



## Straying from the Flock

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“That’s it for today, everyone,” Ms. Flynn dismissed her students with a smile. “Remember to hand me your exit tickets as you leave!”

As the 10<sup>th</sup> graders filed out, Ms. Flynn silently congratulated herself for successfully completing day two of Southville, Arkansas’, four-day-long sex ed curriculum. Despite several disruptions from a rowdy all-male table, she was proud of having taught them all how to put a condom on a banana, and why condoms are the most reliable means other than abstinence of preventing STDs.

Teaching 15 year-olds about barrier methods of contraception was certainly different from the peer counseling she had done at University of Arkansas, where she had recently finished her B.A. in health education. There, she had focused on running workshops on safe alcohol use and staffing a 24-hour pregnancy crisis hotline run by her Christian faith group. But she appreciated the opportunity to cover the basics of human reproductive health with her students. In this respect, she felt, Southville was ahead of surrounding districts.

Despite having the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the U.S., Arkansas has no mandated sex education in public schools. Even those districts that do choose to teach sex or HIV education need not ensure the material is medically accurate.<sup>1</sup> Rather, health educators are told to emphasize the importance of abstinence until marriage and to teach students methods for “avoiding coercion.” Most of the districts nearby Southville had chosen either abstinence-only or no sex education curricula. In this context, Ms. Flynn was grateful for her four-day curriculum including STD and condom instruction, even if it did lead to lots of sophomoric giggles from the back table.

Just after the final students straggled out of Ms. Flynn’s classroom, Rachel Jackson slipped inside. “Hey, Ms. Flynn,” Rachel greeted her.

“How are you doing, Rachel?” Ms. Flynn asked warmly. “Did you enjoy the library activity? I love the interactive healthy meal builder.”

Although Rachel was normally in the health class Ms. Flynn had just dismissed, her parents had opted her out of the sex ed unit via an opt-out form that the district sent to all families of 10<sup>th</sup> graders. Students whose parents had excused them spent the class period in the library with a student teacher working on alternative assignments about nutrition. Ms. Flynn had not been surprised when Rachel had submitted the opt-out form, as the Jacksons were prominent members of a local Pentecostal church who were known for running a tight ship at home. All five of the Jackson children completed daily chores on their family farm on the outskirts of town. The older siblings also helped their parents lead single-gender Bible study groups, and Rachel sang in the church choir.

Ms. Flynn had met Rachel’s father a couple of times at school events, as Mr. Jackson was a long-time school board member. “My family’s been part of this district longer than some of you young teachers

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<sup>1</sup> Marcy Manley, “Working 4 You:Sex Education in Arkansas,” *ARKANSASMATTERS*, November 19, 2015, <http://www.arkansasmatters.com/news/local-news/working-4-yousex-education-in-arkansas/274274795>. “State Policies on Sex Education in Schools,” accessed June 3, 2017, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-policies-on-sex-education-in-schools.aspx>. “Sex and HIV Education,” *Guttmacher Institute*, 01 May 2017, accessed 03 May 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education>.

have been alive!” Mr. Jackson had laughed when he first met Ms. Flynn. “Gotta do my part to keep the place running. Give back and serve others, that’s my motto.”

“The meal builder?” Rachel repeated. “It was cool, I guess.” Then she fell quiet.

“Is there something I can help you with?” Ms. Flynn prompted.

Rachel glanced down at her hands. “I was wondering if I could ask you about something the class talked about today.”

Ms. Flynn placed her students’ exit tickets on her desk and invited Rachel to sit down at one of the tables. “Sure,” she started, pulling out a seat. “What’s on your mind?”

