

## Ursula Academy grad pairs with her mom in promoting abstinence

by Grace DeGregorio

The message is simple, clear and concrete - casual premarital sex excises a price. And the price can run from damaged self-esteem to AIDS - plus everything in between. Delivering this message is a mom and her daughter, bonded with the firm belief that what they have to share can prevent destroyed lives.

Tara Adlard is among the recent graduates of Ursula Academy in East Walnut Hills. Tara says her friends and peers at the school are focused and goal-oriented, and that the school advocates belief in self and in future dreams.

“We don’t really talk about sex at school,” she says. But kids I know are more assertive and know what they want. They aren’t going to lay down their lives buckling under pressure.”

Tara, one of four siblings, was raised in a family that embraces concern for others. Her mother Carole, also an Ursula Academy alum, formed Adoption Option, Inc., a non-profit organization, in 1986. Through school visits of birth parents who had arranged adoption plans for their babies, students receive an education in how adoption can result in success stories for all involved.

Adoption Option has since changed its name as a new non-profit organization called Healthy Visions - with an expanded focus developed by Carole, its founder and executive director.



*Tara and Carole Adlard are close in their relationship about making healthy sexual choices.*

“We’ve been doing abstinence programs for five years using federal funds,” she explains. The concept came out of a meeting discussion which made her think, “While teaching about adoption was wonderful, teaching about abstinence would be even better.”

Carole describes abstinence-based education as being on two levels - wanting children to have a disease and pregnancy-free childhood; and addressing older women on welfare (whom she refers to as “born again virgins”) with the idea that “until you curb and redirect your sexual energies, you cannot build your life

and get off welfare.”

The Healthy Visions model involves visits to schools (usually a three day session integrated into health class) and organizations (such as the Urban League, Healthy Beginnings and Morningstar acclimation program for felons) by a health educator and a testimonial speaker.

“After doing the program for a while we felt we wanted to improve the component of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs - also referred to as Sexually Transmitted Infections, or STIs). We found that in years of health classes speakers would come in and talk about the symptoms of STDs, but kids aren’t going to remember that.” She started work during the summer of 2000 developing a new curriculum that would be practical and concrete - and relevant.

Enter Tara.

“Mom asked me if I would work on the project with her. Previously I had worked on fund raisers, but not educational materials. She wanted me to approach the program from a teen’s perspective. I got ideas from past curricula. I changed the language to be more layman’s rather than scientific, aiming for seventh through twelfth grades.”

The program she and Carole developed - the only student written curriculum, to their knowledge, on the market - deals with abstinence, teen pregnancy, STIs and AIDS. “When

designing the program we wanted it to have a universal message that could be replicated easily in other places,” says Carole. The finished product included a written curriculum and video entitled, *Why Abstinence? The Price Tag of Casual Sex* (which earned an award from the Columbus International Film and Video Festival).

In reviewing the materials, one is struck by their simplicity, straightforwardness and practicality. There is no preaching, no empty warnings or threats, no confusing messages - only sensible approaches to an energy-charged topic that helps the person sort out a healthy life-route regarding sexual decisions.

The video shows single teen parents talking about their struggles to deal with their utterly altered lives. There are shoot-from-the-hip discussions about contracting STIs. Even more powerful is the tragic story told by a woman who contracted HIV from an extra-marital partner. After reconciling with her husband, she gave birth to a child also infected by HIV who later died. Scenes from the family’s precious few months with the child are unforgettable visions of emotional pain. The story speaks for itself.

The curriculum presents facts based on careful research from respected sources. (Note: Carole cautions

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knowing the source, data base and methods of studies before accepting their conclusions.) It also introduces activity sheets which require the program participant to think through a variety of questions relating to personal choice about sexual behavior. Some of the activities include defining abstinence; determining if parenting at this time is an option; listing dreams and goals; determining the perceived and actual costs of raising a child; recognizing the difference between the responsibilities of babysitting and having to care full-time for one's own baby; gauging one's own risk of pregnancy and STIs based on his/her behavior; and many other related questions and exercises that help the person reach a realistic and informed decision about what role sex ought to play in his/her life.

Healthy Visions conducts follow-up surveys to determine the effectiveness of its program in meeting its objectives. A July, 2001 report of 13 Greater Cincinnati schools (both public and private) surveyed before and after receiving abstinence only education, concluded participants had a better understanding of the harmful effects of sex before marriage and what sexual behaviors lead to STDs and HIV; more than 3/4 of these students felt they better understood what abstinence is and why abstinence is the best choice; they agreed abstinence is the best choice for themselves; and they believed their friends would benefit from participating in the program.

In an average year Healthy Visions reaches over 6000 participants in combined programming. The abstinence program has gone international, with sales of the video and curriculum increasing in volume.

"We don't want to tell people what to believe or how to live their lives," says Tara. "But we do want to show how someone can have a better life and can make more informed decisions."

How has her "avocation" been accepted among her peers?

"My friends call me 'the abstinence girl!'" she jokes. "All their parents want them to hang around me! It's a stigma I don't really want, but it's OK!"

Tara's other accomplishments include being a second place finalist in Science in the prestigious Golden Galaxy Awards. Of her experience at Ursula Academy she observes, "Looking back over the four years, I feel so blessed to have had such a wonderful community of girls. I'm also lucky to have been at a school that encouraged us to be assertive and have goals." This fall she will attend the University of Dayton, studying broadcast journalism. But her work with Healthy Visions is not far from her thoughts. "I'm debating if I want to help out in the campus clinic. This is an important program to have in a college."

As for Carole, her work continues and her faith in its ultimate successes is strong based on those already observed.

"In one program we did with 100 girls seven years ago, our follow-up shows one year later not one girl was pregnant. At

Linwood Academy a sixth grader wrote as a comment, 'After hearing your presentation I think it'd be safer to stand in front of a moving bus than have sex'."

"We see the project staying with a student population but moving more to adults. We talk not just facts but implications, so the program goes beyond educational to psycho-education, which we see to be important to adults greater than age 18. It's a new concept to adults that they can refuse sex."

A new program begun by Healthy Visions is PAIRS, which aims to give adults tools to have healthier, happier relationships. "The course teaches how to be intimate; it teaches emotional and relationship literacy," says Carole. "We are raising the concept that sex is something you own and should respect."

Comments from women receiving Welfare who participated in programming support Carole's optimism. "This taught me a better way of living." "This program gave me a whole new understanding of sex." "It teaches no matter how bad your life is, you can turn it around.."

Perhaps one of the most telling - and uplifting - comments came from a Lakota student: "For Valentine's Day I was going to surprise my boyfriend with sex. I'm going to get him CDs instead!"

For more information about Healthy Visions programs, call 793-7268 or visit the website at [www.HealthyVisions.org](http://www.HealthyVisions.org).

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