

## PUBLIC LIVES

## Sex Ed Without Birds, Bees or Even Storks

By CHRIS HEDGES

STOCKTON, N.J.

SUSAN N. WILSON, a large gold necklace with the words SEX, ETC. dangling around her neck, is having wheat toast without any butter for her birthday breakfast.

The necklace, a retirement gift from her staff, looks as if it should be adorning a rap artist or someone who uses words like bling-bling rather than a 75-year-old who lives in Princeton and shops at Ann Taylor.

"There are some situations where I cover it up a bit," she admits, "but I love it. It means a lot to me."

Ms. Wilson is New Jersey's most visible activist for sex education. She retired this month after 23 years as the executive coordinator for the Network for Family Life Education, a program of the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers University. She was instrumental in bringing sex education to the state's public schools and putting the curriculum into place. She oversees a Web site, SEXETC.org, for teenagers that gets roughly 40,000 visits daily. Her newsletter for teenagers, published three times a year, has a circulation of 800,000.

"Adults who are experts in adolescent medicine, social work or health and sex education answer 12 questions a day that teens leave on the Web site," she says. "These teens, often girls, ask very personal questions, the kind that really can't be asked or answered in a classroom setting. We also do a lot for those struggling to define their sexuality."

Her work has been controversial. Conservative groups that oppose sex education, like Concerned Women for America, have grown in influence. The New Jersey Legislature passed a bill in 1993 called the AIDS Prevention Act that requires sex educators to stress abstinence.

"We fought long and hard to keep it off the books," she says. "There was not a newspaper in the state that supported this measure. In the end we lost. The bill is not as bad as those passed in some other states. The best language they could get was a requirement to stress abstinence, but it



Laura Pedrick for The New York Times

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was a blow. The focus on abstinence increases the chances that kids will not learn about other measures of protection such as using condoms and contraception."

Ms. Wilson grew up in New York. Her father was a businessman and her mother was active in Republican politics. She attended the Brearley School in Manhattan and then Vassar. She worked after college as an education reporter for Life magazine in New York.

"I met my husband, Donald, in the office," she said. "He was a foreign correspondent for Life. In those days most women were restricted to soft news."

She and her husband moved to Washington, where he worked as President John F. Kennedy's deputy press secretary and later as the deputy director of the United States Information Service. But it was their close relationship with Robert F. Kennedy that had the biggest impact on her, especially a trip she took in 1962 with Robert and Ethel Kennedy to developing nations in Asia.

"I saw, for the first time, the tremendous needs of people in the poorest countries in the world," she said. "I returned home and I won-

dered what I could do about the poor in my own country."

She began tutoring poor children in Washington and got a master's degree in early childhood education. Ms. Wilson and her husband, who have three children, moved to Princeton nearly 40 years ago, and she remained active in childhood education. She was appointed in 1978 to the State Board of Education. "The commissioner of health spoke to the board about the rising rates of teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and abortions," she says, ignoring her toast. "I asked him at what age he thought children needed to know how their bodies work."

He could not provide an answer. And it led Ms. Wilson to embark on a new career path.

"You have to be careful what questions you ask in life," she says, laughing. "You don't know the traumatic effect of questions. This one changed the rest of my life."

She pulled out all the files on sexual education and early development she had found at Life. There

were not many. She then started the state's Family Life Education program in the public schools, although not before Concerned Women for America challenged the program all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which issued a decision supporting the program.

"I was not prepared for the attacks," she says. "It made sense to me to teach the basics about biology and physiology to teenagers so they could protect themselves and make informed decisions."

She is not sure, years later, why the issue of sexuality provokes such strong passions, but wonders if it is not due in part to the refusal to confront the issue openly and honestly.

"Sexuality is a major part of our humanity," she says, "and yet many people have never been educated about it. Because sexual feelings are so powerful, because many of these people did things they were told not to do, I suspect the guilt and remorse drives them towards a desire for greater repression. They believe if we can be made to feel guiltier and more shameful these impulses and feelings will be extinguished."