

Is Abstinence Unrealistic?

I've had the opportunity to speak to millions of teens from across the U.S. about abstinence, and you'd be shocked at some of the answers I've gotten when I ask people to define "abstinence." When I first started speaking, I went to a preparatory school in Beverly Hills where they spend a lot of cheese to send their kids to school.

Cheese is the equivalent of cheddar, bling-bling, ice or whatever vernacular kids are using these days for money. So I asked the crowd, "Can anyone tell me what abstinence is?"

This one chick raised her hand and said, "Um, it's like, um, really, like you know what I'm sayin'....it's like a growth that like grows in the back of your neck."

And I said, "No, honey, that's an ."

Then I got in my car and rolled across to the south side of L.A. to a high school in Compton. As you probably guessed, they don't spend no cheese to send their kids to that broke-down, tore-up school.

So I asked the assembly at Compton, "Can anyone tell me what abstinence is?"

Sista girl raised her hand and said, "Yo, um, it's like this. You know what I'm saying? It's like Mookey and Yoyo told me that Yashika and Camoochi said it was like a bird." And I said, "No, honey, that's an ." People have some crazy definitions for abstinence. But abstinence is not a growth and it is not a bird: It is saving sex until marriage.

It means waiting until you say "I do"—which means I do you, you do me and we don't do nobody else. Abstinence: Waiting until you say "I do"—which means I do you, you do me and we don't do nobody else. Mom wasn't afraid to talk about

abstinence. She was very clear: "You have sex and I will kill you."

When I thought of premarital sex, pregnancy and disease were not the first things that came to mind. I feared a major time-out: I might not come back out of consciousness after my mom found out. But the ultimate time-out would be the disappointment I would feel from my mom because she gave me her best and I didn't give it back.

Many people believe abstinence is completely unrealistic—and it is if someone shakes their finger at you, tells you not to do it and then doesn't show you how to live it. My mom demonstrated for us as a single parent what it was to abstain from sex. She didn't have a string of boyfriends sleeping over or living with us. And she didn't just advocate sexual abstinence—she promoted a lifestyle of abstinence from all risky behaviors including drugs, alcohol and violence.

She knew that if you're not modeling what you're teaching, and then you're teaching something else. If you're not modeling what you're teaching, then you're teaching something else. Teaching abstinence isn't shaking your finger and telling someone to "just say no."

Teaching abstinence is mastery and demonstration of the arts of self-control, self-discipline and delayed gratification. Many adults are busy telling young people don't do this or don't do that, which only helps them focus on what not to do. Not doing those things becomes its own end. But my parents communicated to us that the things we were to abstain from—including smoking, drinking and promiscuity—were a means to an end. The end was a better life, and those things were obstacles that would get in the way.

It wasn't just my mom who taught about abstinence and personal responsibility as a lifestyle. Every summer when I was growing up, my family would get into our Chevy Suburban (this was

before Suburbans were cool) and we would drive across the country from Southern California to see my mom's family in a small town in Alabama. After the Civil War and the slaves were freed, many of my ancestors stayed right there and built the churches, businesses and homes in the entire community.

If you met someone on the street and asked them where they came from and they went back far enough in the family tree, chances are good we were related to them. There was a sense of community that I had never experienced before. During those summer visits, we would sit and listen to stories from aunts and uncles about how things used to be.

My paternal grandfather was the pastor of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where a bomb went off in the '60s. The story is the basis for Spike Lee's movie Four Little Girls. I learned about my uncle, who after retiring from the Air Force, became a professor of engineering at Tuskegee Institute. He designed the carpool system for the Montgomery bus boycott during the civil rights movement.

I also discovered that when my mom and her sister were college students at Alabama State University, they took a day off from classes to hear the cute new pastor preach at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. They were disappointed to find out that the pastor's wife, Coretta, was playing the organ. The pastor's name? Martin Luther King, Jr. I heard stories from one of my younger aunts who used to host Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. at her boyfriend's parents house. (They are now her in-laws.)

Many people know who Rosa Parks was, but she was not the first to be arrested or the last. My aunts and many other college students sat in the front of the bus as a matter of protest, waiting to get arrested. It was here at the feet of my elders that I began to understand why my parents were the way they were.

In the big picture, life and death, success and failure depended on doing what was right and not what was convenient or popular. They disciplined themselves to stand for what was right, even when others mocked, spat at, threatened and abused them. And I thought I had it hard! I realized that I benefited from their discipline and sacrifice.

We grew up hearing about civil rights and we also grew up hearing about personal responsibility. The two are inseparable: Every right demands responsibility. Growing up, it only made sense that when someone got pregnant, someone got married. If you exercised the right to have sex, then you should step up and be responsible. Every right demands responsibility.

Rights and responsibilities apply to every area of our lives, and one summer I discovered how they apply to sex. When I was 11 years old, during my family's annual visit to Alabama, I woke up to discover that my grandfather was nowhere to be found. After a few days, I realized that his disappearance was a daily occurrence. So one afternoon, I decided to wait for him out on the porch. When he finally came back, I asked him, "Granddaddy, where do you go in the mornings?" "I go to talk to my best friend," he answered. "Who's that?" I asked.

"Your grandmother," he answered. Now, my grandmother had been dead for four or five years. But six days a week, excluding Sundays—which was his day of rest—my grandfather would get up while it was still dark and walk down the dirt road with his cane. He loved to make the two-mile journey to his daily destination—our family cemetery—just as the sun was coming up. He would sit in his lounge chair next to her headstone for hours. Then he'd walk two miles back home. He was 90 years old.

"Why do you do this?" I asked.

"Because Ada was my best friend," he said, and started to tear

up. "That woman made me feel like I could take over the world. You know, there's nothing I wouldn't have done for her." As we sat on the porch that morning, my granddaddy told me all kinds of stories about he and my grandmother: how she waited for him to come back from WWI, how she helped spare him from being lynched, and how they got their family through the Great Depression. He also took time to tell me that the first time he ever kissed my grandmother was when the minister said, "You may now kiss the bride."

They were married more than 60 years and raised 12 children together. So it was obvious that after they said "I do"...they did. The last thing my granddaddy said is the thing that I still remember the most from our entire conversation: "You know, I don't know anything about any other woman and I don't want to, because , she was the stuff." I remember taking a deep breath in awe.

That's what I wanted. I knew from that moment on that afternoon in Alabama that I wanted what my grandparents had. I wanted to be like them and wait until I got married before I had sex.

I didn't want to be like other girls in my community, pregnant at 15 years old with stomachs sticking out and sayin', "Where my baby-daddy at? You seen Ray-Ray? Where Ray Ray is?" I didn't want to be an episode of The Jerry Springer Show.

I wanted "till death do us part." Now my granddaddy didn't have more than a third-grade education, and he didn't know anything about safe sex. All he knew is that he loved this woman more than life itself, and he was true to her throughout his entire life. That was the vision he gave me at 11 years old that helped me see abstinence as the means to reach the desired end: a deep and lasting love.

*This is an excerpt from **Lakita Garth-Wright's** book, The Naked*

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