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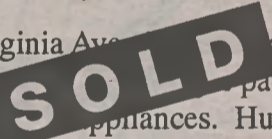
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## lesbian notions

### Talking about sex

by Paula Martinac  
Special to Q-Notes

With the barrage of media coverage on the alleged Clinton sex scandal, I find myself haunted by the story. Even in my dreams, I'm engaging in risky sex — in my parents' house, in my old bedroom, with the door slightly ajar. More importantly, all this talk about White House shenanigans has me thinking seriously about sex education, sexual ethics, and the way those topics are handled in our society.

A lot of people around me, from the check-out clerk at the supermarket to the guy who runs the neighborhood copy shop, have expressed sympathy and support for the president. Some lesbians and gay men are rightly concerned about the damage that could be done to the most queer-friendly administration in history; others throw up their hands in an "Oh, those crazy heterosexuals!" resignation.

What I haven't heard is very much concern that Monica Lewinsky, at the time of the alleged affair, was just 21 years old. In fact, a recent *New York Times* poll found that only one-third of the people questioned thought her age was an issue. People are more concerned that "an intimate encounter" may have occurred in (gasp!) the West Wing.

For me, all the elements of this latest scandal capture the problems we, in this country, have talking about and viewing sex in a meaningful way — as a normal, integral part of life that is too often subject to sensation or abuse. First, there's a young woman — a "bad girl" — with a history of clandestine sex with older, married men. What we know about her suggests a life defined pretty much by sex — not unusual in a society that still views women and girls as sexual fodder for men. Second, there's a powerful man who stands accused of using his authority to attract women for sex. That's a figure whom any woman who's ever worked in an office is familiar with. Instead of discussing what's wrong with this scenario, there's a pub-

lic obsession with, and tee-heeing over, the lurid details. Reportedly, even members of Congress have been telling each other dirty jokes about Monica and Bill.

Why this immature preoccupation with sex? As immature children, most of us learned almost nothing at school or in our homes about sex beyond the facts of what makes a baby and the supposed joys of premarital abstinence. Statistics show that the United States has one of the worst records on sex education. Consequently, it also has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates (and 77 percent of those pregnancies result from girls having sex with adult men). In addition, the US has an alarmingly high rate of HIV transmission among those under 25 — a rate which continues to grow rapidly. On the other hand, European nations like Holland and the Scandinavian countries have solid sex education programs, low teen pregnancy figures and a lower rate of HIV transmission among the young. It isn't a coincidence that those countries also have the most liberal policies on homosexuality.

In this country, 41 states do not have any training requirements for sex education teachers. The subject is usually taught by physical education or home economics faculty with no special training. Many of those teachers find their hands tied by parents when they try to talk about any kind of birth control or safer sex except abstinence. In addition, conservative, religiously-motivated school boards across the country continue to ban books from libraries that could offset the inferior sex education most kids get — "threatening" titles like *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (which sensitively deals with issues like incest and lesbianism) and *100 Questions and Answers about AIDS*. Board members outlaw these books with a squeamish prudery that suggests that they themselves got very little positive sex education when they were young adults. "What it said on the first page was all I needed to hear," one school board member in West Virginia was quoted as saying about Walker's novel.

The truth is, sex education in this country fails most of us, straight and queer, because it focuses on biological descriptions and not on people's sexual realities. It doesn't deal with sex in the context of complex human relationships that aren't about love or marriage, but that many people experience. It doesn't talk, for example, about sexual abuse, harassment or objectification — so a lot of us can convince ourselves that those things don't exist. It doesn't address power imbalances in sexual relationships between younger and older partners, students and teachers, employees and employers — so the fact that Monica Lewinsky was 21 seems irrelevant to a majority of people.

These are exactly the kinds of topics, however, that would have been useful to Lewinsky when she was growing up — and, for that matter, to Bill Clinton, too. As a friend of mine points out about the White House scandal, "Well, it's good the country's talking about sex." But unfortunately, we're still talking about it in a very limited way. ▼

[Paula Martinac is a lesbian activist and writer. Her most recent books are the novel *Chicken* and the nonfiction guide, *The Queerest Places: A National Guide to Gay and Lesbian Historic Sites*. She can be reached by writing in care of this publication or at her email address [LNcolumn@aol.com](mailto:LNcolumn@aol.com).]

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