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Where Tennessee Abstinence Education Fails to Protect

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Sex education, particularly where federal funding is concerned, is always a matter of debate. But in the South, where it intersects with issues like religion and racial inequalities, it gets even more complex. In 2012, the Tennessee state legislature passed a law further regulating already-mandated abstinence only sex education to prohibit the discussion of “gateway sexual activity.” I embedded with abstinence educators in rural West Tennessee through training and a class in a public middle school to see impacts at the ground level.

Where Tennessee Abstinence Education Fails to Protect  
By Becca Andrews

I sat in the third seat, second row from the left—14 years old, all wild red hair and too much eyeliner and rampant insecurities. Our health teacher, a girls' basketball coach with a halo of cropped gray hair, opened with a single statement:

“Ladies, everything can be avoided if you'll just keep your legs closed.”

He punctuated it with a sardonic smile. That was all he said on the subject for the week. When he was done, he stepped aside, plopping down into his desk chair to glance up intermittently while grading papers after he turned the class over to two strangers—a man and a woman—who would be our new teachers for the week. Nervous giggles rippled through the classrooms. As teenage girls living in a rural community that revolved around cotton, Friday night lights and gossip, we knew the consequences of sex—ruined reputations, questioned faith, and the most unthinkable fate of all, pregnancy. We had whispered about such girls. We had read the accusations scribbled on the bathroom stalls.

Over the next four days, we (a class of about two dozen ninth grade girls) participated in a class called Right Choices, an offshoot of a nonprofit pregnancy crisis center and medical clinic in Dyersburg, Tenn. called Life Choices<sup>1</sup>. The class was to fulfill a sex education requirement in our high school curriculum, and its focus was on abstinence—or refraining from sexual activity until a traditional marriage—as the primary route.

It's been a decade, but I clearly remember the emphasis on marriage and how we were told that as teenagers, we could severely damage that future sacred relationship. We talked about “family values,” and how to not sabotage our chances at that in our youth. The illustration I remember most vividly involved a piece of Scotch tape and what I took as a commentary on my worth.

The Right Choices instructor chose a normal piece of tape, freshly torn from a roll on the coach's desk. She held it up, taut, for all to see. She asked us to note how transparent and clean it was, and to observe its adhesiveness. Then she handed it to the girl in the first row, and told her to attach it to her skin and pull it off. “It won't hurt,” she promised. The girl did as she was told, and the piece of tape was passed around for us all to follow suit. When it got to me I gingerly stuck it on my left forearm, smoothing it out before I peeled it back off. I examined the particles of dirt and dead skin cells and hair that now clung to the tape— some mine, some not. I wrinkled my nose. I passed it along.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://lifechoicesdyersburg.com/?page\\_id=236](http://lifechoicesdyersburg.com/?page_id=236)

Once the tape had collected bits and pieces of each of us, the instructor pinched it between her thumb and index finger.

“See how dirty this piece of tape is?” she said. “It’s basically garbage.”

She pointed out that two pieces of “dirty” tape could never bond well enough to stick forever. She tore off another clean piece of tape and pressed it against the dirty piece, saying these two would be able to stick together a little longer, but not half so long as—two pieces of clean tape—*these* two. She pressed the two pure pieces together, and made an animated show of her inability to separate them. The moral of the story was that if two people waited for marriage to have sex, their marriage would be successful and nothing would ever be able to come between them, but anything different was lesser and would inevitably fail.

A decade has passed since this demonstration, and I never forgot it. While I’m not convinced abstinence education—telling students not to have sex before they are in a committed marriage— is totally flawed, I had hoped the methods that were being used in Tennessee classrooms had evolved away from scare tactics.

They haven’t.

Three years ago, the Tennessee legislature adopted legislation requiring abstinence education to be even more cautious in the classroom. Senate Bill 3310/House Bill 3621, also known as the “Gateway Sexual Activity” bill, stated that Tennessee sex education programs must “exclusively and emphatically promote sexual risk avoidance through abstinence, regardless of a student’s current or prior sexual experience.”<sup>2</sup> The culture of abstinence education in rural Tennessee has been dominant since sex education became part of national curricula in the 90’s,<sup>3</sup> and it is deepened by the conservative Christianity that dominates the region<sup>4</sup>. The new regulations built on a foundation set in Tennessee Health Education policy years prior, that stated family life education “must include presentations encouraging abstinence from sexual intercourse during the teen and pre-teen years.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See SB 3310/HB 3621 PDF

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.futureofsexed.org/background.html> “By 1989, 23 states had passed mandates for sexuality education, an additional 23 states strongly encouraged sex education, 33 mandated AIDS education and 17 additional states recommended it.”<sup>2</sup> In June of 1989, SIECUS published “Sex Education 2000: A Call to Action,” which outlined 13 goals that would ensure that all children received comprehensive sexuality education by the year 2000.”

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/life/entertainment/story/2010/jan/16/tennessee-ranks-high-among-states-in-importance/1907/> “Tennessee is the fifth most religious state in the country, according to polling data from Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life.”

