

Calling for Help Radio: On KROQ's freewheeling 'Loveline,' a deejay and a doctor field questions from troubled teen-agers.

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Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Los Angeles, Calif.

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Date: Feb 7, 1991

Start Page: 1

Section: View; PART-E; View Desk

Text Word Count: 1813

Document Text

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It's late Sunday night at KROQ-FM in Burbank. "Loveline" has been in full swing for a half-hour. Every line on the switchboard is blinking.

Caller David, 22, in Long Beach, says he recently had unprotected sex with someone who carries the HIV virus. He's scared.

Michelle, 16, in Garden Grove, says she is pregnant. Neither she nor her boyfriend has a job. Her father is a drug addict. She is opposed to abortion, but doesn't want "to bring up my baby in a drug-addicted house."

Shannon, 17, in Fullerton, says she has a friend who has been getting her to smoke pot and drop acid. "When we're doing it, it's kind of fun," Shannon says. "When we're off it, it's really scary."

"Loveline" host and disc jockey Jim Trenton, 39, whose nom de radio is the Poorman, finally goes to a commercial break. "Whoo," he says, rubbing his eyes. Every line on the switchboard is still blinking.

Every Sunday from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., the rock music station that bills itself as "the ROQ of the '90s" broadcasts the talk of the '90s. Teen-agers and young adults whisper, giggle, and sometimes weep over the issues some can't or won't discuss with their parents: drugs, abortion, AIDS.

"Loveline" is partly an advice show with a rock 'n' roll atmosphere, partly a phone-in party. Callers often end their conversation with a request for a KROQ T-shirt or a dedication of the latest Depeche Mode single to a boyfriend or girlfriend. But many of the calls describe teen-agers in serious trouble.

On the receiving end are Trenton and Dr. Drew Pinsky, 32, medical director of the chemical dependency unit at Las Encinas Hospital in Pasadena and a physician in private practice in San Marino. The two met through a mutual friend who suggested that Pinsky would be good on the show.

The ongoing war between the jock and the doc is a major part of "Loveline."

"I just want a range of calls that are interesting," explains Trenton, though he readily admits, "I always like the most bizarre calls of all."

Pinsky, however, finds the show's freewheeling atmosphere troubling. "Lots of things get on the air I don't find appropriate," he says.

Pinsky once threatened to quit on the air when a guest gave inaccurate medical information about AIDS. The doctor stayed after the station agreed to be more careful in giving advice.

"This is not Dr. Ruth or David Viscott," Pinsky says. "I'm constantly policing the show, trying to keep it educational and non-treatment oriented."

Neither Trenton nor Pinsky, known on the air as "Dr. Drew," is a trained psychologist. However, psychologists who work with young people say the show is a helpful resource for teen-agers who might not talk to parents or professionals about their problems. The fact that "Loveline" lacks a psychologist is "the strength of the show," Trenton argues. "Kids aren't afraid to call us because we're not some big authority figures who have all the answers."

According to fall, 1990, Arbitron ratings, "Loveline" is L.A.'s most popular radio program in the first hour of its time slot, drawing more than 36,000 listeners from the station's signal range—Los Angeles and Orange counties and portions of San Diego, Ventura, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

The callers are mostly middle-class young people, and pregnancy and AIDS are among the most popular topics, Trenton and Pinsky say.

In a room adjoining the studio, two screeners staff the switchboard, selecting callers, with an ear toward providing a variety of calls. The screeners bring slips of paper with the caller's age, city and a thumbnail sketch of the problem into the studio throughout the broadcast.

The hosts sift through the slips, looking for what Pinsky calls "a good balance."

Sixteen-year-old Alison, from Canoga Park, explains that she recently found her boyfriend having sex with another man.

"Well, unless you're completely open minded and dig on that, maybe it's time to find somebody new to date," the Poorman says.

Parents might be taken aback by such discussions, but Trenton, married and the father of a 6-week-old son, seems unfazed.

"The general public isn't getting the message that teen-agers have sex lives the same as adults," he says. "Drew and I would differ on that aspect. He tries to say that teens are this way and adults are (another) way."

Pinsky is frank about the fact that Trenton's style bothers him. "The show frequently goes too far," he says.

"One of the criticisms levied at us is that we're salacious and exploitative," he says. "That hits me right where it hurts. This show is about the interplay of Jim, who has no sense of what's inappropriate, and me trying to control him and the guests."

Jeff, 19, from North Hollywood, calls to confess, "I had sex with a woman who was 38."

"Is that her chest measurement?" wisecracks the Poorman.

Dr. Drew groans.

Before hanging up, Jeff asks one last question that illustrates the ignorance underlying much of the surface sophistication of teen-agers.

"Can you still get pregnant when you're that old?" Jeff asks.

Pinsky might be the expert, but Trenton is clearly the star of the show. A KROQ disc jockey for a decade, he plays records on weekdays.

Physically, the hosts are a study in contrasts. At the station, Trenton wears a sweat shirt and baggy pants. A bumper sticker on the console reads, "BURY MANILOW." Pinsky sports a button-down shirt and chinos, and wouldn't look out of place at a Barry Manilow concert.

