

on the MOVE



Brian Clare, a parishioner at St. Mary Church in Auburn, listens to teen teachers Jaime Mazzeo and Bill Bouley Aug. 20 as they conduct an abstinence program for seventh- and eighth-graders at Auburn's Sacred Heart Church. The program was presented as part of Sacred Heart's summer religious-education program.

Standing up to the pressure

A small group acts out a scene where a sexual advance is firmly refused. Another group follows. And another. And another.

During this role-playing, seventh- and eighth-graders go over suggested responses to a boyfriend or girlfriend who wants sex: Say no, and keep repeating it; state clearly what you think or feel, and ask why he/she keeps pressuring you; refuse to discuss the matter further.

If this sounds like theater class, well, in a sense that's true. Consider it a dress rehearsal for when a youth's pledge of sexual abstinence gets tested in real life.

"If you can come up quickly with these lines when you get into a situation, you'll be so much better off," Colleen Hotchkiss told a class of 13 seventh- and eighth-graders Aug. 20 at Auburn's Sacred Heart Church. Although some of the youths giggled as they took brief turns at acting, Colleen reminded them that "it's a serious subject when you're actually in the situation."

Colleen, 17, and Holly Parker, 15, were co-presenters at Sacred Heart's summer religious-education program. They, along

with several other teen volunteers, appeared as part of a sexual-abstinence initiative through the Cayuga County Health Department.

The abstinence curriculum was held during both of Sacred Heart's summer sessions, July 8-19 and Aug. 12-23, and presented to approximately 60 youths entering seventh and eighth grades. The students were mostly from Sacred Heart, St. Ann in Owasco and St. Mary in Auburn.

Lasting a total of five hours, abstinence classes were presented in one-hour blocks. Among the main topics were risks and consequences of having sex, media pressure and peer pressure. Meanwhile, the entire Aug. 20 session was devoted to assertiveness techniques. Toward the end of that class, students filled out worksheets stating how they would respond to "pressure lines." Among the more interesting answers, in italics:

"Everybody's doing it." *But not me.*
 "If you love me, you'll have sex with me." *If you love me, wouldn't you wait?*
 "I want to marry you someday." *So let's wait 'til then.*

"But I have to have it!" *Cry me a river, build me a bridge and get over it!*

Although it's easy to be this assertive in role-playing, Colleen pointed out that it's not so simple when you have strong feelings about a boyfriend or girlfriend. "You like the person. You've got to keep in mind this is going to be hard," she said.

Colleen and Holly also instructed students to repeat that it's OK to think, talk and develop feelings about sex. And it's OK to show affection to another person. But it's not OK to have sex now.

Their message was well received by Mark Dellostritto, 13, and Matt Jetty, 12, who both attend Sacred Heart Parish.

"It teaches you what you should do in life if you want to have a good life and a good relationship," Mark said.

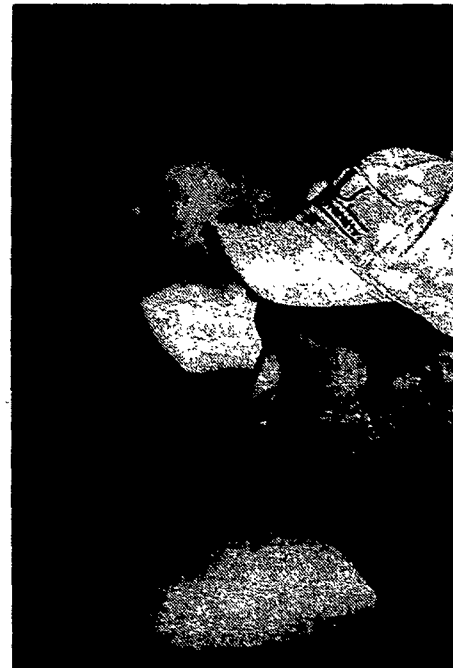
"Basically, it was how to have a good relationship and not base it on sex. I don't think it's hard to say no. You just have to say it because the consequences could be disastrous," Matt said, citing pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and hurt feelings.

The Cayuga County abstinence program was begun in 1998. Teen instructors are trained under Val White, an educator for the county's health department. White emphasized that these volunteers must walk the walk if they wish to talk the talk: If any are found to have violated the required abstinence pledge, they can no longer teach.

But for Holly, that's not something that concerns her. "I just really believe in it," said Holly, who is in her first year with the program. She attends Auburn Alliance Church.

Colleen belongs to St. Joseph's Church in Weedsport, part of the Northern Cayuga Cluster that also includes St. Patrick's in Cato and St. John's in Port Byron. She has been with the Cayuga County program for four years, appearing at numerous churches and schools. Overall, she said, her presentations are well received. "You get some people laughing and making jokes, but most of the people are pretty cooperative," she remarked.

While Catholic teaching that sexual



Kevin Clark of St. Mary Church watches a video explaining assertive ways to say no to sex.

intercourse is reserved for married couples has influenced her involvement, Colleen also said abstinence is important "even beyond my faith. If this was not part of my religion I would still be (volunteering.)"

Colleen and Holly agree that a plea for abstinence is more effective when delivered by teens rather than adults. "I think they're going to relate better, because they're going through the same things I am," Colleen said. She added that "adults can sometimes be intimidating," and Holly said that "kids might not show their feelings to adults." For that matter, Colleen added, some parents may not even be promoting abstinence.

Yet getting the word out is crucial in this day and age, said Maureen Collins, faith formation director for Sacred Heart and St. Ann. "What we find is, our middle-school kids are sexually active," Collins observed.

"I don't think this county is unique. Children are having sex at a younger age; they think everybody's doing it. But that's a myth," White said.

Collins said she realizes a message of abstinence is an unpopular one but stated, "You've got to convince them that's not what they want to do."

Story by Mike Latona

Photos by Karin von Voigtlander



Brian Clare (center) giggles as Jaime Mazzeo (left) shows him which lines to read to Sacred Heart's Eric Miller during a sketch they performed in front of the class.