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Feature.showFeature&featureID=2170> Under prior Tennessee law, family life education must “include presentations encouraging abstinence from sexual intercourse during the teen and pre-teen years.” [3] The **Tennessee Health Education Standards 6-8** include the expectation that students will learn to “identify abstinence from sexual activity as the responsible and preferred choice for adolescents.”

Sex education that promotes and teaches abstinence has been around since the 1980s, when federal funding for these programs first became available.<sup>6</sup> The central theme is simple: don't have sex until you're married.<sup>7</sup> Most programs only discuss contraception in the context of its shortcomings<sup>8</sup>, and some, Right Choices included, present abstinence as central to being a better person.

According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 29 states have policies in place that require local education agencies to "stress" abstinence.<sup>9</sup> Alabama has an abstinence-based policy that decrees abstinence as "the expected social standard for unmarried school-age persons," but there is no penalty for schools that don't comply.<sup>10</sup> Mississippi passed a law last year that mandates

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.futureofsexed.org/background.html> "Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, these groups had a great deal of quiet success at the local level, convincing school boards across the country to adopt restrictive abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. In 1996, the groups' success on the national level changed the landscape for sex education dramatically. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Act was passed under former President Bill Clinton's administration and fundamentally changed how low-income families received federal assistance. A part of this legislation was Title V, Section 510(b), which allocated \$50 million per year over a five-year period to states for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. These programs were governed by a very strict definition of abstinence, known as A-H (see sidebar on page 7) in which states could choose to focus on some sections of the definition over others. In addition, states were required to provide a \$3 match for every \$4 received from the federal government for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. Every state except California accepted these funds."

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/publications-a-z/429-the-history-of-federal-abstinence-only-funding> "Federal support of such programs began in 1982 with a limited pool of funding through the Adolescent Family Life Act. Then beginning in 1996, funding for abstinence-only and abstinence-only-until-marriage programs (hereafter, collectively called abstinence-only) grew exponentially with the enactment of welfare reform (P.L. 104-193). The law contained a little noticed mandate of \$50 million a year to fund abstinence-only programs. In fact, the law amended the Maternal and Child Health Block Grant legislation (Title V of the Social Security Act) and was groundbreaking, both for its funding level and also for its unprecedented, eight-point definition of abstinence education. This definition (see below) has remained at the core of all federal abstinence-only funding streams, including the newest and, arguably, the most controversial – Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE)."

<sup>7</sup><http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=522&grandparentID=477&parentID=523> "Programs are designed to promote the conservative social idea that sexual behavior is only morally appropriate in the context of a heterosexual marriage."

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/topics-issues/abstinenceonly/132-8-point-definition-of-abstinence-only-education>

Gov't eight-point definition of abstinence education says, "teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of sexual activity."

<sup>8</sup> See Life Choices curriculum.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=1427&parentID=478> Used this graphic to count how many states emphasize abstinence education.

<sup>10</sup><http://siecus.org/document/docWindow.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewDocument&documentid=363&documentFormatId=426> "Alabama has chosen to implement abstinence-only-until-marriage programs through Title V..."

<http://www.alsde.edu/sec/isvcs/Pages/faq-all.aspx?tab=Health%20and%20PE&navtext=FAQs>

However, if sex education is taught it must be in compliance of The Code of Alabama which states:

(a) Any program or curriculum in the public schools in Alabama that includes sexual education or the

abstinence education or “abstinence plus” curricula (meaning the emphasis is on abstinence, but some information about contraception methods are provided).<sup>11</sup> Texas’ education code states that all materials must give priority to abstinence, and information regard HIV/AIDS, contraception and STDs must follow set guidelines.<sup>12</sup> Utah schools also must emphasize abstinence as the primary choice for students.<sup>13</sup>

But Tennessee’s legislative stance is particularly interesting because it continues to elaborate on a health education policy that already regulated how sex education was presented in public schools, and it does so with unique language. The term “gateway,” an obvious reference to the concept of gateway drug use,<sup>14</sup> came under

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human reproductive process shall, as a minimum, include and emphasize the following:

(1) Abstinence from sexual activity is the only completely effective protection against unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) when transmitted sexually.

(2) Abstinence from sexual activity outside of lawful marriage is the expected social standard for unmarried school-age persons.

<sup>11</sup><http://siecus.org/document/docWindow.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewDocument&documentid=387&documentFormatId=450> Mississippi’s new sex education law requires each school district to adopt either an “abstinence-only” or an “abstinence-plus” policy, implementing a corresponding curriculum by the start of the 2012–2013 school year. In addition to teaching abstinence-only concepts, “abstinence-plus” education may discuss broader sexual health topics, such as “the nature, causes and effects of sexually transmitted diseases,” and STD/HIV prevention education. However, the education “shall not include instruction and demonstrations on the application and use of condoms.”

<sup>12</sup><http://siecus.org/document/docWindow.cfm?fuseaction=document.viewDocument&documentid=434&documentFormatId=497> Texas Education Code states that all course materials and instruction related to human sexuality must stress abstinence, providing specific criteria for discussion of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and contraception.