“I know my parents said I couldn’t hear anything about pregnancy or sex or anything,” Rachel started, “but that’s just because they’ve been listening to the preacher at our church and taking him pretty seriously. He told all the Southville parents that they should opt their kids out of class this week because it wasn’t right for us to be corrupted in school. On the way home from church on Sunday, my dad said he agreed that school should be about ‘real’ classes – you know, algebra, English, and U.S. history and stuff – and not whatever you’ve been teaching. But I have a boyfriend now, and I kind of…”

Rachel’s voice trailed off and she glanced around the room, eventually training her focus on the window. Sensing Rachel’s discomfort, Ms. Flynn tried to assume an empathetic facial expression and give Rachel the space to continue.

“Well, I was on my church’s website on a computer at the library, and I found this page that talks about why it’s important to wait until marriage, since condoms don’t work. Look,” she said as she pulled out a handwritten scrap of paper. To Ms. Flynn’s dismay, it read:

*Think on a microscopic level. Sperm cells, STI organisms, and HIV cannot be seen with the naked eye—you need a microscope. Any imperfections in the contraceptive not visible to the eye, could allow sperm, STI, or HIV to pass through...The size difference between a sperm cell and the HIV virus can be roughly related to the difference between the size of a football field and a football.<sup>2</sup>*

Ms. Flynn knew this was blatantly untrue; she had just shown her class a PowerPoint that quoted the CDC’s condom effectiveness fact sheet: “latex condoms provide an essentially impermeable barrier to particles the size of STD pathogens.”<sup>3</sup>

“I just want to know about pregnancy and how not to get pregnant and...other things like that. The thing is, I don’t agree with my parents or Preacher Jim. I love going to church and I really do believe in God, but I’m trying to figure out what’s so bad about doing something more than going on a dinner and movie date with Tim. Whenever I ask my parents about it, they just tell me to be quiet and not ask any questions about it. I tried to figure things out for myself, but I don’t even know where to start.”

This was what Ms. Flynn had feared from the moment Rachel walked in. It was not a fear of her own incompetence or lack of knowledge; in fact, she was honored that Rachel felt comfortable enough with her to approach her about it. One of the reasons Ms. Flynn had chosen to become a high school health teacher was so she could offer kids guidance during tough times. She had loved being a peer counselor in college, and felt that the opportunity to mentor students was one of the highlights of teaching at Southville High. But how should she balance Rachel’s parents’ wishes to teach Rachel abstinence only

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<sup>2</sup> “Abstinence-Only Sex Education Curriculum,” *Union of Concerned Scientists*, accessed May 5, 2017, [http://www.ucsusa.org/center-for-science-and-democracy/scientific\\_integrity/abuses\\_of\\_science/a-to-z/abstinence-only-curriculum.html](http://www.ucsusa.org/center-for-science-and-democracy/scientific_integrity/abuses_of_science/a-to-z/abstinence-only-curriculum.html).

<sup>3</sup> “Fact Sheet for Public Health Personnel | Condom Effectiveness | CDC,” accessed May 5, 2017, <https://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/latex.html>.

with the reality that Rachel was potentially going to engage in unsafe sexual behavior if Ms. Flynn said nothing?

“Hmmm... that’s a tough situation, Rachel. Thank you so much for coming to me with your concerns. As you know, I’m always here for you and any of your peers if you have any questions or just want to talk,” Ms. Flynn felt herself saying automatically, as her mind raced to figure out what to say next. She paused, and queried slowly, “You know, your parents signed the opt-out form for this week.”

“I – I know, but...” Rachel’s eyes flitted to the clock. “Oh, I’m sorry, Ms. Flynn, but I gotta go. The bus is going to leave without me. Could I maybe come back tomorrow afternoon?” she pleaded.

“Yes, of course. Have a good afternoon!” Ms. Flynn said, instantly feeling awash with relief. The young girl tossed her backpack over her shoulder and awkwardly wove through desks to make her way to the bus loop.

Rachel stopped at the door and looked back. “Just don’t tell my parents I came to you... They can’t know I asked anything at all. They don’t even know Tim and I have kissed! They would *not* be happy knowing that we want to do other things. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked at all. Sorry.”

