

Is abstinence the answer?

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Originally posted 7/18/2007

Abstinence promoters claim to be on the cutting edge of sex education. Critics say they oversimplify.

The National Abstinence Clearinghouse held their 11th annual leadership conference in St. Paul July 9-11. The conference featured several speakers promoting a message of abstinence until marriage. MSR was among those invited to their July 9 press conference.

Among the seven speakers was Lakita Garth Wright, who says that as an 11-year-old, she made a decision to remain abstinent until marriage after having a conversation with her grandfather following the death of his wife of 60 years.

"The thing that I remembered the most out of the entire conversation was [him saying of his deceased wife] 'I don't know anything about anybody else, because she was everything.'"

Garth Wright tells of growing up at a time when abstinence programs did not exist for her in school, in a community that Money magazine rated as the most dangerous place in America and the worst place to raise children.

"I didn't want to be like other women in our community," she said, "15 years old, stomach sticking out, talking about 'Where my baby daddy at?' I didn't want to be a Jerry Springer episode."

Garth Wright travels across the country carrying the abstinence message, and although she says that 85 percent of her speaking engagements are with suburban White teens, she states, "If this is a message that can work in my community...it can work anywhere."

She says that most of her friends now adhere to this message. "Now they are teaching people how to treat them — that you are going to respect and appreciate me for my sense of humor, my intelligence, my wit and charm. Sex will just be the icing on the cake after we get married."

MOAPPP (Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting) is a 16-year-old nonprofit organization that provides resources and training for people statewide who work with parents, adolescents and young adults. Brigid Riley, executive director for MOAPPP, says that she believes that the abstinence message is an important one as part of a comprehensive health curriculum. However, she says that she is concerned about Abstinence Clearinghouse because of their history of promoting "misinformation" with "technical inaccuracies," specifically surrounding the ineffectiveness of contraceptives.

"My concern, too, is that a simple abstinence message — that you should just simply wait until you get married — is an incomplete message," Riley points out, noting that though many people do not marry until 25-30 years of age, most are involved in sexual relationships before that time. "If they don't have information or if they have false information, this can be life-threatening."

Another Abstinence Clearinghouse speaker, Keith Deltano, a military police officer and public school teacher, uses comedy to capture his audience. But when it comes to the message of abstinence, Deltano says, "I'm serious. I'm deadly serious. We all are."

During the press conference, Deltano was adamant in his speech: "Pregnancy rates for the State of Georgia for 15-17-year-olds have dropped 46 percent... Mathematica is getting run nationwide. Mathematica of course shows that abstinence education doesn't work." He urges listeners to go to virginityrocks.com where he has "conceptualized it [studies] so a layman can understand."

Mathematica describes itself as a nonpartisan policy research firm that evaluates data collected through surveys.

Deltano says that pregnancy rates have continued to rise during the past 30 years of comprehensive sex education. He credits abstinence curricula with declining teenage pregnancy rates and presents the declining rates as proof that the abstinence message works.

But Riley says that it is important to look at how we determine if something works. “I’m a public health person... I believe in data that has been collected in a scientific way... I don’t want you to give [youth] a quiz at the end of that lesson that asks, ‘Do you think you’re going to have sex in the next three months?’ I want you to measure — I want you to find out whether they did have sex.”

She says that the 14 studies referenced by most abstinence providers measure attitude change. But Riley says that it is behavior change that causes young people to postpone sexual involvement — or, if they are already sexual active, to use contraceptives or condoms.

Deltano insists that the abstinence message resonates with the Clearinghouse audience. “I get — Luis gets — Laketa gets standing ovations... These kids want the truth. There’s a new sexual revolution going on... The kids around the country are revolting despite the idea that we are an ‘antiquated, out-of-touch movement.’ We are not — we are on the cutting edge.”

Riley explains that in 1996, with the Welfare Reform Act, a shift began directing increased federal dollars toward abstinence programs. “It’s not just abstinence [for teens]. It’s providers of abstinence-only-until-marriage [for all age groups] — people who adhere to a very strict definition, an eight-point definition of the things that they will cover [see sidebar at right]. That’s who gets this money.”

To be specific, \$141 million in annual federal funds support the abstinence message. “They have a real strong presence,” Riley says. “They are able to put on very fancy, glitzy shows for the kids who participate in their program. And if the content was solid, that wouldn’t be a problem for me. But it isn’t.”

Luis Galdamez, another of the speakers at the conference, says that he came to the U.S. with dreams of becoming a pilot, but because of poor choices he was not able to fulfill his dreams.

“I’m going around speaking to youth, telling them, ‘Don’t do what I did,’” Galdamez says. “I’m speaking to parents, telling them the importance of speaking often and daily and keeping it real to your kids — the message of abstinence.”

Galdamez believes that this is a message that our country was founded upon. “A lot of Latinos can do more in this country if they can have the chance to hear the message of abstinence... I want my people to have a chance, not to be doing lawns and picking strawberries. Go to college. Get an education. Be successful, and more than anything, stop this cycle of poverty.”

As for his own children, he says, “The curse will end with me. My kids will get married one time, they will have kids in their marriage, and they are not going to have multiple homes.”

With an abstinence-until-marriage message, and with a strong emphasis on teenage pregnancy as a deterrent for early sexual activity, how does the gay and lesbian community relate?

Riley says that promoting abstinence until marriage sends a very clear message that the focus is on heterosexual relationships, “because in this country, only heterosexuals can get married.” As for pregnancy rates, Riley says that lesbian and bisexual girls experience pregnancy at twice the rate of heterosexual girls, so all women need information about preventing pregnancy.

She also says, “If you look at the guidelines for abstinence programs, and if you look at a lot of the content, I think you will see that there is a very serious bias against homosexual relationships.” She then read the following quote, saying, “I found it in a document called ‘Legal Momentum’:

“The male and female body are not anatomically suited to accommodate sexual relations with members of the same sex. Sexual practices in the homosexual lifestyle are considered very dangerous for disease, infections, etc. This lifestyle should not be encouraged as healthy or as an equal alternative to marriage.”

Yet, all speakers agreed that marriage is a relative term used so that youth understand. Galdamez speaks most often in California, which recognizes domestic partnerships and civil unions. He says, “[I am] sometimes approached by youth who feel that they are homosexual, and they’ll say, ‘Luis, you talk about marriage. What’s the goal for us? Wait until when?’

“So I tell them, ‘Right now, as a teenager, concentrate on your goals and dreams.’ The message...is for everybody. Whatever your gender preference is, all we’re saying is wait.”

Riley says, “We all care about young people, and we all want what’s best for young people. But I believe that if we are serious about preventing too-early pregnancy — too-early sexual involvement, sexually transmitted infections and HIV — we have to do a lot more than talking only about abstinence to lay the best possible

foundation.”

According to a recent Minnesota parent survey on sexuality education in public schools, parents want their children to hear an abstinence message along with other information as well. Riley says that this is partly attributable to the fact that it is challenging for parents to have these conversations with their children.

“We’re working here at MOAPPP to try to get parents some of the tools to do that, and to help them relax a little bit about it and realize that, from the time your children are little, there are lots of opportunities to talk about these things and to build a more open relationship about it with your children.”

For more information on National Abstinence Clearinghouse, call 605-335-3643 or go to www.abstinence.net. For more information on MOAPPP call 651-644-1447, 800.657.3697 or go to www.MOAPPPp.org