



JERI
ROWE

Teachers fight crisis of teenage pregnancy

GREENSBORO — They're on the front lines, these teachers who tell teens about sex.

Tony Casas talks to them in Spanish. Spencer Long tells stories about his time working in a prison. And Dawn Charaba helps her girls' dreams through linked chains of construction paper.

Then there's Jean Workman. She's known as the "Sex Lady." She will sit in a circle of middle school girls, bring out a flip chart of anatomically correct illustrations and give them the green light to squeal — right there in an auditorium.

Workman is used to it. So are Casas, Charaba and Long. They describe their work as a mission to help middle and high school students learn the importance of saying no.

Their talks work. Teen pregnancy rates in Guilford County are dropping. But that's only half the story.

Every day, three teens between 15 and 19 years old in Guilford County become pregnant, two teens give birth and one teen terminates or loses her pregnancy.

You read that right. Every day.

Folks in the know call it a "crisis." So, they'll gather on Monday in what's considered the first local conference created to come up with more ways to prevent adolescent and teenage pregnancy.

Statistics tell you why. So do stories. Let's start with the "Sex Lady."

Workman, a married

See Rowe, Page B3

mother of two, is health educator with the Guilford County Health Department. Since 1997, she has been teaching middle and high school students enrolled in the program Smart Girls.

Her student's story: An 11-year-old girl from High Point had sex with an 18-year-old boy, and she figured she couldn't get pregnant because she hadn't had her period yet. She was wrong.

Long, a former investigative officer at a youth prison in Caswell County, works with the Family Life Council, a division of the Children Home's Society of North Carolina. Since 2001, he's been teaching in the program called Wise Guys.

His inmate's story: A 16-year-old he met in prison

had killed someone over money. The boy was a drug dealer. After he was released, the 16-year-old met the same fate. Dead.

"Prison," he'll tell his students, "is not a place you want to be."

Casas is a minister, a married father of two. At age 6, he came to the United States from Mexico with his family and later graduated from college and earned a master's degree in divinity. He started with Wise Guys in September, and he deals strictly with Latino teenagers.

He knows statistics show pregnancy rates skyrocketing among Hispanic

teenagers, particularly in North Carolina. Yet, in those statistics he sees faces. And he sees himself.

Casas

"I'm a minister at heart, and no matter how dire the statistics are, there is still hope," says Casas, 39. "Information can be transformational."

And misinformation hurts.

A few days ago, Workman stood in line at a state conference and heard a state legislator ask: "Don't girls get pregnant because it's socially acceptable?"

She told him about the quote she has on the wall in her office: "Just as any birth control method or condom can fail so can the will to abstain."

Later, she talked about a girl she calls Tina.

Tina was 14, a homeless girl from High Point who had a son after being raped by a family member. She dropped out of high school. At 16, she waited tables. At 18, she got her GED.



Workman



Long



Today, she's 24, an unmarried mother of two. And she's getting her associate's degree in nursing.

She was a Smart Girl, and Workman still keeps in touch.

So Workman walks into her neighborhood pool and hears a girl scream, "Oh my God, that's Miss Jean. She's the Sex Lady!" And she's just fine with that.

"It makes sex everybody's business. It becomes a conversation worth having, and if being called that brings focus to that, it's a badge of honor," says Workman, 41. "It empowers girls. It empowers parents. It makes them feel it's OK."

That's easy to see in Dawn Charaba's class. She's the program manager for College Bound Sisters, a pregnancy prevention program for younger sisters of teen moms that was created by two UNCG professors 14 years ago.

On this particular night, she's using candy, a game of Jeopardy and a Power Point presentation to explain sexually transmitted diseases to a half-dozen girls. Around her, after a dinner of lasagna and salad, conversations begin.

"Don't use a holey condom," says one girl. "That's how my sister got pregnant."

"My older sister had got AIDS, you know," says another.

"At church, my friend heard that using condoms was a sin," says a third.

It's a frank discussion. But Charaba hasn't yet had a frank talk with them

about the program.

In late May, the funding for College Bound Sisters will run out. The program that provides teenagers with money for college has two options: find new funding or face the possibility of shutting down.

"I have to tell them, but I'm dreading that I have to tell them," she says. "Here, you have a program where adults listen to them and trust them. To have that taken away ..."



Charaba

The construction-paper chain was created by her students, all of whom finished the sentence "I have a dream ..."

Charaba doesn't finish her sentence. She pulls down a chain of construction paper from beside her office door.

Wrote one girl: "... that I get a good education and a job to make a better life for me and my kids."

Wrote another girl: "... regardless of what your family makes, everyone would be allowed to attend college."

Charaba smiles and hangs the construction-paper chain back on a hook.

"Aren't they fantastic?" she asks.

Contact Jeri Rowe at 373-7374 or jeri.rowe@news-record.com

WANT TO GO?

What: Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Summit

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday

Where: Greensboro Airport Marriott, One Marriott Drive, Greensboro

Cost: Free

Information: 274-2217 or www.appnow.org

SOME FACTS ON TEEN PREGNANCY

■ Only 40 percent of mothers who have children before age 18 ever graduate from high school.

■ Nearly 50 percent of all teen moms and more than 75 percent of unmarried teen moms begin receiving welfare within five years of the birth of their first child.

■ Fifty-two percent of all mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager.

■ Nearly 80 percent of the fathers of children born to teen moms do not marry the mothers. These fathers pay less than \$800 annually in child support, often because they are poor themselves.

■ Fifty-nine percent of Guilford County's high school juniors and seniors report having had sexual intercourse.

■ North Carolina remains in the top three among states nationwide with the highest Latina teenage pregnancy rates.

■ In one year alone, adolescent and teen child-bearing cost Guilford County \$13.6 million.

Source: Guilford County Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy