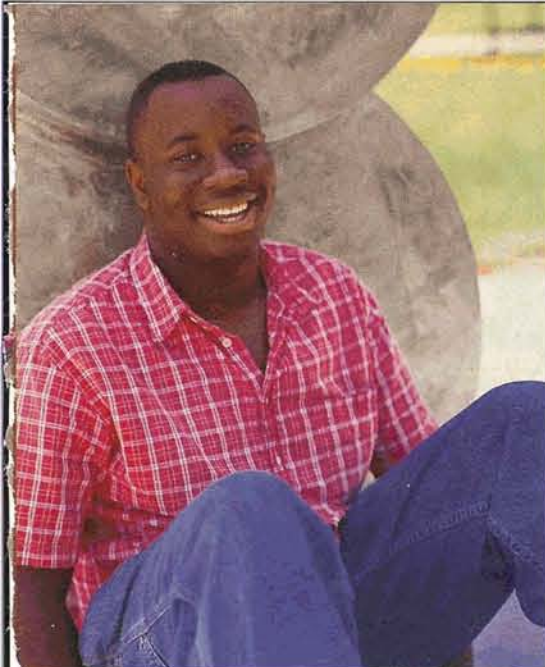


THESE NEW JERSEY TEENS GIVE SEX EDUCATION A NEW SPIN
WITH A CONTROVERSIAL STUDENT-WRITTEN NEWSLETTER
BY SONA CHARAIPOTRA

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AT FIRST, THIS SEEMS LIKE ANY OTHER group of teens. The 14 high school students convened on a crisp autumn morning in a classroom at the Rutgers University School of Social Work in Piscataway, N.J., are gossiping, swapping summer vacation stories, heatedly debating musical tastes. Then Zandilé Blay, 17, of Jersey City, says she thinks they should talk about oral sex and

why "there's a whole lot more of it going on now." Suddenly it's clear that this is no ordinary teen gathering.

Welcome to the first meeting of the 1999-2000 editorial board of *Sex, etc.*, an award-winning national newsletter about health and sexuality that is written by and for teens. Published three times a year and distributed free of charge to 3,000 schools and community organizations, *Sex, etc.* has a circulation of 585,000. The stories—about such issues as sexual abuse, date rape, birth control, sexual orientation, postponing sex, and interracial dating—are balanced and always eye-opening frank.

"I was talking with a friend yesterday about [oral sex]," Zandilé continues, eliciting giggles from the group. "We came to the realization that it means two very different things to guys and girls. Girls do it because they think it's safer—emotionally and physically—than sex. And guys want girls to do it. But if she does, it changes the way guys look at her." John Cedeño, 16, of the Bronx, agrees: "It's an image thing. Everyone thinks girls are so innocent and everything, but if you know that about them, it's like, 'Wow!'"

Zandilé nods. "It's Brownie points that a girl will do it, but then guys look

at her as a slut. She can't win. So a lot of girls say they don't do it, but I know good and well that they do."

"Yeah," John says. "They don't talk about it because they're not supposed to like it or think about it. Or sex in general for that matter." Sarah Lynch, 18, of Mine Hill, N.J., points out that some teens use oral sex as a replacement for intercourse, a way to preserve their virginity—misunderstanding, or ignoring, the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. "How are kids defining sex?" she asks, and then suggests an online poll to find out.

The group's adult adviser, Nancy Parelo, weighs in. "Oral sex is a very hot topic, and I'd really like to do a story on it," she says. "Maybe what we should focus on is, are kids actually having oral sex instead of intercourse, and how do guys look at girls who have oral sex, and why?"

high standards Parelo, a reporter, trains the teen editors in the basics of journalism, while Ann Schurmann, an expert in public health, serves as health adviser. The publisher of *Sex, etc.* is Susan N. Wilson of the Network for Family Life Education at Rutgers University's School of Social Work, who created the nonprofit newsletter, one of the first of its kind in the country, in 1994.

In 1997, *Sex, etc.* was honored by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton bestowed the prize). But the newsletter is definitely controversial. That same year, the New York City Board of Education briefly refused to distribute it when a panel reviewing the materials declared the newsletter inappropriate. After review by a second committee, the board reversed its ruling, and New York City schools now distribute 110,000 copies of each issue. But the incident illustrates Wilson's dilemma: She doesn't want to censor the kids, but she also doesn't want *Sex, etc.* yanked from ▶

GETTING THE WORD OUT: Seventeen-year-olds Collin Howard (top) and Zandilé Blay are part of the all-teen editorial board of *Sex, etc.*, a national health and sex newsletter in which almost no topic is taboo.



schools. Neither do the readers who depend on it for the straight story—people like Emily Fraser, 18, of Princeton, N.J., who first picked up the newsletter at Princeton High School. She praises *Sex, etc.* for offering practical information teens can't get anywhere else. "For example, telling where to actually get birth control, and what kind of laws apply to minors," she says. "*Sex, etc.* provides the kind of factual information a teen would be afraid to ask an adult about. That's why it's controversial. The editors aren't any different from other teens; they have to deal with the same peer pressure, things adults might not be aware of."

