

Europe's attitude on teen sex: just right or all wrong?

By Ann Doss Helms
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Here are some things you might find difficult to imagine:
Condom billboards scattered around the South.

Sex and contraception discussed frankly in schools.

Teen pregnancy, abortion and AIDS rates less than half the current level.

Northern Europe and the American South are two very different places, as a group of Charlotte-area youth advocates and adolescent health experts are well aware. They recently returned from a study tour of the Netherlands, France and Germany. Their goal was to figure out what we could learn from countries where, by many indications, teen-agers are far more sexually responsible than here.

They found cultures with a level of comfort about contraception that was stunning even to health professionals, cultures where most adults believe teens will have sex and advise them on how to do it without harming themselves or others.

"Their attitude toward adolescents themselves seems different. They seem to respect them more as individuals and give them a level of trust for responsibility in their actions," said Townley Moon, executive director of the Mecklenburg (N.C.) Council on Adolescent Pregnancy. "Our expectation is no sex until marriage. Theirs is, 'Yes, you'll have sex, but be responsible.'"

That's not an attitude likely to be embraced throughout the Carolinas. "They go to Europe and say, 'Look how enlightened they are!' I happen to think they're just more immoral," says Mecklenburg County commissioner Bill James.

In the Carolinas and across the United States, teen pregnancy rates have declined in recent years. A 1998 federal report credits abstinence and contraception - fewer teens are having sex, and those who do are using more birth control, it said.

But the declines look minuscule when compared with figures from the countries the group visited. U.S. youth have more teen births, more sexually transmitted diseases and more abortions than their European peers, and according to one international survey, they start having sex younger. That is why four participants argue that we must find a way to blend European openness about contraception with American messages about sexual abstinence.

"When we only tell our kids the negative side, and their own bodies are telling them the positive, and so are the media, they've got to be thinking, 'Someone's lying here,'" said Linda Berne, a UNC Charlotte

health education professor and tour organizer. "If they decide the abstinence people are lying, they go toward uninhibited, unprotected sex."

Berne and Barbara Huberman, a former Charlottean who works for Washington-based Advocates for

administration. "They think it's pretty naive. There were kids that we talked to that weren't going to have sex, but if they were, they darn well knew what to do."

To James, the county commissioner, claiming to separate

vow. She told The Cincinnati Enquirer she was both shocked and enlightened by what she saw on the tour. While she didn't shift her personal values, she said she became convinced that American youths and parents need more information about contraception.

"Sex is a positive thing over there. Everything about it is negative here," she told The Enquirer. "I don't want people to think I'm liberal because I'm not ... but when you go to a country and realize how much your country is failing in what they're doing, you have to change a little bit."

Figuring out how to meld the two messages - safe sex and no sex - is the biggest challenge the tour participants see ahead.

U.S. pregnancy-prevention media campaigns pale beside those in Europe - they're not as catchy, not as informative and not nearly as widespread, the Charlotte-area tour participants said. They'd love to see better access to contraception and a massive education campaign in the Carolinas, one that unites the people who emphasize use of contraceptives and those who favor abstinence.

"That's going to be the tricky part, getting both groups to say, 'We're going to let you in,'" said Roush, the graduate student.

Tricky indeed. Moon, the Mecklenburg Council on Adolescent Pregnancy director, said she's heard people say there's no need for change here, that higher American pregnancy rates are caused by greater acceptance of young, unwed pregnancy among African Americans and Hispanics.

In fact, while national teen birth rates are twice as high for those minority groups as for whites, white American teen-agers still had 39 babies per 1,000 girls in 1995 - three times the rate in Germany, the next highest country.

"It is not a race problem," Moon said. "It is an economic problem."

North Carolina law requires abstinence-based sex education in public schools and plenty of public officials in North and South Carolina say that's the only message kids should get.

South Carolina Gov. David Beasley is a strong advocate of the abstinence-only approach, saying contraceptives give teens false confidence.

