

Abstinence is a worthy lesson

By **Rebecca Ray**/ As You Were Saying . . .
Saturday, March 26, 2005

I, for one, was not shocked to read that a 15-year-old girl performed oral sex on five Milton Academy hockey players in a locker room. Although a bit extreme, it's fairly consistent with the stories and attitudes I hear, day in and day out, from middle and high school students.

As the director of Healthy Futures, a local abstinence education program, I've taught thousands of Boston area teenagers about the realities of adolescent sex today and the benefits of waiting to have sex.

Schools invite our program in, typically as a supplement to their sex-ed classes that teach contraception. Healthy Futures presents abstinence as a realistic, attainable choice and gives students a vision for sexual and relational health and happiness distinct from that taught by our MTV culture.

Most of the girls I talk to don't like having sex. They do it to hold on to their boyfriends (who inevitably leave or cheat on them anyway since we are, after all, talking about teenagers).

This is a far cry from the enlightened, empowered role we as a society have tried to create for women for the past 40 years or so.

And the situation is no better for boys.

Socialized from a young age to equate their "manhood" with sexual conquest, teenage boys experience intense pressures to become sexually active. Boys need to hear from their parents, communities and certainly their schools that they don't have to be controlled by their sexual urges. We have a responsibility to teach young men that real men respect women, not use them, and that healthy relationships look to give and not take.

What I find in students today is a hunger for intimacy, not sex. Teens want someone to love them. They want someone to be faithful to them. But by and large they have no idea how to get that.

Although some laud casual sex as a sign of societal enlightenment, it clearly isn't working for today's teens.

We see this every day in the regret, sadness and even depression expressed by far too many adolescents who have been sexually active.

That's why we at Healthy Futures teach teens about what a healthy relationship really is - what it means to be treated with respect and cared for, not for what you can "give" in a locker room or back of a bus or bedroom, but for who you are.

Gov. Mitt Romney recently vetoed legislation that would have excluded \$800,000 in federal abstinence education funds from being spent in the classroom, where more teens can learn about the true benefits of abstinence and be equipped with the tools to make and sustain that choice.

Some members of the Legislature are vigorously fighting the governor on this point - they'd rather see the dollars spent on a wasteful, low-impact advertising campaign.

It's just common sense that abstinence should be taught along side of other forms of sex education in our schools. Legislators who vote to uphold the governor's veto are simply saying abstinence should be an option for local school districts who wish to teach it.

If more teens learn what relationships are about, what mutuality means, and how rewarding respect can be, we will see fewer teen sex scandals.

Otherwise, this tragic episode at Milton Academy will be only the beginning.

Rebecca Ray is the director of Healthy Futures, a Boston-based sexual health program that teaches teens about the benefits of abstinence. As You Were Saying is a regular feature of the Boston Herald.