“No, no need to apologize, Rachel. I’ll see you tomorrow after school and we can talk more then.” In a bit of a daze, Ms. Flynn walked toward the teachers’ lunchroom to collect her belongings from the refrigerator before heading home herself.

“Whoa, watch yourself, Lydia!” Kyra Thomas laughed, jumping out of the way as Ms. Flynn almost fell on top of her as she backed up to close the refrigerator door.

“Oh, Kyra, I’m so glad you’re here!” Ms. Flynn responded. “Boy, could I use your good counsel this afternoon.” Kyra Thomas was another young teacher who had been hired around the same time as Lydia Flynn. She taught U.S. history, loved chatting over tea, and had quickly become Ms. Flynn’s closest confidant in the school. They held different views on some matters, but Kyra was always willing to listen and entertain ideas that conflicted with her own.

“So what’s up?” Kyra asked, pouring them both some tea and gesturing to go sit on the ancient couch in the corner.

Ms. Flynn related her conversation with Rachel and sighed deeply. “I’m just so torn. I’m a health teacher, you know? It’s my job to give kids the information that they need to make healthy choices. But I grew up Christian, and faith is still so important to me. I’d be upset as a parent if my child’s school just went behind my back, especially if I didn’t want my child to learn something because I felt it went against our faith. But then again, her parents can’t want her to get pregnant, right? I’m so lost.”

Kyra nodded sympathetically. “I feel your pain. How much of a risk do you think there is if you don’t share any info with her?”

“I’d say it’s pretty likely that she has sex. She and her boyfriend seem pretty serious,” Ms. Flynn replied. “Her parents are strict, but it definitely says a lot that she actually came to me. I mean, that can be a pretty nerve-wracking thing to do. And she’s totally misinformed, so she may not use any contraception or protection at all. I guess I really do fear she’ll become another statistic among Arkansas teen girls.”

“But her parents must think they can help her avoid that through the church, right? That’s why Southville Public Schools gives parents the option to take their kids out of this unit, to teach sex ed differently from how the school does it,” Kyra countered. “I’m sure Mr. and Mrs. Jackson don’t want her

to get pregnant, either, but they actively chose to opt her out of your class. Shouldn't that count for something?"

"Yes, it should," Ms. Flynn acknowledged. "But what about Rachel's own views? She clearly disagrees with them about what she should be learning. Ultimately, it's her education. How could I look at a student who is asking me to teach her scientifically valid information and tell her no, she has to stick with ignorance?"

Kyra shook her head impatiently. "She can still go to the library or talk to friends – you don't have to violate district policy for her to learn about safe sex."

"I guess," Ms. Flynn responded skeptically.

Kyra continued, "Look, the time will come when Rachel is legally independent and everything, and then she can decide exactly what to learn and how. But right now, she's a minor. Parents play an integral role in shaping their children's beliefs and actions, and that's kind of their right since they did bring her into the world."

"But she's seeking me out as a mentor now. How could she trust me in the future if I refuse to help her when she needs my guidance the most?" Ms. Flynn asked. "I don't want her or her friends to think that I'm just a by-the-book, academics-first teacher. I care so much about all of them personally."

"Where do you draw the line, though? Lydia, everyone loves you. Your students *do* trust you – Rachel did come to you. I don't think you should worry about it." Kyra paused to pour herself more tea before continuing. "Look, you want your students' trust, but what about parents' trust? If you don't respect her parents' authority on the matter, what are the consequences? As a public school, Southville has to serve everyone – regardless of beliefs. The best way to do that is to let parents have a little bit of control over what their kids learn, or at least give them the chance to with an opt-out form. That form has to be respected if it's going to mean anything at all."

"That makes sense," Ms. Flynn acknowledged. "But it's still hard to imagine telling Rachel I refuse to teach her what she wants to learn. I mean, she's coming back to my classroom tomorrow after school. What will I say to her when she asks me how to keep from getting pregnant with her boyfriend?"

*What should Ms. Flynn do? What kind of information should she pass on to Rachel, if any, and how much information could she give?*

## References

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