"A condom gives you the courage to get in the back seat, but you don't use it once you get back there," he once said.

Mecklenburg commissioner James says he has no quarrel with local advocates going overseas to study teen sexuality. But back home, he said, their job is to live by the law, including a 1997 ordinance James introduced that forbids counseling young people about sexuality without parents' consent.

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Linda Berne, UNC Charlotte health education professor

Youth, organized the 12-day summer tour to encourage academic research and advocacy for teens. Forty-two people, including nine from the Charlotte area, signed on.

Most already were sold on the notion that the European approach to sexuality has advantages, Berne said; that's part of what motivated them to commit the time and money to going. The only members of the "abstinence-only" camp were two teen journalists, sent by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Even the veteran health professionals were astonished by the bombardment of safe-sex and contraception messages they saw. As the bus looped around Paris, the group counted nine condom billboards. The Dutch had massive media campaigns with slogans such as "Your condom or mine?" "I'll have safe sex or no sex," and "STDs are available somewhere near you. Condoms are too."

In all three countries, condoms were available from street-side vending machines and clinics offered free medical contraception to teens without parents' permission. Emergency contraception - the controversial "morning-after" pill just cleared for marketing in the United States - is widely used.

Sexuality was incorporated into many areas of study in schools - literature, biology, social studies. The group chucked a bit at one European life-skills text: A page on doing laundry, a page on grocery shopping, a page on sex.

While Europeans have long had a more liberal attitude toward sex than Americans, the current safe-sex campaigns are a response to AIDS in the 1980s, Berne said.

Contraception is treated as a public health issue; parents and churches are free to teach their own values about whether to have sex but generally, they don't block efforts to teach contraception.

"Some of them were sort of astonished at our abstinence campaign," said Chan Roush, a UNCC graduate student in health

health issues from morality is a deception.

"Comprehensive sexuality education is many things, but one of the things it is moral indoctrination: 'Kids are gonna have sex, go ahead and do it, grab a handful of condoms and have fun,'" he said.

Gaston County, N.C., school board member Brenda Hamilton agreed, saying pregnancy rates are insignificant compared with values.

"It may lower the birth rate, but the morality and self-esteem, I can't imagine how low that would be," she said.

Tour participants said the European approach does teach values: Responsibility, love and respect for oneself and one's partner.

European teens tend to practice "serial monogamy" - a sexual relationship with one partner at a time, which is taken seriously and tends to last a year or two, said tour participants, who talked to European experts, teens and parents.

They frown on relationships between older men and teen-age girls, a source of many U.S. pregnancies. Abortions and unwanted pregnancies are viewed as irresponsible, tour participants said.

"Both the liberals and conservatives were so opposed to abortion that they met in middle ground," Berne said.

LaCole Fender, a neonatal nurse who lives in Gaston County, joked that she felt like she was going into Babylon when she got to Amsterdam. But something struck her as a mother: While American parents live in fear of kidnappings and child abuse, Dutch moms would leave their babies sitting in strollers outside shops, apparently without fear.

"There's a sense of the community taking care of all the kids," she said. "Yet we feel like we're so much more moral and have a handle on the kids because we tell them 'Don't do it.'"

Melissa Harris, 17, a Teen People reporter from West Chester, Ohio, is a self-described conservative who signed an abstinence-until-marriage

Brethren Cult seeks members from colleges

By Allison Sherry
Colorado State University
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FORT COLLINS, Colo. — In front of a camp-style dinner at dusk with Horsetooth Reservoir as their backdrop, four members of a Bible-toting cult called the Brethren sat thoughtful and somber, carefully choosing words to express their admittedly extreme spiritual lifestyle.

"We believe that Christ lived the purest example of Christian life," said member Jerry Williams. "We live like him ... we wish everyone could be this happy."

