

CHOICE/LESS 404: Sally Vs. Sex Education

- Speaker 1: I think my Sex Ed experience was pretty much non-existent.
- Speaker 2: I don't recall any Sex Ed really. Maybe in high school there was a crash course on STIs.
- Speaker 3: The only thing that I really remember was some guy coming in who I would have sworn he would have been about 30-something. I reckon he was 50-something, and the reason that he was looking so young was because he had abstained from sex.
- Speaker 4: I remember a lot about masturbation, I think.
- Speaker 5: I went to a private Christian school. Sex ed didn't exist.
- Speaker 6: It's more of a way to scare you out of having sex.
- Speaker 7: Mostly we watched "Degrassi: The Next Generation," and that's how we learned. We watched it. Episodes and episodes of them, and we even had quizzes.
- Jenn Stanley: For Rewire.News, I am Jenn Stanley, and this is CHOICE/LESS. If you're just joining us, this is the fourth episode in a series so please go back and listen from the beginning. Like many of the people we heard from, I didn't have comprehensive sex ed in school.
- ("Mean Girls" Paramount Pictures, 2004)
- Speaker 9: Don't have sex because you will get pregnant and die. Don't have sex in the missionary position. Don't have sex standing up. Kids, don't do it. Promise? Okay, everybody take some rubbers.
- Jenn Stanley: Not all states require schools to teach kids accurate information about their bodies, and some parents prefer it that way.
- Nicolette Pawlowski: Some parents view their children as pure, and that means asexual.
- Jenn Stanley: Nicolette Pawlowski is a Sex Educator with more than 10 years experience and a Ph.D in Educational Policy from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.
- Nicolette Pawlowski: It's devoid of connection to their bodies and other relationships outside of the family. And that's just not the reality. To censor information about what youth could potentially do whether or not it's something that a parent wants them to do or not, it's about dealing with not ideology but reality and meeting children where they are at, and giving them the tools necessary whether or not they stay abstinent until marriage. They need these tools even after they're married.

Jenn Stanley: In the last few episodes, we heard how parent/child communication can really start to break down when it comes to sex. Today, we're going to hear how the schools are doing. Nicolette decided to teach Sex ed because she had such bad experiences with it when she was younger.

Nicolette Pawlowski: As a freshman in high school, there was a speaker that came in for one day. She was an abstinence only [until marriage] speaker. I remember pretty vividly, especially what she said. In addition to some shock and awe kind of exercises or presentation, she ended her class by saying that her husband truly loved his sons because he waited to have sex until he met her and they got married, I think. Her whole statement was, "My husband can look straight into the eyes of his sons and says he truly loves them because he waited for me."

So I was 13, 14 at the time, and I got extremely upset. I wasn't even sexually active at that point, but I had been in love. To me, her words were really just offensive saying basically my feelings weren't real and legitimate. And they were very much so to me. Then later on I realized that she basically told 90 percent of the class whose parents had never married, or had sex before marriage, or were on their second marriages, or were divorced, or were separated, or whatever it was, that basically they'd been lied to their whole lives and their parents didn't really love them. It was such a horrible presentation that I actually wrote about it for grad school essay and application to get into grad school. That was kind of big moment for me.

I was, back in December, visiting ... I'm born and raised in Chicago, I was visiting family and every year, almost every year, I'd come back to Whitney Young for an alum Christmas gathering, which one of my favorite teachers, Mr. Scotese, does a reading of "A Christmas Story" by Truman Capote. He does it the last day before their winter break, and lots of his alums come back and we just sit and listen to the same story. He's been doing it for like 20-something years.

I walked around the school and I went downstairs to talk to Dr. Kenner, who's the principal, and say hello to the assistant principals. It was the first time that I got to go, "Dr. Kenner, Dr. Pawlowski." It was a really cool moment. I started talking to the assistant principal, who is Lynn Zalon. Ms. Zalon and I just started chatting about why I did my Ph.D and what I do now. I told her that I'm a sex educator and I go around and teach, and I've done that for many years.

So she got really excited and she thought this would be an amazing opportunity to offer some programming for the youth in the school. So she talked to Dr. Kenner and Dr. Kenner was completely onboard.

Jenn Stanley: The state of Illinois has particularly equitable sex ed laws.

Nicolette Pawlowski: Illinois law states if any school teaches any sort of information about sexuality, including abstinence, it must cover comprehensive sex ed, including birth control information, and sexually transmitted infection information.

Jenn Stanley: Joyce Kenner, the school's Principal says that the students have been asking for sex ed programs, so she was excited about the possibility of having Nicolette present.

