Fast Times at Hillsboro High

River gets expelled for teaching head to the class

June 1, 1996 By River Huston

OK, so I am finally able to get a condom on a penis with my mouth every time. It's quite exciting. So I feel this urgent need to demonstrate my newfound talent at all my safer-sex lectures. I try to pick the most opportune time, whether as an icebreaker at a gathering of grade-school teachers or just as a late-afternoon classroom pick-me-up.

What I didn't realize was that by demonstrating my method at Hillsboro High School in suburban New Jersey on March 20, 1996, I would change the course of my life.

It was a late-afternoon lull. I have been giving lectures at Hillsboro High School for the last three years. The kids always appreciated my humor and candid illustrations on just how to have safer sex, whether it is oral, anal, vaginal, plural, rural, in cars, bars and/or airports. I pulled out my new demonstration penis. I told the students how to place said condom in mouth in the correct direction to allow for easy application: "With your tongue, secure reservoir tip on that penis." I usually stop after I cover the head, assuring them I could go all the way.

It was about at this point that I noticed a woman frantically snapping photos. I just thought it was one of the librarians. (They love my lectures.) So, on a whim, I decided to show her how to do it with no hands. Click! Click! She ran from the room.

Shortly after, the militia arrived. "Ma'am, you will have to stop using any props in this school." I laughed, thinking they were kidding. I gave my next lecture. Suddenly, over the loudspeaker, I could have sworn I heard I was being summoned to the principal's office. Ahhh, but it was only signaling the end of another pleasant day at Hillsboro High School. But we were having so much that fun no one wanted to leave my lecture.

Not so for several school officials. I had barely hit the parking lot when I was informed that there was a problem. I wasn't too unnerved; I've offended people before. Certainly they will get over it once they actually see for themselves what a fun and exciting activity putting a condom on a penis with a mouth can be.

Then, at 7 a.m. the next morning, a fellow from 101.5fm calls about the alleged six-inch purple sex toy I had in my mouth while leading a group of hapless students in a lewd chant. What? "Would you like to say a few words to our radio audience in your defense?" he asked. He then proceeded

to announce, every 30 seconds, “We have River Huston, AIDS activist, on the line. Yesterday she put a six-inch purple sex toy into her mouth during a safe-sex demonstration at Hillsboro High School.” He then had to use the same phrase whenever he asked me a question. I finally had to say, “Hey, Marty, is it the size or the color that offends you?” It seems that if a demonstration penis is purple, it becomes a sex toy.

Well, I did 22 talk shows that day, all the network news shows, every major newspaper in New Jersey, plus *The New York Times*. There were press conferences and mobs of angry parents. I received, in equal amounts, supportive phone calls and cranks asking me to come and demonstrate my talents personally.

The next night, David Letterman included me in his monologue. The harangue has not stopped. I have to ask myself, What the hell is going on here?

I can’t help finding it all a bit ridiculous. Our safer-sex message in this country is to hold up an unopened condom and say, “Be safe.” What exactly does this mean? That if I carry this thing in my pocket, I’m safe? What is a lesbian supposed to do? Part of the safer-sex discussion has to focus on sexuality and celebrating it. We must examine our feelings about sex, why we have sex, why we have unsafe sex. Is it low self-esteem, peer pressure, manipulation, boredom, curiosity, financial stability or just the inability to say no?

I feel there are two purposes to sex -- pleasure and procreation. If you are doing it for other reasons, let’s look at that. I try to create a safe forum for people to explore what they really want out of a sexual experience. I use humor, anecdotes and, yes, props. The results have me booked a year in advance, in the States and abroad. I have a file-cabinet drawer filled with letters of appreciation from kids, parents and teachers. I know that to give the same warmed-over statistics-based safer-sex talk filled with fear and consequences does not create behavior change. I want people to have a chance that I didn’t have.

Some other AIDS educators have commented that I damaged our reputation and set AIDS education back. I can only say that before I walked into that classroom, I said what I always say: “What are the guidelines today?” The lady who introduced me responded, “Go for it -- they need to know it all.” Well, now they do. Not just abut safer sex, but about the realities of sexual shame and the powerful effect it has on all of us.

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