Williams, along with about 110 other Brethren members nationwide, live a nomadic life. They travel around, mostly to college towns, striking up conversations with young adults about right and wrong and God's word, with hopes of finding recruits for their "church."

Their lives are simple, and their quest is to abstain from what they call the "complications" of the real world. They do not work or own many material possessions. They claim to have no income and say they live day-to-day knowing that God will provide for them.

The few members now living in Fort Collins, Colo., are in town primarily looking to recruit Colorado State University students to their ranks. They say other group members are camped out in other college towns doing the same thing.

Experts on cults and parents of recruits are fighting the group's efforts with waves of bulletins warning college students not to associate with the Brethren. They say the group destroys its members psychologically, coercing them into cutting ties with family and friends and into sorting through trash bins for food.

"They (The Brethren) are extremely dangerous," said Hal Mansfield, director of the Religious Movement Resource Center, an organization that follows the movements of religious cults. "They are based on deception and mind control ... It's very troubling."

During a recent interview, members of the Brethren said all they do is seek peace and promote God's love and will among his people. Don Busweiler, a member of the group since June of 1995, said the people who are the most offended are the people who don't understand them.

"It's bogus," said Busweiler, a former fashion designer from Long Island, N.Y. "The parents will try to get a hold of their kid (who is with us) and 'de-program' them from thinking the way they do. They are doing exactly what they are accusing us of doing."

Both Busweiler and Dan Garcia, who is also with the group

hanging out in Fort Collins, said they have spoken with their families - but they conceded that such communication does not have high priority in their lives.

"Relationships have a certain pull," Williams said, thoughtfully scratching his beard. "But they can be used as a tool to pull you away from God."

Busweiler agreed, saying, "If it's God's will, I will see my mom."

While the cult has more men than women, there are about 40 "sisters" scattered in groups throughout the United States, Williams said. Often times, he added, men and women who travel together distract each other from God's word. For that reason, the groups usually travel in single-sex groups.

Mansfield said members of the Brethren are especially dangerous to unsuspecting college students because they come off as normal and innocuous.

"You don't say (to a new recruit): 'Come in so we can brainwash you,'" Mansfield said. "They are not dumb ... I can see them being harmless if there was one set of parents that was upset or one former member speaking out, but there are dozens and dozens of families upset. There are a few former members saying this is a lifestyle of destruction."

Larry Wilcox counts himself among the Brethren's victims. He has been trying to track down his son, Bart, with whom he hasn't spoken in seven years. Bart Wilcox joined the group in 1991 while he was a sophomore at the University of Idaho. Larry Wilcox said his family found out Bart's decision after receiving a letter from him that stated he had asked his roommate to dispose of all his "worldly goods." The family received two more letters from Bart, but nothing more.

"(Members) are indoctrinated to run from their parents," Larry Wilcox said. "I don't want to tell Bart what to do ... but we just expect communication."

Wilcox said he spends several hours each week talking to a vast network of parents whose sons and daughters are also members of the Brethren. With help from officials at the American Family Foundation, the parents communicate via e-mail and telephone, warning colleges and media organizations when the Brethren arrives in their towns. The network also attempts to track each of the group's nomadic members.

Williams said such parental worries and the accusations often attached to them are unfair.

"We're just radical," he said. "They are saying our most cherished beliefs are programmed ... it's very offensive."

Busweiler agreed. "I needed a good brainwashing," he said, noting that his former fashion designer life was self-righteous and evil.

Many students believe 'Dead Roommate' legend

By Ralph Vigoda
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

Note to college students:
Do not wish your roommate dead.
Do not encourage him to kill himself.

Do not in any way hasten his end.
It will not get you a perfect grade-point average.

That happens only in the movies - as in the summer release "Dead Man on Campus," in which two students with grades in the tank go looking for a suicidal roommate. If he offs himself, the college will compensate the pair for their presumed trauma with straight A's.

