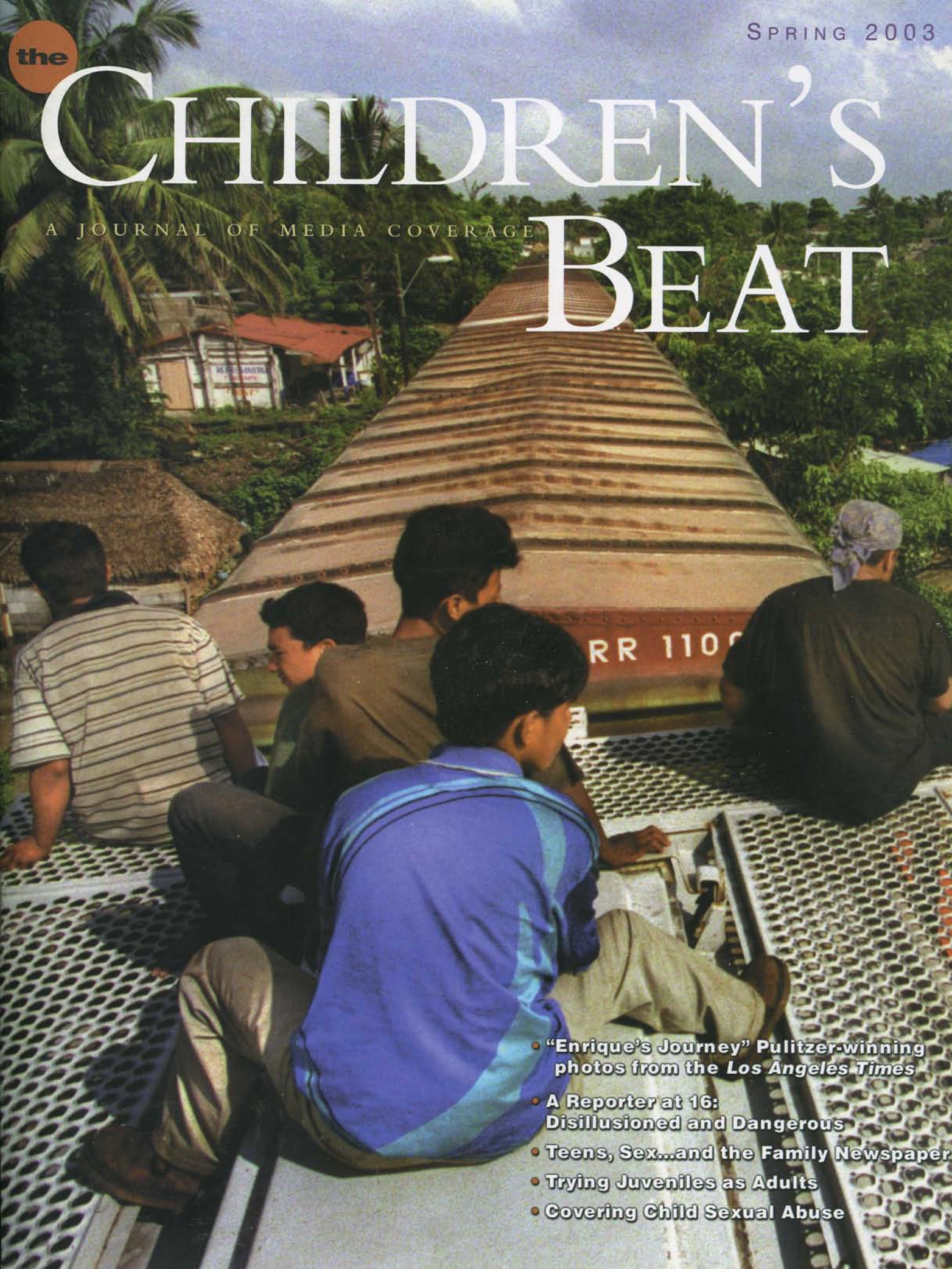


SPRING 2003

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CHILDREN'S BEAT

A JOURNAL OF MEDIA COVERAGE



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Teens, Sex... and the Family Newspaper

BY DEBRA WEYERMANN

Pondering her role as guide on her two daughters' relentless march toward womanhood, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editor Virginia Lynn Anderson swallowed her breath, finally announcing her efforts have been about as graceful as a pregnant pole-vaulter.

“All the roadmaps from previous generations are not there anymore,” she mused during a recent discussion about teenage sexuality and the role of the press therein. “Sometimes I don’t know who’s crazier, the teenagers or the parents, but I absolutely know the press should be reporting on this issue, despite its sensitivity. Or maybe because of it; I’m not sure our generation is serving the kids well and we need information.”

The generation to which she refers is late baby boomers, the willing participants in the 60’s new social order; the witnesses of unpopular wars and dreadful assassinations; the self-proclaimed protectors of free speech. Broad-minded thinkers who never had trouble cutting a moral path on national issues but now find themselves stumbling through the thicket of their teenagers’ emerging sexuality without a good machete.