<http://www.statutes.legis.state.tx.us/Docs/ED/htm/ED.28.htm#28.004> (e) Any course materials and instruction relating to human sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, or human immunodeficiency virus or acquired immune deficiency syndrome shall be selected by the board of trustees with the advice of the local school health advisory council and must:

(1) present abstinence from sexual activity as the preferred choice of behavior in relationship to all sexual activity for unmarried persons of school age;

(2) devote more attention to abstinence from sexual activity than to any other behavior;

(3) emphasize that abstinence from sexual activity, if used consistently and correctly, is the only method that is 100 percent effective in preventing pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, infection with human immunodeficiency virus or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, and the emotional trauma associated with adolescent sexual activity.

<sup>13</sup> Utah Code mandates that the state board of education establish curriculum requirements in grades eight through twelve for the prevention of communicable diseases. The instruction must stress abstinence and materials used for instruction in health cannot include the intricacies of intercourse, the advocacy of homosexuality, the advocacy or encouragement of the use of contraceptive methods or devices, or the advocacy of sexual activity outside of marriage.

<http://www.rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-474.htm> “Human sexuality instruction or instructional programs” means any course, unit, class, activity or presentation that provides instruction or information to students about sexual abstinence, human reproduction, reproductive anatomy, physiology, pregnancy, marriage, childbirth, parenthood, contraception, or HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.”

<sup>14</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/US/tennessee-governor-passes-controversial-gateway-sexual-behavior-law/story?id=16335600> If marijuana is the gateway drug, are kissing and handholding the gateway to sexual activity? <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/tennessee-passes-bill-to-tamp-down->

fire in media coverage for its ambiguity.<sup>15</sup> It has since been defined as “activity that involves the groin, upper thighs, buttocks, breasts and genitalia.”<sup>16</sup> Ohio made a move to pass similar legislation the year after Tennessee’s bill was signed into law, but it ultimately failed after long-winded debates about the precise meaning of “gateway sexual activity.”<sup>17</sup>

The other element that sets this law apart is the punishment for failure to comply—a \$500 fine against any organization that is found in violation.<sup>18</sup> So far, none have been penalized.

I wanted to see for myself what abstinence education looks like where I grew up, particularly now that it was further regulated by Tennessee lawmakers. I wondered if the educators were fulfilled by their work explaining concepts of abstinence and “secondary virginity,” the concept that abstaining from sex even after previous sexual encounters can “reclaim” your virginity, to middle school kids.<sup>19</sup>

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[gateway-sexual-activity](#) You've heard of gateway drugs -- smoking marijuana supposedly leads to harder, more addictive substances. But what about "gateway sexual activity": the hand-holding, lip-locking and light-grazes that can lead to ... other things?

<sup>15</sup> <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/muckraker/tennessee-passes-bill-to-tamp-down-gateway-sexual-activity> The bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Jim Gotto, said the bill wouldn't address things as innocuous as holding hands, the *Knoxville News Sentinel* [reports](#). But critics of the legislation say the offending behavior is not clearly defined.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/12/us-usa-politics-tennessee-idUSBRE84B00D20120512> The very ambiguous language in this bill certainly puts teachers in a very difficult situation" when it comes to knowing what to teach, said Jerry Winters, spokesman for the Tennessee Education Association.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/12/us-usa-politics-tennessee-idUSBRE84B00D20120512> David Fowler, president of the Family Action Council of Tennessee, which pushed the bill, said it does not ban kissing or holding hands from discussion in sex education classes. But he said it addresses the touching of certain "gateway body parts," including genitals, buttocks, breasts and the inner thigh.

<http://www.knoxnews.com/news/state/gateway-sexual-activity-spurs-legislator-debate> Gotto also cited, without reading aloud, the current statutory definition of "intimate parts," which is "the primary genital area, groin, inner thigh, buttock or breast of a human being."

<sup>17</sup> <http://stateimpact.npr.org/ohio/2013/04/17/lets-not-talk-about-gateway-sexual-activity-baby/>  
<http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/04/19/1897921/ohio-drops-gateway-provision/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/US/tennessee-governor-passes-controversial-gateway-sexual-behavior-law/story?id=16335600> Outside instructors or organizations who do discuss gateway sexual behavior in a sex ed class can be fined \$500, according to the law.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/12/us-usa-politics-tennessee-idUSBRE84B00D20120512> Under the law, Tennessee teachers could be disciplined and speakers from outside groups like Planned Parenthood could face fines of up to \$500 for promoting or condoning "gateway sexual activities."

See also: SB 3310/HB 3621 PDF

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.lovematters.com/startover.htm> Secondary virginity is a decision to abstain from sexual activity, starting with today and continuing until the day you get married.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/04/style/it-s-never-too-late-to-be-a-virgin.html> These days, a period of "secondary virginity," as it is sometimes called, is increasingly the norm for many brides-to-be across the South, an accommodation to the modern reality of premarital sex and the traditional disapproval of it in the Bible Belt.