The notion of a "dead man's clause" in any college policy would be too absurd to bother debunking - except that the legend has been circulating on campuses nationwide for 15 to 20 years and that, for just as long, otherwise bright people have been buying it.

William Fox, a folklorist who has studied the myth, found that about

two-thirds of the students he questioned at two New York state colleges believed it.

Listen to W. Richard Ott, the provost of Alfred University in western New York state:

"Last semester, a young man hanged himself in one of our resident suites, which housed five other students. The mother of one of them called me, the president of the school and the dean, insisting that her son was entitled to a 4.0 based on what she thought was common knowledge."

Hear it from Phillip Jones, the dean of students at the University of Iowa, where a fraternity pledge died of alcohol poisoning a few years ago:

"The student government office got numerous calls about the policy on this. It got to be a discussion of who would get all A's, his roommate in the dorm where he lived or the other people in the fraternity."

And this from David Sacker, a 1997 Swarthmore University grad:

"The situation came up with a

friend of mine. His roommate had a heart attack. Immediately, the rumor started circulating that he was going to get a 4.0. ... I remember people saying it sort of made sense."

So, with one movie out and another similarly themed film, "Dead Man's Curve", on the way, it is time to state firmly the not so obvious: You can search your college handbook from table of contents to index and not find a dead man's clause.

"We check all these things out and have found no school with such a policy," said David Mikkelsen, who runs an urban-legend Web site (www.snopes.com) and gathers such stories for the San Fernando Valley (Calif.) Folklore Society.

The most prevalent version is this: A student whose roommate commits suicide automatically receives a 4.0 for the current term. According to Mikkelsen, however, there are other morbid provisions: The death must occur in the dorm room or during the last six weeks of the term - when, under typical school policies, courses

cannot be dropped.

Another variation includes a sliding grade scale: To get the 4.0, the death must be witnessed by the roommate. Otherwise, the GPA drops to a 3.4. And if there is more than one roommate, the best the school can offer multiple survivors is 3.5.

As nutty as legends may be, say those who track such things, most have some basis in fact, and this one has. Schools usually have policies that deal with bereavement, and students who suffer trauma can drop classes, postpone exams, or take incompletes without penalty.

Alfred University's Ott said his school has an extensive array of such support services.

"But there is no 4.0 rule," he said, "even though the rumor is quite persistent."

And extraordinarily long-lived. "I first heard about it when a fellow gave a paper on it at a folklore conference in 1985," said William Ellis, a professor of English and American studies at Pennsylvania

State University, Hazleton, and president of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research. "At that time, it was presented as extremely commonplace on campus."

La Salle University's new dean of students, Joseph Cicala, who has worked at three colleges in Pennsylvania and two in New York, said he had heard students talk about the "policy" everywhere he has been.

"It gets in the groundwater and just spreads," he said. But, he added, "a policy like that is philosophically impossible, because grades are not regulated by the institutions but by professors."

Catrin Einhorn, a senior at Haverford College, learned of the supposed rule during her last year in high school in Chicago from two friends who were at college. She heard it again when she arrived at Haverford.

"I don't think I believed it," she said, "but I didn't totally disbelieve it. College is so mythological, you

hear so many things about it, that I'd say a lot of kids accept it as true."

Charlie Kovas, a 1997 graduate of Vanderbilt University in Nashville who now works in Washington, remembers a tragedy in which the dead man's clause was all the talk on campus. A football player, after a fight with his girlfriend, fell to his death through a dormitory window.

"People said, 'Oh, that's awful,'" Kovas said. "Then they said, 'I wonder if his roommate will get straight A's?' We heard that the girlfriend got all A's, and I can tell you with certainty that people believed it."

According to Fox, the folklorist, the rumor speaks to an obsession with grades and the feeling that they often are arbitrary, a matter of luck rather than merit.

But it also is a slap at college administrators, argues Simon Bronner, a professor of American studies at Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, and author of "Piled High and Deeper", a book about the folklore of student life.