Joyce Kenner: I have known the speaker all through her high school years. I would tease her all the time and say, "You need to go model." She's beautiful. She used to come down to the main office, she was pleasant, respectful, articulate, and academically focused. When she got her degree, then she shared with us what she was doing, I jumped at the opportunity for her to come back to speak with her fellow students of Whitney Young because she had experienced this high quality of education here at Whitney Young.

Jenn Stanley: But not all the parents were thrilled.

Sally Wagenmaker: My name is Sally Wagenmaker. I am a mother of two children. I have a son who just turned 20, and I have a daughter who is 17. My son went to Whitney Young Magnet High School from 7th to 12th grade, and my daughter has done the same. She's now a high school senior.

I first found out the sex ed workshops to be offered through the Sunday night general Whitney Young email, and it said there will be a presentation for the 7th and 8th graders Tuesday morning, which is less than 48 hours later, there will be another presentation for 11th and 12th graders the following Tuesday, so nine days later. I have a running buddy I met the next morning to exercise with. She has children there as well, and she said, "You know, I looked that up and it seemed a little odd." So I get home at 6:30 and then I found her website and this connection to her college.

Apparently, the University of Wisconsin Badger Herald, her column called "Hump Day", I started reading these articles. Basically strongly advocating promiscuity. She had an article advocating for hook-up sex, talking about if you're going to have sex while you're drunk make sure that you know how to put your condom on.

Nicolette Pawlowski: From what I understood initially was that this one parent, and her last name is Wagenmaker, she found my sex columns. I used to write for a student newspaper at the University of Wisconsin Madison, The Badger Herald, when I was a master's student there. This was with several other sex educators. We rotated the columns amongst us all. I wrote for it for about two years and I started getting very busy with my Ph.D work so I ended up stopping with that work. But they're public.

I mean, it's on my bio. I have nothing to hide, but these are specifically college-aged youths and real questions. All those questions that you see on all those columns are real questions that people emailed us. My editors chose, I would say, slightly more eye catching titles, then I would choose. But all my answers are based off of people writing in and talking about the realities of what they're dealing with, with their sexuality.

Sally Wagenmaker: It just seemed bizarre, advocating pornography.

Nicolette Pawlowski: So I talk about pornography. I've talked about it in my sex columns, and I will even bring it up in workshops because the majority of information that youth get on sexuality is mainstream porn. I want to highlight "mainstream porn" because there is some wonderful pornography out there, and it's wonderful as in I define it by that it shows consent, shows communication, and shows condom usage, it shows both the woman and man orgasming and having pleasure throughout the entire scene.

Mainstream pornography, for majority of it, is fantasy-based. The majority of men are orgasming, the women are not, or they're shown orgasming as in expressing emotions or expressing facial features of orgasm but they are actually not. There's very little condom use. There's very little communication at all. A lot of it can show kind of aggressive or sexually harassing actions. If this is your only outlet and information on education about sexuality and the body ... There was a study I saw that cited that the average of pornography exposure, and this was several years ago. Several years ago.

I would bet you anything that it's so much younger, that it's the age of 11. By the time you are 11, and probably younger, mainstream pornography has been seen and digested by the majority of youth. If that is your main form of education, then it is no wonder that we have such enormous problems about sexual assaults, and enormous problems in bullying and rape in this country. There needs to be other avenues for that. I'm not here to sit and judge and say porn is wrong. I think if you are moderately using it and you are in collaboration with your partner in discussing this and being open and consensual about that, whatever it is. But if this is the only consumption that you have, is mainstream pornography, and that's all you're basing your relationships on, then that is a problem.

Sally Wagenmaker: This makes no sense to me that she's about to teach 7th and 8th graders. At the time, I didn't know what the law was, I didn't know what the Chicago Public School's policy was on any of this. I just thought it was really odd.

Nicolette Pawlowski: She emailed Principal Kenner.

Sally Wagenmaker: And she emailed me within a few hours later, and it was a one-liner. The first word was, "Wow!" She said, "I will follow up." I do remember an email from her saying, "I went to the 7th and 8th grader presentation. Everything was age appropriate."

Joyce Kenner: I even sat in one of these sex sessions that she had, and in my mind I said, "Dang, I think she needs to be a little bit more specific." You know, she was more vague than I thought that she needed to be.