And the coach who taught that health class: did he even remember saying that to us? Did he have any idea that his words remain burned into my brain?

So I went back.

On a sticky July day in Dyersburg, Tennessee, I sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair in a building reminiscent of a doctor's office—fluorescent lights, white tile floors, hardworking air conditioner. I was in the West Tennessee headquarters of Life Choices, a nonprofit medical clinic that advises women on unplanned pregnancy. Right Choices is its offshoot for youth that covers abstinence education classes in West Tennessee schools. The whole crew was there—two educators, Matt Boals and Donna Whittle; the nurse who teaches about medical consequences of sex, Kim Hampton; and Marla Kennedy, the project coordinator for Right Choices.<sup>20</sup> The team is all white, all middle class, all Christian, and they all have children. They were assembled for a summer training session to plan the 2014-2015 school year. We greeted each other, and after the introductions, we settled into our seats while Kennedy set up the projector for the curriculum videos.

Even though Right Choices is where I got my sex education as a kid, I didn't actually expect to see anyone who taught me all those years ago. I didn't expect to talk to anyone who was there the day I ripped that piece of tape off my arm.

I should have.

The lights flickered off, and a projector began to play a video onto a large screen in the front of the room. An African-American educator named Walter Lindsey stands on a stage, surrounded by ferns, with a large white board set up on an easel to his right. The lesson comes from a curriculum designed in Chattanooga called Live On Point<sup>21</sup>, which has since been shortened to simply "On Point," and the theme that kicked off the four-day class was about family. "Today's objective: to give teens a traditional view of marriage and family," Lindsey says, reading from a screen onstage.

The group sets up the idea of a complete family—a mother and father who occupy conventional gender roles in order to provide a safe, stable environment for their children as an ideal to strive toward. In the video, Lindsey asks his class how this works. Audience members can be heard shouting out the "mother's" responsibilities. "Cooking! Cleaning! Nurse! Homemaker!" Then they move on to the father. "Yard work! Bills! Discipline!"

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<sup>20</sup> [http://lifechoicesdyersburg.com/?page\\_id=236](http://lifechoicesdyersburg.com/?page_id=236)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.liveonpoint.org/#2>



Lindsey writes all these jobs down on the white board in columns under “mother” and “father.” Pacing across the stage, he acknowledges that sometimes, single mothers have to take on “male” jobs, because families are “left fatherless because of war casualties,” but that is the only good excuse for single motherhood. All his anecdotal examples are of heterosexual couples of the same race projected on a screen in the background. Live On Point uses the term “mixed family” to describe second marriages, and their claim is that can be problematic because favoritism naturally exists between the biological parent and his/her children. Lindsey says he knows this from experience. He tells the audience that he comes from a “mixed” family, and recalls a childhood incident in which his stepfather scolded him and he shot back, “You’re not my real father.” His tale ends with the couple divorcing, and while he says he doesn’t directly take the blame for their split, he thinks his comment created a crack in the family’s foundation that only widened with time. The point is that by having sex with more than one person, it’s possible to ruin a chance at true, committed family.

The lights came back on. As I looked at everyone seated around the table, one of my fellow trainees looked familiar. Matt Boals had a friendly smile, warm brown eyes and an “aw, shucks” demeanor. It wasn’t a stretch to wonder if I knew him when I was a kid—the West Tennessee region is one of those places where everyone knows and is related to everyone else.

Hampton connected the dots. “You took the class in 2005? Matt was teaching then!” He had taken a few years off to be a firefighter; his wife was now pregnant with their second child, and he decided to come back to teach full-time to be more available for his growing family. His new teaching partner, Donna Whittle, had two young adult daughters who had both been through the Right Choices program, and she decided to get involved after a conversation with previous volunteers at her church.

During the lunch break, I sat down with Hampton to hear more about Right Choices. “One particular school that we’ve been in for three or four years, this past year they did not have one single pregnant girl in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade—the first year that any of the teachers working there can remember,” Hampton said. When asked for documentation later, Hampton was unable to find it. The matching Tennessee Health and Human Services grant of \$92,800<sup>22</sup> provides the majority of their financial support is specifically for 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms, so most of the group’s time is spent in middle schools.<sup>23</sup>

Hampton has three children, all teenagers, and she keeps an “open-house policy” for her kids’ friends to come over and hang out. “I’m the chaperone queen,” she said. I could see why her home would be a popular spot—she’s vivacious, charming, and

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<sup>22</sup> Number came from Marla Kennedy.

<sup>23</sup> [http://lifechoicesdyersburg.com/?page\\_id=260](http://lifechoicesdyersburg.com/?page_id=260) Life Choices is delivering our Right Choices program in middle schools in Crockett, Dyer, Haywood, Lake, and Lauderdale Counties.

tough, and I never saw her lose command of a room. “I want to give them the power to realize that they don’t have to be what society says,” she told me, and then mocked the standard line. “*Teenagers, they’re just animals, they just act on hormones and they can’t think and they can’t make choices,*” she said. “The ‘boys will be boys’ mentality, I don’t agree with that at all. Oversimplification is disrespectful to teenagers.”