Krissy Stautz, 16, of Gresham, Ore., likes the reality *Sex, etc.* staffers bring to the publication. "It applies to pretty much every teen," says Krissy, whose mom brings the newsletter home from the high school where she teaches. "The issues they deal with are issues that every teen has to go through, decisions that every teen has to make."

saying the s word These reporters don't run away from controversy. "Whenever I wear my *Sex, etc.* T-shirt to school, the teachers do a double take, or they yell, 'What does your shirt say?'" says writer Samantha Nay, 17, of Delran, N.J. "I guess that the word 'sex' scares them. How are you going to teach your kids about sex if you can't even say the word? The stuff in the newsletter is what teens need to know. It's not a fifty-year-old gym teacher preaching in front of a class."

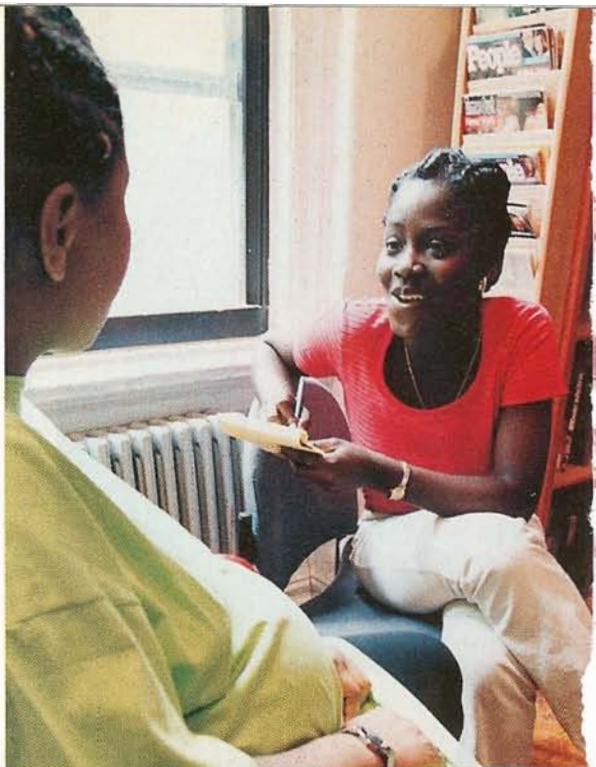
Her colleague Collin Howard, 17, from Piscataway, agrees. "Our stories are so real—date rape, drinking, whatever the issue might be," says Collin, whose recent article on masturbation, approved by Wilson and the two other adult advisers after much deliberation, confirmed the publisher's worries: Some Florida schools canceled their subscriptions after it ran. "We don't cram a particular viewpoint down [our readers'] throats," Collin continues, "and that makes adults nervous."

keeping it real Once the teens have reported and written their stories, the group reconvenes to edit the work, which then goes to Parello, Schurmann

and Wilson for approval. The final text is laid out by a professional graphic artist and sent to the printer. While this is happening, the teens are already hard at work on the next issue.

Zandilé recalls taking on her first big reporting assignment for the newsletter. The aspiring journalist confesses that she was nervous as she sat on a New York City subway train preparing questions for the girls she was about to visit at Inwood House, an organization dedicated to preventing teen pregnancy that also includes a residence for homeless, pregnant girls. "I had never imagined that I would be going to that kind of place," she says. She got off the train and walked down a tree-lined street to Inwood House. The comfortable boarding-school atmosphere surprised her. "I imagined a dingy homeless shelter," Zandilé recalls. "I was worried about how these girls would receive me. Would they be willing to tell me their stories? Would they see me as somebody who thinks I'm better than them?"

Putting those reservations aside, Zandilé strode into the center, notepad in hand, and introduced herself to the program director, who took the time to answer a few of her questions. When it came time to talk to the girls themselves, though, Zandilé was told that no one was available. Disappointed but determined, she scheduled a second visit to Inwood House. But on the way out, she spotted six girls hanging out in the lobby. Her reporter's instincts told her to take a chance. She approached the girls and found them more than willing to talk. "The older girl I interviewed had just turned 18 and has two kids," Zandilé says. "She really wanted to communicate that having kids when you're that young is a huge responsibility. She was happy that she got a chance to voice her opinion and let other peo-



ZANDILÉ, who has decided to pursue a career in journalism, interviews a pregnant teen for *Sex, etc.*

"How are you going to teach your kids about sex if you can't even say the word?"
—Samantha Nay

ple learn through her experience."

Zandilé was thrilled about getting the story, but came away from the experience a little saddened and a lot wiser. "It makes you think. I've never imagined myself in that situation, but then again, none of these girls did either," she says. "Talking to the girls made it so real to me."

Zandilé's story, called "A Scary Subway Ride to Teen Parenthood," was published in the Spring 1999 issue of *Sex, etc.* The thrill of seeing her first story in print is something she'll never forget. "I would never have had this experience if it weren't for *Sex, etc.*," she says. "*Sex, etc.* is going to take me to places I never expected to go. That's what I like about it. It makes me think this journalism thing may actually work out for me." ✪

To find out more about *Sex, etc.*, check out its Web site at: www.sxetc.org.