Nicolette Pawloski: With the 7th and 8th graders, I did the exact same workshop for both. We go over the vocabulary, the human anatomy, then we talked about puberty, lots of different changes in puberty. My basic message is, a lot of things are going to

feel not normal, and a lot of things are going to feel awkward and uncomfortable, and that is normal. Then we talked about bullying, discussed all the different ways for bystander intervention. My biggest message is, there are always more bystanders than there are bullies and we all have rights, and we should all have a say in what's going on about our lives, and be able to do something about that and be active in that.

Then I have them all write a personal ad for friendship. Oh, and we also went over consent, so I gave a very broad definition of consent. I used actually the definition that Scarletteen.com uses for sexual consent. For 7th and 8th graders I make it a little bit more broad. I take out the word "sexual" and I basically just "consent" for everything, all activity, which I think is very true. It applies to everything that we're going, consent is constant negotiation, and I give an example of ... I put a big pizza up. Let's say you and friends decide to get a pizza together.

Maybe you change your mind. You don't want the pizza anymore because it just looks so greasy. You know, you are constantly negotiating and setting those boundaries throughout the entire thing. It's not because you said yes to pizza once that you are expected to shovel it all down, right? That applies to wherever.

Sally Wagenmaker: Well that's helpful, but I'm still concerned about the "Are you ready for college?" I remember from the bullet point, what if you go to parties, what if can you expect once you're on campus, so things that are just odd for this woman. I think as I reflected later, no matter what you do, I think with high school juniors and seniors, by that time it's going to be really hard to get away from values. This is a person who has the imprimatur of the school saying, "This is a person you should listen to. This is a person you should respect, you should follow their advice." I just thought this was really odd.

Joyce Kenner: A parent, for whatever reason, I believe it was her religious affiliation, did not want us to discuss those topics that we were going to discuss.

Jenn Stanley: Sally Wagenmaker is a lawyer with a conservative religious law firm, The Thomas More Society. That may sound familiar to you. In earlier episodes, we heard from Paul Linton, another Thomas More Society lawyer who advocated in favor of parental notification laws. So for Sally, this was more than just the one sex ed discussion. This is about what a school's role should be in educating children. Sally says that the curriculum undermines her family's strict religious values. This isn't the first talk she's had trouble with.

Sally W.: I think when my daughter was in 9th grade there was this special session, and it was going to be ... I can't remember exactly what it was on. It was either tolerance for LGBT things or anti-bullying. But in any event, it was an organization called Advocates for Youth that was presenting. I looked them up and they were stridently pro-LGBT in very specific ways, which I thought was

frankly rather biased. So emailed. I don't think I'd ever emailed this particular Administrator before, but I was really pleased that they were so responsive.

Jenn Stanley: But this time Sally wasn't happy with the response she got.

Sally W.: What they told me was the show will go on. The 7th and 8th graders had their workshops. I begged in the email to cancel it. I asked for a meeting with Dr. Kenner. She refused, absolutely refused.

Joyce Kenner: So she's saying that she asked for a meeting and I denied the meeting?

Jenn Stanley: Yes.

Joyce Kenner: The meeting request?

Jenn Stanley: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joyce Kenner: That's not true. That's not true at all. I meet with everybody. I didn't deny a meeting request. This is the honest to God truth, I don't have any reason to lie. I don't remember her asking for a meeting. What she asked me for was to provide her with the full transcript of what the presenter was going to present. That's what she asked me for.

Jenn Stanley: So the truth is somewhere in the middle here. Sally sent an email asking for a meeting later that day, or towards the end of the next week. Principal Kenner responded, "Unfortunately, I am very busy today with the incoming 9th graders and their parents. I will be at an educational conference next week. Please know that we will be making provisions for anyone who wants to opt out of the presentation. Information will be going out today and in the weekly newsletter."

Sally Wagenmaker: By Friday night it was very clear that it was going to go on. As an attorney, as a mother, as somebody who has very strong connections to a public interest law firm called Thomas More Society, it seemed very obvious and clear as much as I would hate to do it, as much as I've never done this for any other situation, it seemed the other way to get their attention and to take care of this would be to file an emergency court action for a restraining order to say you cannot ... You cannot have a sex ed teacher, who's not been credentialed, without the sufficient notice and without the disclosure of the information. It's not right. It's illegal and it's against Chicago Public School's policy. We had the TRO, Temporary Restraining Order.

Just to back up a little bit, I filed the court action on Monday. I could not get a court hearing in time for Tuesday. But I sent the restraining order motion and complaint to Dr. Kenner. Within a few hours after that, she emailed and said she would cancel the 11th and 12th grade presentations.

Nicolette Pawlowski: It was devastating, I have to be honest.