Overheard snippets from her daughters’ age group make Anderson fear parents are swimming in ignorant bliss concerning their little ones, who are swimming in a dark pool so vast they have no idea where bottom is, much less the shore line. Researchers and other experts in the field give legs to Anderson’s nagging angst.

“Parents don’t know enough to know where to begin,” says Debra Roffman, a teacher, school consultant and author of “Sex and Sensibility” (Perseus Publishing, 2001). “They don’t want to be sex negative. They see setting limits as being prudish and as a result they don’t see the big picture. I have parents of 6-year-olds asking if it’s okay for their daughters to have a Britney Spears theme party.”

“Parents need to get informed,” says Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. “More than anything today, kids need to know what it all means. The white-knuckled talk at the kitchen table will not get it.”

Anderson began her foray into covering the subject by never letting a day slide in which the topic was not discussed with her colleagues in the editorial department. Finally, she wrote several columns about the seeming lack of boundaries where young adults were concerned. These columns, she admits almost sheepishly, were philosophical in nature – a big toe in the churning water she dared not swim.

“Let’s face it,” says Laura Sessions Stepp of *The Washington Post*. “It’s an uncomfortable subject. Reporters are uncomfortable asking about it and papers are certainly uncomfortable printing it.”

Stepp should know. She’s written in depth about a teen party activity known as “hooking up.” It is similar to “FB” (friends with benefits) except when hooking up there is no need to maintain a relationship. You merely approach a person you consider “hot” and offer sex – usually oral. You may hook up with more than one individual in an evening and there is no requirement to ever speak with him or her again. In the FB scenario, one remains on friendly terms, but no commitment is implied.

“I think it would be interesting for reporters to do a story on what teenagers think a virgin is today,” offers Adrienne Verrilli of SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States). “With the hooking

up and other buddy sex systems girls can still say they’re virgins, even if sodomy was involved. [Virginity] seems to be important.”

Stepp found parents were shocked and disbelieving of her 1999 story on middle-schoolers and oral sex, yet by then, she had known of the practice for two years. In the meantime, Monica Lewinsky revealed explicit details of her relationship with President Clinton.

“Although we never discussed it in those terms,” Stepp says of her editors’ decision to run her stories, “I am sure that the fact we had printed the words ‘oral sex’ in the paper prior to my story made it easier for the editors to print them again. In fact, it probably made the story itself easier to sell because it was a topic already being talked about among readers as well as editors.”

Stepp was saddened, but unsurprised to find most girls still looked hopefully at hooking up as a way to create a relationship while boys didn’t. She found the girls wistful and sometimes unhappy. She was surprised to find most parents gave her initial stories a light reading, assuming a small group of kids had decided to imitate the president on one occasion and it certainly wasn’t their kids. It took several follow-up pieces before the phone calls from aghast parents started coming in, wanting more details.

“Parents hear vague murmurings and are afraid to ask questions,” she says. “They need to have some kind of discussion with kids about the relationship between physical and emotional intimacy.”

Radio host, teacher and Oprah-lauded author Michael Riera agrees. “People look for intimacy through sex,” he observes. “Too many parents fall back on the plumbing talk. We don’t cover the emotions and what we leave out, teens need to hear. We have to help them understand intimacy, and treasure it.”

Riera, co-author of the “Field Guide to the American Teenager” (Perseus Publishing, 2000) and other books, believes parents and reporters alike should exercise caution when interpreting anecdotal information from teenagers. He points to a declining teen pregnancy rate, among other things, as evidence that teenagers are “making better decisions” about sex and says hooking up may not be a widespread practice.

Still, the press has an invaluable role in reporting such things – uncomfortable as it might be.

“The press can serve as a wake-up call to parents,” he says. “I would go to different schools and talk with different groups of kids. Getting the cross section is the hard part.”

This is what Cara Nissman of the *Boston Herald* does for a living. When she inherited the “teen beat” she didn’t know what to expect, but now believes it was kismet.

“Nobody told me what to write about or where to go,” she recalls. “So I just started going to the schools, meeting the teachers, counselors and kids. After three years, I’ve built a good source base and I pretty much know what’s going on in the schools. I love it.”

Nissman writes “light” stories covering teen fads and movies. But she’s also delved into teenage sexuality, covering party sex and other subjects such as teen female masturbation, a topic that caused her unsuspecting photographer to fumble his equipment when taking pictures of teens discussing those topics.

“I try to hit things nobody talks about,” Nissman says. “Teens have told me many times they want to talk to their parents about sex but are too embarrassed, or feel it will lead to a judgmental interrogation.”

Nissman believes the *Herald* has acted as a bridge over this chasm. Her contact information, which appears in her articles, produces a steady stream of calls and e-mails from teens and parents alike.

“Some parents really don’t know what’s going on,” she observes. “Ignorance is bliss or something.”

JOHN WILCOX / BOSTON HERALD



For an April 2003 story, Cara Nissman spoke with these and other teens about gay-straight student groups in Massachusetts high schools.

JOHN WILCOX / BOSTON HERALD



A month earlier, she interviewed 10 teenage girls about their sexuality. “Most are reluctant to discuss sexual desires — and they DO have them — with their parents, their school counselors and even their best friends,” Nissman wrote.

Virginia Lynn Anderson sorrowfully agrees. “I don’t know exactly when my rose-colored glasses came off,” she says. “We were the kids of the ‘60s. We were the rebels. I always thought the best thing you could do for your kids was unconditional love and positive rewards. Now I’m thinking we may have done them a disservice.”

Bill Albert of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

says boomer parents may have put too positive a spin on their teens’ mistakes. “It’s okay to use the ‘C’ word because there really are consequences.” In addition to STD risks, the statistic he says will make most readers choke on their cornflakes is this: “Four in 10 girls will get pregnant by age 20.”

Albert hastens to add the pregnancies result from sex without contraception and although that rate has been

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declining in the United States since the early '90s, it is still twice the rate of the nearest industrialized nation, England. What's more, he says, the decline could be reversed by what some educators and experts see as a dangerous trend in sex education in the public schools: a focus on abstinence.

"Almost 40 percent of the schools in this country now teach abstinence if they take federal money under the 1996 welfare reform package," says educator Roffman. "I'd like to see reporters do some stories on what teens are learning from this. What they're *really* learning."

Critics say abstinence curricula mandate that contraception cannot be discussed, except in terms of failure rates. Sexual diseases are presented as common consequences of pre-marital sex, and illustrated with terrifying photos of genitalia in various states of advanced decay. The programs, they say, are rife with misinformation and confusing messages equating abstinence to religious purity.

"There's a difference between promoting abstinence and demanding chastity," says Verrilli of SIECUS. "The abstinence programs are everything you don't want in a sex education program."

Pia de Solenni of the Washington, D.C.-based Family Research Council couldn't disagree more. "I've seen a considerable number of these programs and have seen very few that operate that way," she says. "There's no condom for the human heart. The people who are making these choices [to have pre-marital sex] aren't very happy."

De Solenni maintains that studies show today's generation is more conser-

vative, populated by many young women who felt coerced into sex and "already regret their sexual debut." She says a group of ex-beauty pageant winners known as "Project Reality" has enjoyed good success visiting high schools, where they deliver a message that equates abstinence with self-respect.

"These are beautiful, accomplished women who tell the kids 'I'm just asking you to listen,'" de Solenni says. "And they do because it's all about self-respect."

On that at least, the experts can agree.

"This impersonal sex is being sold to girls, at least, as evidence of their emancipation," says Maureen Downey, an editorial writer at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "They're told they're getting something, when what they're getting is hurt."

"Kids need to understand that sex is not changing oil," says Bill Albert, who added that many boys feel pressured into impersonal sexual activities too. "We are trying to convince parents that young people really want to hear from them on this issue. Our primary message is to convince parents they're still parents, and they're not only needed, they're wanted."

"Limits are like oxygen for children," echoes Debra Roffman. "They're drowning in a sinkhole of sexual imagery used to sell anything. Products not even remotely related to sex are now sold with sexual innuendo. Kids are assaulted with it every day."

Most experts agree the "sex talk" should not be relegated to the tense and dreaded kitchen table episode. Ideally, such conversations should have been

ongoing throughout a child's life, emphasizing the connection between physical and emotional intimacy. That said, experts acknowledge reality. Most parents are seriously uncomfortable discussing sexuality with their children and can use all the help they can get. Asked what role the press could play, the answers were unanimous.

"Parents can use articles to get informed, and then key off them for conversation," says Riera, adding a good time for such talks is in the car, preferably with other kids around. "This way, you can use the story to learn more and next time, have better questions."

Other experts say the press could do more investigative work into school curricula.

"Parents think schools will take care of this one," says Albert. "In reality they're getting a 45-minute class eight times a year, which is certainly insignificant in this highly sexualized culture."

But by far the most neglected area is talking to the teenagers themselves.

"Ask them what the 'bases' are these days," Riera suggests. "I guarantee you'll be surprised by the information you get."

But is this a job for the family newspaper business?

"I think it has to be," Atlanta's Anderson states unequivocally. "It's part of the social fabric and these kids are the future."

Nissman agrees. "I write stories about parents that get kids thinking what the adults think about them," she says, "and stories about kids get the parents thinking. It's really sensitive, but I've been able to find my own niche and accomplish some things I entered journalism to do."

"I'm very proud of my paper for printing these stories," says Laura Sessions Stepp. "I realize it is a tender subject, but I don't know of many that are more important."

Debra Weyermann is a freelance writer living in Florida.