"Loveline" also features a weekly guest, a "celebrity love doctor" who chimes in with advice. Tonight's celebrity is Jason Priestley, who plays a high school student on the Fox series "Beverly Hills 90210."

"I wanted to say 'Hi' to Jason. I think he's really cool," 17-year-old Gypsy begins shyly, before launching into her problem: "My boyfriend is bisexual and all the people I hang out with are bisexual and I don't know if I'm bisexual."

Priestley asks Gypsy if she has unprotected sex with her boyfriend.

She says she does.

"That's a very dangerous prospect, Gypsy," Priestley cautions her, reeling off some facts about AIDS. Dr. Drew listens, nodding at Priestley's advice.

The celebrity guests have included Mr. T, Judd Nelson and Herve Villechaize of "Fantasy Island." Most are young television actors from such TV shows as "21 Jump Street" and "Head of the Class," or musicians from bands like Icehouse, Dramarama, and Gene Loves Jezebel.

"The best guest was a member of the group Social Distortion, who was a recovering heroin addict and had a lot to say," Pinsky says. "That's what kids respond to. Face it, if it was just me, a doctor, offering advice, no one would listen."

"If you had a psychologist, kids would expect treatment," Pinsky says. "We're not counselors. We want to educate

kids about the consequences of sexual activity and substance abuse. This is a springboard for discussion, a support group for adolescents."

"I think you're always better off with a competent, sympathetic, motivated, trained professional," says Laura Schlessinger, a psychologist who hosts her own radio phone-in show weeknights on KFI. "But I would rather have a trained civilian than an incompetent licensed therapist, if they were able to be supportive and give referrals when necessary."

"My young patients raved about the show," says Bobbi Carlson, who brought two of her patients to talk on "Loveline" last year. Carlson, an Arcadia-based clinical psychologist specializing in adolescents, is now a frequent listener and recommends the show to clients.

John Bakaly, a psychologist who also teaches peer counseling at Polytechnic School in Pasadena, calls the show "a good resource."

"I'm a strong advocate of peer helpers," Bakaly says. "And anyway we can get through to adolescents in a respectable manner is helpful."

The night a year ago when Pinsky almost quit, he wasn't on the show, but he was listening as the Poorman interviewed the in-studio guest, a self-styled "sex priestess" whose religious rituals included having sex with multiple partners. She was telling listeners that AIDS was not a heterosexually transmitted disease, the doctor says. Horrified, Pinsky immediately phoned the show.

"I called in and told them to stop . . . or I'm out," he recalls. The ensuing argument went out over the air.

Since his outburst, he says, there has been a change in attitude and the show is "back on track."

The "Loveline" formula, which stresses responsibility, also was "incompatible, basically, with what used to go on at KROQ," Pinsky says. Over the years, songs frequently played on KROQ leaned toward the outrageous.

A program director who took over in mid 1988 changed the format to include more commercial music. "All the jocks who used to advocate sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll have cleaned up their acts," Pinsky says. Indeed, the "Loveline" time slot is taken over once a month by "Clean and Crazy," a show hosted by station deejays who have kicked drug habits.

The KROQ management expresses no qualms about "Loveline."

"It's a less controversial show than I would have imagined, partially because of when it's on," says KROQ general manager Trip Reeb. "We're aware of what they do and we make suggestions and comments, but the Poorman and Dr. Drew are given total free rein to put on what they want."

With "Loveline" in its eighth year on radio, Trenton and Pinsky signed with a Hollywood agency last month. Their goal: a television deal. Trenton in particular is eager to make "Loveline" a late-night TV show.

The final calls of the evening are coming through.

Damien, 21, of Laguna Hills, says he doesn't have a car and has trouble meeting other gay men. "I was hoping someone might call and we could get together," he says.

Although the show never introduces listeners to each other, calls come in for Damien for the next 24 hours.

Heather, 17, says her mother grows marijuana. Her stepfather molested her while she was in elementary school. She has been living with her grandparents for awhile, but now they want her to move back home. And on a recent visit with her parents, she had cause to believe that her father is molesting her 5-year-old stepsister.

Dr. Drew, the Poorman, and Priestley spend several minutes with Heather, strongly urging her to get help.

"Call us back next week and let us know what happened, Heather," the Poorman says.

Later, on the elevator with his wife and new baby, Trenton shakes his head. "Wow," he says. "Tonight was heavy."

[Illustration]

PHOTO: The "Loveline" co-hosts, deejay Jim (Poorman) Trenton, standing, and Dr. Drew Pinsky, field calls in studio while celebrity guest Jason Priestley, left, listens.; PHOTO: COLOR, (Orange County Edition) The "Loveline" co-hosts, deejay Jim (Poorman) Trenton, standing, and Dr. Drew Pinsky, field calls in studio while celebrity guest Jason Priestley, left, listens. / MIKE SERGIEFF / Los Angeles Times

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