Jenn Stanley: Because it wasn't just about the canceled class. It got personal.

Nicolette Pawlowski: There are multiple conservative websites that I was shown. One site referred to me as a "vile sex columnist" and they didn't write that I have a Ph.D. They did not write that I'm the owner of a dance company. What they wrote was, "Dancer, sex Educator," and it did not hit me. Three other people called me and said, "You know, Nicolette, they are assuming, they are literally giving the message that you're an erotic dancer."

Which I have no problem with erotic dancers, but the fact that they are purposely trying to skew this in a way that makes it seem that I'm not qualified to teach when I have taught this and studied this for so many years. I've done a lot of this work, I've done research on this. One of my professors wrote a book, Nancy Kendall, specifically talking about the culture wars regarding sex education. I've written about it myself in research papers in the university. But to get it personally, I thought I wouldn't be as upset as I was about it. I think I was more devastated by it because this is my high school that I was raised in.

Joyce Kenner: I would never, ever, ever put a person in front of our students who I felt was inappropriate. I've been principal here for 23 years. I've concluded 23 years. I know what is good for our students, and what is not good for our students. I would never have done that.

Jenn Stanley: Sally's lawsuit held some merit. Chicago Public Schools are supposed to vet speakers to make sure they're qualified and appropriate, and Whitney Young didn't go through the proper procedures to do that. But after the lawsuit they did, and Nicolette was approved. Again, Joyce Kenner.

Joyce Kenner: But the bottom line is we felt like the speaker we had identified was an appropriate speaker. Now subsequently, the speaker has been vetted by CPS, and they too believe that she is a quality speaker, she has her credentials to talk about sex education period.

Jenn Stanley: Principal Kenner says that Nicolette will likely be presenting at Whitney Young in the future, but the Wagenmakers are all out of high school now, so they'll never have to hear it.

Nicolette Pawlowski: These youths are becoming adults, and this parent who tried to stop this, who delayed this, literally their child is either already an adult, is already 18, or is going to be 18 within a couple of months and is going to be out on a college campus and have absolutely no other tools besides, I'm going to say it, mainstream pornography.

Jenn Stanley: Nicolette always leaves time in her workshops for questions, and the questions that she's getting suggests that not all parents are supportive and some kids have a really hard time talking to their parents about these things.

Nicolette Pawlowski: I got questions about abuse, I had one person write in that they were cutting themselves, that their parents were abusing them. I had a person ask, "What should someone do if they have an eating disorder because they are transgender, and they don't want their parents to find out because they are so

against this. They're so scared for their parents to find out." The 8th graders, I had multiple youth write that they were really lonely and they just wanted to be friends with anyone and how could find friends. I love these workshops because they give me an opportunity to meet and give really honest information, give really relevant medically accurate, comprehensive information so that these youths make much healthier decisions for themselves, for their relationships, their bodies, and for the families that they will potentially have in the future. To censor that is just so unbelievably harmful.

Jenn Stanley: If these talks aren't happening at school, where are they happening?

Sally Wagenmaker: We talk about all kind of things. We have books on private parts, public parts, what's the doctor do, and how to have a healthy body image. I mean we've talked about it for years in a really matter-of-fact way. We live in an inner-city neighborhood on Chicago's West side. We have done that very intentionally since they were born, so we've talked about death, we've talked about single parents. Why is that some people only have one parent when it takes two parents to have a baby? I remember having that conversation far earlier than I expected. When it comes to drinking, they've seen rampant alcoholism and drug abuse.

My son had a textbook and there were some interesting things in there. When he was in 9th grade and did the health portion of that year, he came home and started talking about drugs. I said, "What have you learned?" He said, "Frankly, I learned there's nine good reasons to smoke marijuana and only one bad reason." So we talked about that. I didn't say, "No, you can't have education about drug use." I talked about our neighborhood. I said, "Well what do you see around us?" He said, "I see a lot of pot heads who aren't doing much of anything." I said, "Well how does that make you feel about smoking pot?" "Not very good." I said, "Is it legal? No, it's not legal. Do you want to do anything that's illegal that's going to get you in trouble and keep out of college?" "No, I think I want to do things that are legal."

So we had that conversation. Sex ed is really sensitive. There's tremendous faith-based aspects to it, there're tremendous values, there're tremendous implications whether it's a STDs or getting pregnant, dealing with those issues.

Jenn Stanley: Say your parents were so opposed to premarital sex that they had your high school's sex ed workshop shut down. Would you feel comfortable talking to them about complicated experiences like abortion?