Family is a major theme for the Right Choices program, and for Hampton, it’s why she takes on the task of explaining the potential medical consequences of sex—STDs, pregnancy, potential infertility. “What I’ve found in hanging out with teenagers— I do not come from a real healthy family life, and I wasn’t taught a lot of the things that I think kids need to be told— so in my effort to raise our children differently, that they would be educated, and for my son to feel like he has the freedom to go and say, ‘I woke up with an erection, what is this?’” She pauses. “Open communication, we wanted them to have that.”

The Right Choices group seems to genuinely want to foster open communication and provide a safe space to ask questions between themselves and the families they encounter, but the way sex is discussed—or rather, not discussed—in conservative Southern culture poses a major challenge. “You know, the parents will ask me, ‘Will you talk to my kid?’” Hampton says. “So I’m telling them different stuff, and then parents will tell me, ‘I didn’t know that.’” Hampton adds that these are educated adults, but sex education was not part of their curriculum in school, and most of them, like Hampton, come from families who weren’t comfortable discussing sexuality.

And then it was time to watch another Live On Point film. The rest of the day, and the day after that, progressed similarly, watching videos that explained the curriculum. The Live On Point staff covered talking points for the classroom, skits and statistics during the videotaped conference that served as Right Choices’ curriculum map. Some of the messages were actually encouraging, like one that addressed body image pressures young women faced. Others used more inelegant language —“seed” versus sperm in the context of a “with great power comes great responsibility” cliché prefacing a reference to breasts as “boobies” in a lesson geared toward male students. The female lesson on puberty held no mention of sexual desire. The lesson for the men was full of assurances that what they were feeling was “normal.”

Driving from the training that evening, I remembered the moments I experienced sexual desire as a teenager, and I wished there had been someone there to assure me *that* was normal, to explain that I didn’t have to beat myself up for it. “Keep your legs closed.” That stayed with me, didn’t it? That and the tape.

I wondered he was now, Coach Everything Can Be Avoided. I made a note to ask around town.

In the fall, their training complete, Boals and Whittle went to work.

On an unseasonably cool Monday morning in September, I went with them to the first day of a week's worth of classes. The middle school scheduled for that week was in a community that's mostly poor,<sup>24</sup> like many of the rural areas in West Tennessee. I met Whittle at the Life Choices offices where we had the training a month prior, and she drove us to that week's school. We made small talk, and the sun continued to creep up from the horizon as we made our way down the highway, Whittle was silent for a while, and then she frowned. "This is a predominantly black school, isn't it?" she asked. "I just really don't know what to expect."<sup>25</sup>

The Right Choices classes were to be held in the gym, in place of physical education classes. A belligerent old air conditioner whirred and sputtered. Rickety wooden bleachers stretched out across a scarred floor painted for basketball, and gray cinderblock walls served as the backdrop, adorned by a single red stripe in the middle that wrapped around the entire room. A paper wad lay forgotten on the floor; students kicked it as they stampeded into the gym for class. The classes were seventh grade, co-ed, but the gym teacher made a point of separating the girls and boys by row. The students without parental consent forms—half of them, either denied permission by their guardians or unable to produce the signed slips I suspected were crumpled in their backpacks—promptly disappeared into a back room.

The boys huddled in the back rows, slumping, shoulder blades against the next row of bleachers. In the front, girls followed suit. One girl smacked her gum, dug through her purse, and glanced up disinterestedly as Boals and Whittle made their way forward.

"Hey, y'all," Boals started. He and Whittle began their introductions by showing family photos and talking about their careers before Right Choices—Boals described some of his firefighter adventures, and Whittle talked about her past as an editor at the *Dyersburg State Gazette*. They wore matching light blue T-shirts with a multicolored Right Choices emblem on the top right chest. Red, yellow and green arrows sprouted from a single line that had "Right Choices" vertically written.

They began a PowerPoint presentation with a slide titled, "To date or not to date," with a photo of white teenagers holding hands. Whittle stepped forward. "So, are y'all dating now?" she asked.

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<sup>24</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/47075.html> Median income: \$34,542; 22% live below poverty line

<sup>25</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/47075.html> 50% of Haywood County is African American compared with the state (17%)

A lively debate to define the difference between “dating” and “talking” began. The general consensus was that most of the students just “talk,” but some insist they date beyond the typical school dance.

“Well, where do y’all go on dates?” Whittle asked, raising her eyebrows.

“The Burger King!” sang out a girl in the front row who wore her hair in a thick braid down her back, while a couple others nodded. I bit back a giggle.

Next slide. Photos of more smiling white teenagers surrounding two words: sexual abstinence, defined on the screen as “saving sexual activity for a committed marriage relationship.”

Boals elaborated. “We define sexual *activity* as ‘when the underwear zone of another person comes into contact with any part of your body.’”

A hand in the front row shot up into the air. First student question of the week—a young girl with elaborately braided hair and an infectious smile.

“How old were y’all the first time you had sex?” she asked.

Whittle’s eyes widened; she didn’t smile. Boals took a deep breath. He shifted his weight from one foot to another.

“I was in a relationship in high school for two years, and we had sex,” he answered. “I was scared to death I had gotten my girlfriend pregnant...I didn’t understand how often girls got pregnant.”

Whittle remained silent. She never answered the question.

The student nodded. “We’re not here to judge you if you’ve already had sex,” Boals said. “When you get married, you can have all the sex you want without worrying about it.”

Whittle unfroze. “Alright, we need five volunteers for this next bit.”

Hands flew into the air, and Whittle selected four boys and one girl. They thundered down the metal steps of the bleachers, and lined up on the gym floor, facing their classmates. The students were transformed into characters: the girl was now Sandy, and the boys were now Romeo, James Bond, Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent. The exercise was modeled after the competitive dating reality show “The Bachelorette, and the girl’s purpose was clear; she was to choose the man who showed the most virtue, meaning the one who had stayed abstinent.” Romeo, Bond and Bruce Wayne all carried baggage—pregnancy, promiscuity and heartbreak, following the relentless seduction of Catwoman. As their personal histories were relayed, Boals

described the emotional consequences that befell the male characters. Whittle tore each of their paper hearts. Awkward laughter punctuated each tale.

The willowy preteen girl, who couldn't resist giggling for more than 30 seconds at a time, ultimately chose Clark Kent, who had remained abstinent, Boals explained, "for her." She theatrically accepted his dramatic proposal with a flourish, amid giggles from their classmates.

"I say, for a girl or woman, be picky," Boals declared.

At the end of the first class, Whittle and Boals conferred. They agreed that the distraction of being in a gym was a huge disadvantage, but there was something more that was different from the other schools. Whittle sniffed.

"You know, I can just tell those girls in the front row have had sex," she said.

Boals agreed.

On Tuesday, the class discussed the emotional consequences of sex. The class began with a slide that stated pregnancy and STDs were the physical consequences, and from there, the duo went into their definition of "spiritual" as the "deeper side of emotional, the way you view the world."

"There will never be any kind of birth control that teaches faithfulness, trustworthiness, responsibility and commitment," Whittle said.

Much of the day was spent on another skit meant to detail the pitfalls of dating in middle school or high school—pressure to have sex, jealousy and emotional instability that comes with being a hormonal teenage. But the two also addressed desire for the first time that week.

"Sex is a natural thing," Boals said. "Sex can be one of the most beautiful gifts in a person's life, or, when used wrongfully, it can totally destroy someone's life."

And that's where Kim Hampton came in on Wednesday.

"Today is picture day," she cheerfully announced when all the students were settled into the bleachers. "Are y'all ready?"

For Right Choices, Picture Day is pivotal. It's the day that stands out most clearly in my memory, and in the memories of my former classmates. Ten years ago, for most of us without siblings of the opposite sex, it was our first glimpse of unfamiliar genitalia—and it was designed to distress.

"I had never seen *healthy* [male genitals] before, much less ones that looked infected," one of my female classmates remembered. I hadn't either.

So the first time ever I saw male anatomy, it was covered in sores. Now, I was seeing it in a middle school gym, surrounded by kids whose expressions flashed between horror and fascination with each slide. For the middle school groups, the images are mostly of other orifices, like mouths and eyes, although there was one photo of a cervix. The high school classes are the only ones that see infected genitals. Those photos are always zoomed in so close that you can't be sure of what you're looking at, but the general idea that it's an image of someone's "underwear zone" is clear.

Hampton is a dynamic speaker, and the students were asked follow-up questions about her family after she introduced herself, something they didn't do with Boals and Whittle. After that, she jumped in. She asked what the only sure way to avoid getting pregnant or a disease was, patiently waiting for the answer: "abstinence." Hampton is all about keeping the students involved in her lessons—there's a lot of call and response. However, when a student used the words "penis" and "vagina" to explain sex, Hampton balked. "You can say 'the underwear zone' if you want to be more modest about saying it. They [the student] were very brave in saying the medically correct terms, but outside of this class, we don't say those words in mixed company." She said it kindly, but without room for question.

Hampton told the class that in the United States, a teenage girl gets pregnant every 30 seconds, and every minute, a teenage girl gives birth. "A lot of times, we just talk about the girl," she said. "But somewhere, there's a boy, there's a baby daddy." Building on her momentum, she added that every 10 seconds, a teenager in the U.S. gets an STD. The only sources I could find to back her claim were clearly identified abstinence education advocates.

This day used the most data during the course by far. Each slide provided a gruesome picture of the disease, and information about how it can be contracted, what its symptoms are, and how it can be treated. Hampton went through each one carefully. The students were riveted. There were no questions, and only minimal giggles. Many of the concepts presented fall back on a moral code, but the information provided about each disease was relevant and factual. Special attention was paid to gonorrhea and chlamydia—these two diseases are rampant in West Tennessee, with the highest rates among young adults (15 to 24) in the state, according to the Centers for Disease Control.<sup>26</sup>

Hampton says that anyone can lie, and there's no way to determine who is telling the truth. So who's to say if your partner has been tested or not? And if you do contract a disease, do you really want to show your doctor that? She clicked to a photo of sores caused by syphilis. "If you kiss this person, what's going to happen?" she asked the class.

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<sup>26</sup> [http://health.state.tn.us/STD/2013\\_Data\\_Surveillance/2013WTR0.pdf](http://health.state.tn.us/STD/2013_Data_Surveillance/2013WTR0.pdf)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/by-age/15-24-all-STDs/state/2013/TN13.pdf>

“You gonna be dead,” a boy in the back muttered.

“Al Capone died a slow, painful death from a syphilis infection of the brain,” she replied. “He probably wishes someone had shot him and gotten it over with.”

The students straightened in their seats.

“If you have an STD, that could keep you from getting married,” Hampton said. “If my husband had told me he had slept with 25 other women, it would have been a game changer for me.”

Hampton knew at least some of the kids in her audience were wondering about contraception—she’s been doing this for years.

“Now, about the pill,” she says, peering at the students. “Let’s think about it like this: if I want to go up on a roof, and I have always wanted to jump off a big building, is that safe?”

“No,” the group chorused.

“Well. ” She walked over to the bleachers, picked up a comically large camouflage umbrella, and opened it. “What if I use this Ducks Unlimited umbrella my son won, for some resistance? Is it safe then?”

“Noooooo.”

“But it’s saf-er, right? I might just break a couple bones? That’s what birth control is. It’s saf-er, but not safe.”

The lunch bell rang, and the students dispersed.

Friday was media lesson day. Boals, whose wife was pregnant with a girl, told me this mattered especially to him; he liked to imagine he was speaking to his future daughter. “We come in once a year, and what they hear the rest of the time comes from the media,” he said. “And in the media, boys are rewarded and girls are punished [for sex]. I don’t think that’s right, we’re equal.”

He used Miley Cyrus to make his point. Up on the screen, side-by-side, were photos of Cyrus from her Hannah Montana days and then her now-infamous VMA performance with Robin Thicke that involved groping, “twerking” and a phallic foam finger.<sup>27</sup> The performance made headlines. The difference is striking—in one image, Cyrus is a wide-eyed teenager with long, brunette hair and a toothy grin. She’s the picture of innocence. In the next, she’s wearing a flesh-colored crop top and microshorts, sticking her tongue out while holding a foam finger between her legs.

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<sup>27</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xM97AAP\\_Y8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xM97AAP_Y8)

“What do y’all think happened here?” he asked. “Remember, we’re not picking on her looks, we’re picking on her image.” Boals and Whittle were trying to make the point that, in an age where media and information are readily available, even sexuality is defined through what we see on our screens—and it’s a far cry from the chaste morality that Right Choices encourages.

“But [Hannah Montana] was just a character she played,” a female student insisted.

“Yeah, but we’re looking at how the media can change a person,” he replied.

The lesson covered the powers of PhotoShop, the evils of Family Guy and a discussion about violence in the media. It hinged on Right Choices’ moral code, which is obviously based in Christianity, but the hopeful looks on the educators’ faces made it hard to be critical of them.

The line that separates church from state is unclear in the context of abstinence education. All of the team members agree that they don’t discuss their religious beliefs with students unless asked, but the material has undeniable religious undertones in the way it frames abstinence as a moral obligation. All four of the team members—Kennedy, Hampton, Boals and Whittle—belong to the Christian faith, Southern Baptist strong, and discuss it frequently among themselves. The educators discuss consequences in categories like “physical,” “emotional” and “spiritual,” which is defined to middle school students as the way people view the world and “the deeper side of emotional.”

Echoing past church sermons I heard as a teenager, instructors advise students to “guard your heart,” and suggest promiscuity or premarital sex of any stripe will lead to immobilizing guilt that will stick with them for a long time. “You kind of have to be careful about [presenting it as a moral issue], you do. Unless I’m asked, point blank, about my beliefs, I don’t get into that. I don’t share it,” Boals said. “Because for me personally, when I was younger, a lot of my decisions were based on my belief system and the morals that had been taught to me as a kid growing up. But I understand that a lot of kids don’t get that, so they have to hear it in a different way.”

At the end of Thursday, we debriefed at a beat-up old table in the corner of the gym we had occupied for four days.

I told them a story about a former classmate of mine I caught up with a couple of nights prior. She is a lesbian, and I asked her what she remembered about Right Choices. She was quiet for a minute, before she recounted her experience. On the final day of our class, she had approached the female educator at the time and asked, “Well, what if you’re gay? Can you still get sick? You can’t get pregnant.” The female educator asked, “Are you?” My classmate wasn’t out yet—coming out in a small Southern town is not easy to say the least.



Boals and Whittle looked surprised.

