



Contributing Editor

MICHAEL GARRETT

FARRELLY is a Youth Services Librarian and graphic novelist living in Chicago; michaelfarrelly@hotmail.com.

Michael is reading *London: City of Disappearances* edited by Iain Sinclair, *Consider Phlebas* by Iain M. Banks, *Requiem for Rome* by Russell Bailey, *Dreams with Sharp Teeth* by Harlan Ellison, and *Dead Cities* by Mike Davis.

“Passing Notes” focuses on young adult service issues, including programming, collection development, and creating stronger connections with young adult patrons. The column will address these topics with a humorous bent and an awareness that the key to working with young adults is constant reinvention.

Sex. Teenagers. Library.

Three words that, when placed in a single sentence, usually conjure up quite negative images. Teenage boys furtively searching for “naked” on Google while grouped around a computer, teen couples necking (or making out, or hooking up) in the stacks or firebrand parents demanding that “smut” like Judy Blume’s *Forever* be removed from the shelves to protect teens.

Can libraries be sex-positive resources for teens? Simply answered, yes.

First let’s define what “sex positive” means in relation to teenagers. Is this “promoting” sex to teenagers? Not at all. Every state has age of consent laws and other legal watch guards to protect children, and rightly so. Being sex positive and a YA librarian is about being an open source of information on human sexuality, as well as selecting the right materials, the right resources, and being nonjudgmental regarding issues of sexual orientation.

More to the point: The idea that—by providing materials that speak about human sexuality in frank and honest ways—you are promoting sexuality is kind of ridiculous. Advertising uses sex to sell everything from cars to iPods; children are exposed to thousands of nonpornographic but still sexualized images on television, in movies, and on the Internet as they grow up. Add to that their own biological development and is there really an argument that providing good, solid, sound information about sexuality is “promotion”?

Finding such good resources got a little bit easier with the birth of a new video podcast called The Midwest Teen Sex Show (MTSS), available at www.midwestteensexshow.com. The name sounds salacious but the content is spot on. Hosted by co-creator Nikol Hasler, the podcast has tackled unconventional topics like “The Older Boyfriend,” “Gym Class,” and more obvious fare like homosexuality and abstinence. The shows are wry, funny, and sharply edited. Unlike the mind-numbingly awkward sex films that have haunted health classes since the fifties, this is a show teens will actually enjoy watching while they learn. The MTSS actually posted one of those old health films found on YouTube featuring a mother catching her son in the act and delivering a creep-tacular monologue. Thankfully, we’ve come a long way since then.

To be clear, the tone and language of the MTSS is definitely frank. This is not a show that uses *Cosmo*-style euphemisms or shies away from giving straightforward answers. It seems odd to warn people about that. Is there any other topic where you'd want someone to give you more oblique answers?

I recently interviewed Hasler via e-mail to learn more about this resource and talk a bit about libraries, teen sexuality and, oddly enough, robots.

Public Libraries: Where did the idea for the Midwest Teen Sex Show originate? What is your, and your collaborators, background in sex education and youth advocacy?

Nikol Hasler: The idea originated in the mind of Guy Clark [creator and director of MTSS], and while I would like to say it was all about nobility, it was more about the intent to entertain. Guy looked at the Internet, thought about what was missing, and decided to create it. We all know there are plenty of informative, educational sites, blogs, and podcasts about sex. A few of these are aimed at teens. None of them were funny, nor did they try to be.

I love that people ask about our background in sex ed, because it reminds me that I don't have any background at all. Who are we to be telling anyone our opinions? Yet, I can remember all of the frustrations of being a teen girl, just as Guy can relate to all of the frustrations of being a teen boy. We aren't yet sure if Britney [Barber, co-creator who also plays various comedic parts in the MTSS podcasts] was ever a teen. We think she might be a robot.

PL: Where in the Midwest is the show based out of? What do you

feel makes the show unique to the region?

NH: The show is based out of northern Illinois/southern Wisconsin. To tell the truth, there is not a single thing that makes this show Midwest-specific beyond the name. It just sounds catchy, doesn't it?

PL: Have you had any backlash regarding the show?

