Band-Aids wrap around all ten of Barbie’s toes during her first few weeks of work. Callouses cover her feet, numbing the pain of having to constantly wear pleaser heels, a brand of plastic high heels Barbie had to blow a hairdryer on to stretch out. After dancing at the strip club for about twelve hours every week since August, Barbie has built up a tolerance. Heels are on the long list of things that no longer bother her.

A first-year, full-time materials science engineering student at Ohio State University, 18-year-old Barbie (who preferred the use of her stage name to remain anonymous) started working at the club in early August, after her Parent PLUS Loan failed to get approval under her mother’s name. Knowing that her family was cutting it close by putting her father’s name on the loan, Barbie began stripping as soon as she was of legal age.

For Barbie, who has a scholarship as well as some grant money, in-state tuition at OSU comes down to about $5,000 a semester. After working as a dancer for nearly three months, she has already saved enough money to pay for an entire year’s worth of tuition, roughly $10,000, since, as a sophomore, she will live in off-campus housing, which is cheaper. She is also paying off the interest on the loan.

Between the years of 2001 and 2016, the amount of student debt owed by American households tripled from $340 billion to more than $1.3 trillion (The Federal Reserve 2018). 68% of college students in the year 2011-12 took out federal student loans, and each year that percentage has steadily increased (Velez 2017). Despite the negative stigma of sex work in this country, many students find sex work a viable opportunity to meet the crippling prices of higher education and a way to make a living wage.

“The people who think sex work is something to be ashamed of have never been to a strip club,” says Barbie.

In the United States, there is an absence of recognition that sex work is a legitimate occupation and opportunity for social mobility (Powell-Sears 2018). Unsurprisingly, “exotic dancers report that the doubt cast on a female exotic dancer by the media, the legal system, and the general public is much greater than that of a woman with a ‘non-deviant’ profession” (Kuntze 2009).

Liza, an exotic dancer from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, explains common stereotypes about strippers. She says, “There are so many stereotypes about exotic dancers: They are drug addicts, or uneducated, or come from a poor background, or have daddy issues... as a result I don’t think the profession is on the same caliber as an accountant or any other ‘respectable’ job” (Green 2016). Barbie is not embarrassed by her job, nor does she feed into these stereotypes. While she admits that it was difficult to sit her mother down and tell her she was stripping, in the end she decided it was better to be honest. She’s open about being a dancer with her family and her roommates at school and says that usually, “people are more understanding when I’m able to explain it.”
Another stigma around stripping is that it is dangerous. The specific club that Barbie works for requires dancers to sign in at the beginning of their shift, which for Barbie is around 6:30pm, and sign out at 2:30am when the club closes. For safety purposes, the cars in which dancers arrive and leave are kept track of, as stalkers pose a real threat for many sex workers. There are cameras positioned throughout the club as well as security guards who make sure there is no loitering in the parking lot.

Barbie makes it clear she has never felt unsafe while working, despite being in situations where customers act inappropriately. She has never been afraid to remove herself from uncomfortable situations, and when they occur, she gets on with her job. At the end of the day, she says, “I’m there to work.”

Many sex workers do not have the same experience as Barbie and have been harassed, abused, and put into life threatening situations because of their occupation. As a result, sex work is often seen as degrading and disempowering, and, “reinforces the idea that women are only valuable based on their sexuality: a sexuality that someone else has made... for them to sell” (Hannon 2013). But many sex workers, including Barbie, also believe the contrary—that stripping is empowering.

“I walk in the club like I own the place,” Barbie says as she curls her eyelashes, her blue eyes bright.

She explains that having confidence intimidates male customers, making them more easily manipulated. The power structure Barbie participates in works to dismantle preconceived notions of strip clubs. Though a “stripper” is a male-centered concept, Barbie doesn’t think about her jobs in terms of objectification. When she is dancing, she is in control.

She recounts a night when two men got into an argument over buying a VIP room with her, “I told them, ‘Whoever has the most money for me can go first.’ They started bidding at $400, which rose to $900, on top of the $300 VIP flat-rate charge.” Barbie made $1,200 in just one hour.

Her first stage sweep stays fresh in her memory. After dancing on the main stage, which sits in the middle of the club and doubles as a bar with nearly 24 chairs around it and a pole in the center, it was as if it had rained dollar bills. Cash covered nearly the entire stage and had to be swept off into a trash bag. Since then, the stage has been swept many times for Barbie. “A lot of people come in and say I’m the most good-looking girl here,” she says, shrugging.

Based on a study from research done in 2002, strippers earned on average “$30,000 annually, with a range of over $60,000 to under $10,000, for an average of three working days a week” (Hannon 2013). For Barbie, and many other young females, dancing offers a more flexible, economically beneficial occupation than typical service jobs. She pockets $20 per dance and $300 every time she books a VIP room, not including tips. Despite being a fairly new dancer at the club, she already has six to seven “regulars,” men who visit her weekly by making appointments with her in advance. The men typically spend time with her in the VIP room, an intimate
setting where Barbie performs a few dances and talks to her customers like they’re friends.

"Write this down," she says, pointing. "It’s so hard to stay motivated to get this degree because coming out of school my starting salary will probably be less than what I’m making right now."

This honesty is not uncommon among other young dancers. Many have voiced the desire to make as much money as they can before they graduate, knowing they will take pay cuts working as lawyers, engineers and psychologists (Chang et al. 2014). The Student Sex Work Project, conducted in the UK, found that 5% of students in higher education have taken on some form of sex work at some point in their education (Staga et al. 2015).

Barbie manages her time as a full-time student and dancer the same way any other student worker would. She continues fixing her makeup as she gets ready for her Wednesday night shift, which she works because her first class on Thursday starts at 9:00am, giving her a little more time to sleep. One reason she loves dancing is because she can make her own hours. Barbie completes as much homework as she can during the day in between classes, so nights are free to work if she wants. She can dance as little or as much as she wants to in a week.

In terms of her social life, Barbie claims that for her, and many of the other girls she works with, going to parties, bars, etc. "feels like work." Even though it’s fun,