Nicolette Pawlowski: She has a kind of a personal and very political motive, and it's unfortunate because almost 2,000 other parents and specifically students were very keen on having this information. It's terribly ironic that certain individuals want to only deal with issues when you already have the most, in some senses, negative results when some of this could be alleviated and I think a large majority could be alleviated by giving information at the front end and really being realistic and

really being honest and comprehensive about how we treat youth and the education that they deserve to get.

Jenn Stanley: I asked Sally what she thought of parental notification laws, and if she thought her daughter would come to her if she needed an abortion.

Sally Wagenmaker: I am not an expert on parental notification rights. I do believe that abortion fundamentally is killing a baby. It is killing a human life. That is one of the worst things that any female could ever do, to kill a person who is inside of her body. It is not my body, my choice. It is a person, it is an unborn person. It is a person that cannot live on its own outside the womb until a certain time, but neither can a lot of other humans who might be at the end of their life, or who might be on a ventilator. So anything I would say about parental rights has to come out that, and anything to do with sex, really sex is procreative.

Jenn Stanley: I reminded Sally that people have sex without intending to procreate all the time, but then she started talking about how pro-choice people never talk about adoption.

Sally Wagenmaker: Sex between a man and a woman can result in a baby. For a parent not to be involved in that is tragic to me. I won't respond to any of the particular details, I'll only stay on the high end of this and I speak to this based out of a long history of being involved with this issue. I know it's tragic. I know it's sad. And you know what? I guess the last part I would say to that, which I never hear, or very rarely, in the pro-death, pro-abortion, pro-life debate is adoption.

Jenn Stanley: I told her that I was pro-choice and I was adopted. It was a decision I immediately regretted.

Sally Wagenmaker: Well I'm so glad. I'm so glad you are adopted. What a noble, amazing thing to acknowledge that you have a human life inside of you and you could give that baby up for adoption. It would be hard, and it would be horrible to have to go through that as a pregnancy, but wouldn't that be amazing for you, and for your parents too, to walk down that adoption road, like you, where I don't your circumstances.

Jenn Stanley: I was just totally taken out of the interview at this point. Why did I tell her that? People always tell me how amazing and selfless it was for my birth mother to place me for adoption. But we don't really know anything, and these conversations draw the air out of the room. I can't see or hear anymore. I don't have any memories of the brief time I had with the person who gave birth to me. And I resent the ways in which people try to force nonexistent memories into my narrative.

Is it beautiful? Is it noble? I'm not sure. I think it's a lot of things. I think it just is. I ended the interview shortly after. I wanted to stay composed, and I was feeling like I was about to fall apart. I was ashamed that something so small could burn me from the inside out. I was sure she could see the heat rising in my cheeks. I shook her hand, and she said, "You really think it would have been okay for your

mother to murder you in the womb?" Oh, that heat was rising into my ears. Why couldn't I be more professional, more composed?

I looked at the floor, took a choppy breath, and said, "I just hope she had a choice, but I worry that she didn't. And I really hope she wasn't forced to have me." And she said, "That's really sad for you." I put on my backpack full of my gear and I just walked ahead and said, "It was nice to meet you," or something like that. But my tone didn't reflect a pleasant goodbye. I took the rest of the afternoon off. It was a Wednesday in May and instead of doing something fun outside, I went home and watched *The Handmaid's Tale*, another bad decision.

Maybe I thought it would be cathartic, but watching a very pregnant June try to escape the people who were stealing her baby was a little too much for me that day, and Sally's words just kept flashing in my head. "That's really sad for you." The truth is, I am sad. But she never asked me about it. No one ever talks to me about it, except to tell me how good and selfless my birth mother must be. What I should have said to Sally was, "It is sad that we never hear about birth mothers' experiences. We just assume or tell people what to think."

With Justice Kennedy's retirement, everyone is talking about what's to happen if Roe is overturned. Are we just going to force people to give birth? But the truth is, some people are forced to give birth against their will now, and teenagers are the most vulnerable because in many states they don't get to make abortion decisions for themselves.

Veronica Hawkins: I feel like he might have wanted to keep it. It's a consequence, one of those punishment things.

Jenn Stanley: Punishment for you?

Veronica Hawkins: As like a lesson learned.

Jenn Stanley: Some teens have had enough, and they're taking on these laws one neighborhood at a time. But more on that next time. CHOICE/LESS is a production of Rewire.news. We're the leading nonprofit journalism outlet devoted to reporting on reproductive and sexual health, rights and justice. To stay up to date with our award-winning journalism, find us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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