NH: Sadly, no. Once we do, I will know we've made it. The closest we ever come is when people leave snarky comments on the site. We all get pretty excited when that happens.

PL: The show combines a lot of humor with solid sex education. How do you strike a balance?

NH: We are still trying to work that one out. Three to five minutes is not a lot of time to adequately cover a topic entirely, and there are millions of jokes that do not make it. In the end, Guy just picks the shots that worked the best with each other.

PL: What's been the response to the show? From teens as well as parents and other adults.

NH: The first people to notice our show were well respected professionals in sex education. Cory Silverberg, who writes the sexuality column for About.com, has done a lot to get other people interested in our show. He was pointed in our direction by Dr. Petra Boynton [a social psychologist, researcher, author, broadcaster, blogger, and award-winning sex educator]. The crew over at Sex is Fun [a podcast dedicated to the rational discussion of human sexuality] have begun telling any teens that contact



MTSS host Nikol Hasler and some very young guest stars.



MTSS star Britney Barber in one of her many roles, this time as an overly helpful gym teacher.

them that they should be coming to us instead.

Teenagers have said that they love our presentation and the way we don't talk down to them. Gen Xers often tell us that they wish this show had been around when they were growing up. The parents of teens have told us that they are literally sitting their kids down at the computer to make them watch. One father even said that he was inspired to talk to his youngest son about sex because we showed him that it is positive. Even people whose children are grown have said that they enjoy the show and hope we keep doing it so that one day their grandchildren can watch it. I'd say it has been overwhelmingly positive.

PL: The show's topics (The Older Boyfriend, Gym Class) take on subjects not usually addressed in sex ed. How did you come up with these? What are some topics you'd like to explore in future shows?

NH: Coming up with the topics is pretty easy. There are a million things we dealt with as teens that were never discussed and there are new suggestions we are given every day from the teenagers who are living through it right now. We've got quite the list of topics to cover. A few of them are abortion, transgenderism, and breaking up.

PL: What resources, both online and in print, do you recommend for teens with questions about sexuality? What resources should be avoided at all costs?

NH: [Worth recommending] of course, there is Scarleteen.com and Planned Parenthood. In print there is an awesome book called *The Truth About Teens and Sex* by Sabrina Weill as well as *The Sex Book* by Jane Pavanel. A wonderfully humorous book that is also more than informative is *The Guide to Getting It On* by Paul Joannides. (He even sent me a signed copy!)

What to avoid, however, is a tougher issue. I would have to say that abstinence-only sites and books are the most useful to avoid for parents as well as teens. There has been a great

deal of research which indicates that this type of education does not lead to less teen sex, but instead to less teen condom use. Teens are being taught false information about condoms that leads them to believe that an attempt to practice safe sex is futile.

Albert Mohler is an outspoken blogger [*Editor's note:* He is also the current president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.] who has been quoted to say, "I think there could be no question that the pill gave incredible license to everything from adultery and affairs to premarital sex and within marriage to a separation of the sex act and procreation."¹ He even compares the invention of the pill to the fall of man. While he is entitled to such opinions, he is presenting a harmful tone which discourages teen girls from using contraception in a time where he clearly believes that the removal of such necessities would turn us all into good, nonsexual beings.

All of that said (and it was a lot to say), those sites out there like AdultFriendFinder.com do just as much damage by presenting sexuality as a free and easy thing to be had by anyone at any time.

PL: What role do you think librarians and informational professionals can play in helping teens access sex-positive information?

NH: Well, we all know that librarians are the sexiest members of society. Long live shushing! I would love to see our libraries more equipped with health and wellness sections which include resources aimed at teenagers. Those books I mentioned earlier should not be hidden on a shelf. And one more thing that would be useful is to stop blocking our site! I know, I know. It has "sex" in the URL name. Yet my son was recently able to access a pornographic site in a search engine at his grade school while looking for plants. The Internet game is changing. I do not envy your tech people. ☹

Reference

1. Shorto, Russell, "Contraception," *New York Times* Online Edition, May 7, 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/05/07/magazine/07contraception.html (accessed Jan. 7, 2008).