“That’s why you have to be so careful about what you say and how you handle questions like that,” Boals said, shaking his head. “I see it like this, personally, I have certain beliefs, and my beliefs to the very core, at the end of the day, tells me, ask me to love people. And I have to do that, regardless of what they do. If I say something that they’re going to remember for the rest of their life, I haven’t done what I’ve been asked to do.” He looked down at his hands. “I hate to hear that, I really do.”

Whittle agreed. “Yeah, that’s sad. But it was a different time too. She may not have ever been faced with a question like that before.”

Eventually, Boals asked what I remembered. I hesitated. Then I told them about the tape exercise. I kept it as straightforward as possible, leaving out the baggage that stayed with me into adulthood.

Boals nodded. He remembered the tactic. His face stayed neutral.

Whittle broke a short silence.

“We should start doing that again,” she said.

That afternoon, I said goodbye to Boals and Whittle and drove back to my hometown. The familiar roads made me contemplative. In a lot of ways, I’m not sorry I went through this class as a teenager. I’m personally better off for not having had sex while I was still in high school, and while Right Choices only played a part in that decision, it clearly contributed enough to be effective. However, that is not to say that what I feel was best for me as a teenager is going to be all other Tennessean teenagers’ realities. And that’s OK.

But with the STD rates and a culture of teen pregnancy in the rural area I’m from, it feels a lot like giving students an empty toolbox. According to the Guttmacher Institute, the teen pregnancy rate in 2010 was 62 per 1,000 women (ages 15-19), compared with the national rate of 57 per 1,000.<sup>28</sup> And in 2013, there were 9,508 adolescent (10-19) pregnancies in the state of Tennessee.<sup>29</sup> Tying abstinence in with someone’s morality, and even self-worth, is damaging, and the claim that contraception is ineffective is a misguided scare tactic that leads to the kind of ignorant use of birth control that causes “accidents.” The pill is 99 percent effective when taken perfectly, and even “typical” use—meaning missing entire or even

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/unintended-pregnancy/TN.html>

<sup>29</sup> Department of Health Tennessee Adolescent Pregnancy Summary Data Report, April 2014 (PDF)

multiple days—is 91% effective.<sup>30</sup> Those odds are better than simply taking chances because it's been billed as less effectual than it is. The failure of the Right Choices program—and many others like it across the nation—is not in its central message of abstinence, but rather in the gaps it leaves in prevention knowledge.

And I can't entirely disregard the impact it had on my relationships as an adult. The conversations from Right Choices, the church sermons, the cultural taboos—all of this followed me into the bedroom I now share with my fiancé.

The program is just one week, but if you're a student in those schools, it's one week annually for two or three years, in addition to the moral code of the area, which never lifts. Today, I am in a loving, committed relationship with an incredible man, but it hasn't been easy for either of us to overcome what has been ingrained in me since childhood.

Still, Whittle feels strongly that their stance is the correct one.

“For people who are concerned that abstinence-based education isn't really effective, you know, I just want to know--do they really think 12, 13, and 14 year olds need to be having sex?” she asked, her voice rising. “Because everything that we see tells us that no, they should not be. At least for this age group, I think we're teaching exactly what we need to hear. Even for those who have [had sex] I think they appreciate it, they participate in the activities that we do, and we ask them questions, you know, ‘Was his heart hurt?’ And they say yes.”

Whittle (and Boals and Hampton) is ultimately trying to do good. She is doing what she has to do to sleep at night, and her spiritual beliefs (which, in my mind, are not to be easily dismissed or disregarded) drive her forward.

But I'd be lying if I said the exchange with Whittle about the girls in the front row in particular didn't bother me. Throughout the week, she said it over and over. “I just know those girls have had sex. I just *know* it.”

I finally asked her to explain this on the last day we were all together. “How do you know?”

She said she overheard some of their “little chitchat” and could tell by their “reactions.”

“So what did you hear?”

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<sup>30</sup> <http://fusion.net/story/53690/why-birth-control-pill-timing-matters/> When taken “perfectly,” the pill is more than 99 percent effective at preventing pregnancies—but when taken “typically,” it's only [91 percent effective](http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/unintendedpregnancy/contraception.htm).  
<http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/unintendedpregnancy/contraception.htm>

“I don’t really remember anything. I just had the overwhelming impression that they had. It was just a feeling. “

I’m not telepathic. I have no idea what she was thinking. But if I had to guess, I would bet that Whittle was more than a little out of her element in a school where health class is held in a gym and the students don’t go to the same youth group as her daughters. They don’t even look like they might.

It wasn’t difficult to track down the girls basketball coach who told us to “keep our legs closed” all those years ago. He has since become the superintendent of the school system. As he told me, not many people end up leaving the county. Most of my former classmates are still there—their children now sit in the same classrooms we once sat in. He has the same halo of grey hair, a few extra lines in his face, and the same tell-it-like-it-is demeanor. But he looked more tired. When I asked him if he remembered the line I couldn’t forget, he smiled a little. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“Sounds like something I would say,” he said.