti-discrimination law was designed precisely "so you can't discriminate against one group of people.

The reason we hope we can get public support for this is because we know what happens when they start winding the laws back. Next thing it will be, you can't come in because you're black, or they will use it to turn away gay men, or single Asian women."

Standing nearby, resplendent in black lace, is Artemisia de Vine. She's the tallest in the group and, unlike many with height on their side, she does not stoop. She has regal bearing, platinum curls, and she's a specialist in what she calls as the "conscious erotic arts."

What does she mean by that? "One can listen to music, maybe have it on in the background, but when you give each note your full attention, you can experience bliss," she says.

"You can apply the same principle to the erotic arts – massage, sex and BDSM

(bondage, discipline, sado-masochism). If you really give yourself over to it, the feeling is incredible, and if we're going to have sex, why not blow our minds?"

Artemisia was bought up in what she calls a "strict Christian" household with no dancing, no jewellery, "no sensual pleasures at all".

Discovering her sexual side "was wonderful. Now it is my life. Some people are into sailing. I'm into sex. I pursue it with the same passion."

She's writing a book about her experience (it's called *Lessons from a Whore* because that's word she'd like to reclaim) and she's written an impassioned plea for law reform, saying: "This (law) means I cannot tour Queensland offering my sessions even though I am extremely discreet and respectful. There are already laws in place that can deal with any sex worker – or any other person – who behaves inappropriately while staying in a hotel or motel."

It's impossible to know for certain, but instinct suggests that public sympathy in this battle won't be with sex workers: it will be with motel owners.

"I BELIEVE SEX IS A HUMAN RIGHT."