

## FEATURE

## Agency aims for abstinence

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

According to Renee Cardinale, many youths in the 10-14 age range still believe "you can't get pregnant or be involved in a pregnancy the first time you have sex. Or that you can have sex and not be affected by an STD (sexually transmitted disease)."

Guess again, Cardinale tells them. As program coordinator for Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes' "Choose Wisely Now" abstinence program, she co-presents workshops at youth agencies and health fairs in Ontario County. They are also offered to schools and churches free of charge.

The workshops deal with such issues as self-esteem, defining life options and goals, avoiding drugs and alcohol, and withstanding negative influence from media and peers regarding sexual activity.

"We ask kids to name TV, movies and music that have sex in them, and they always know something right away. When we ask them what doesn't have sex in them, they have a hard time," Cardinale observed.

Based on the participants' ages, Cardinale said. "We won't see the results for a few more years." Though the target group of ages 10 to 14 might seem premature, "We felt it would be best to reach them at a younger age," said Giovina Caroscio, who serves as Catholic Charities of the Finger Lakes' executive director.

In addition to the workshops, Choose Wisely Now links youths to other support agencies and services. It encourages young people to join such community organizations as the YMCA and Boys and Girls Club so that they can be involved in healthy activities and further cut down the odds of engaging in premarital sex.

Choose Wisely Now also offers parent workshops on how to discuss sex with their children. Cardinale noted that the adult component is key because many adults don't seem aware that younger adolescents are becoming sexually active.

Choose Wisely Now, founded in 1998, is the lead abstinence education agency in Ontario County and also has a supportive role with abstinence programs in Cayuga County. The program gets an annual allocation of \$134,000 and also received a \$25,000 start-up grant. These are federal funds that are distributed by the state Department of Health.

Caroscio said that Catholic Charities eventually hopes to include older teens and also expand to the surrounding counties of Wayne, Seneca and Yates.

Due to federal stipulations for abstinence education funding, Catholic Charities is not allowed to present Choose Wisely Now from a religious perspective. Yet Caroscio said it's noteworthy that the guidelines emphasize both practical and moral reasons for abstinence.

While noting the importance of preventing teen pregnancy and STDs, the requirements also stress that an abstinence program "teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relation in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity," and "that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical defects."

This probably could have been written by the Catholic Church," Caroscio remarked.

## Mom warns teens on premarital sex

By Nancy Westlund  
Catholic News Service

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — The Loretto High School gym bleachers in Sacramento rocked as every one of its 467 students gave a standing ovation to a speaker who had just delivered a knockout message with the power of a heavyweight champion.

The speaker was Pam Stenzel, who makes it her business to travel worldwide challenging teens to choose "the abstinence advantage."

"If you forget everything else, there is one thing you need to remember," boomed Stenzel. "If you have sex outside of marriage, outside of one permanent monogamous partner, you'll pay."

A Minnesota mother of three, Stenzel began her talks in 1989 after serving as director of the Alpha Women's Center, a crisis pregnancy center.

"It took nine years of girls looking at me and saying 'Nobody told me,' 'I didn't know,' or 'I'd have made a different choice,'" said Stenzel, who says teens do make the right choice when given the facts.

Today she speaks to more than 500,000 young people annually. She was in the Sacramento area April 9-10.

Stenzel tells teens that, when it comes to issues related to sex, they are facing consequences youths in previous generations couldn't begin to imagine.

"We were wrong in the '60s when we said we could do whatever we wanted, that God's rules were not for us," she said.

Teens in 2001, she cautioned, are living at a time when sexually transmitted diseases are running rampant; sterility, infertility and abortion rates are up; and marriages are falling apart.

"The worst thing that can happen (if you have sex) is not pregnancy," Stenzel told students, noting that during a 24-hour period 12,000 people receive sexually transmitted diseases. "There is a four times greater risk of contracting a disease than becoming pregnant."

Statements like these were what caught the attention of students like Loretto freshman Andrea Dixon.

"(Stenzel) wants you to make your own decisions and tells you what will happen when you do," Dixon told the *Catholic Herald*, Sacramento's diocesan newspaper. "I really liked how she laid it out and backed it with actual facts."

Stenzel talked about God's role guiding youths in making life and death choices associated with issues of sexuality.

"God loves us and his love is not about wrecking your fun or ruining your weekend," she commented. "God lets you choose and with that there is a colossal risk."

The risks, warned Stenzel, come not only in the form of contracting one of 30 sexually transmitted diseases, many of which



Cathy Joyce/Catholic Herald

are incurable, but in joining the 80 percent of teen-age moms living in poverty.

"The No. 1 indicator of poverty in this country is single-parent households," she said. "If we took care of teen pregnancy, we would not have poverty."

Making good choices, Stenzel tells teens, often takes a lot of courage, maturity and love. She shared a story about a 15-year-old girl who became pregnant after she was raped and had a decision to make.

"The girl chose to give her child life and place that child with an adoptive parent and that child was me," she said.

In her travels crisscrossing the country talking to teens, Stenzel has observed a growing number of young people who are choosing not to have sex before marriage.

"Today we have a group of kids who are not having sex and are militant about it — and I'm saying 'Good for you,'" she said.

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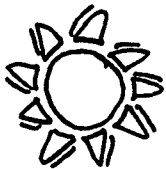
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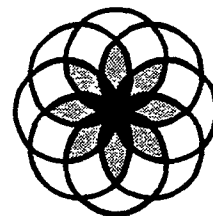
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