

## Selling Safe Sex in Public Schools

MICHELLE BRYANT

► In "Selling Safe Sex in Public Schools," Michelle Bryant, formerly of the Office of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, interviews Shelby Knox, then a government major at UT and the subject of the award-winning 2005 documentary film *The Education of Shelby Knox*, which was shown at the Sundance Film Festival and aired on PBS's P.O.V.

series. According to a recent blog posting by Knox on the Huffington Post, she currently lives in New York City, where she is "a full-time speaker and organizer working with progressive organizations to promote sex education, women's rights, and youth empowerment."

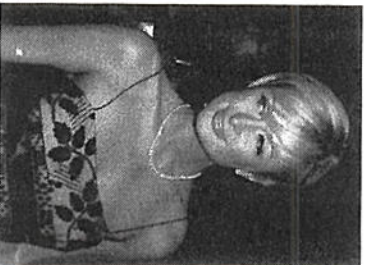
This essay originally appeared as a feature article in the fall 2005 issue of *Life & Letters*: A Publication of the College of Liberal Arts of the University of Texas at Austin. As you read, consider why an article about someone like Knox is an appropriate subject for such a publication.

Teenagers are viewing sexual content in music videos, movies, and, thanks to Paris Hilton, even hamburger commercials. But what do they really know or need to know about sex? Some people feel schools need to teach teenagers about abstinence only. Opponents say that withholding information about condom use and birth control will only lead to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)."

The debate over sex education has intensified in recent years because of substantial increases in federal funding for abstinence-only programs. In 2005, \$167 million was appropriated, up from \$80 million in 2001. President George W. Bush's proposed 2006 budget includes \$206 million for such programs. Schools that choose comprehensive or abstinence-plus curricula don't qualify for this funding and must pay for the programs out of their general budget, provided by local and state governments.

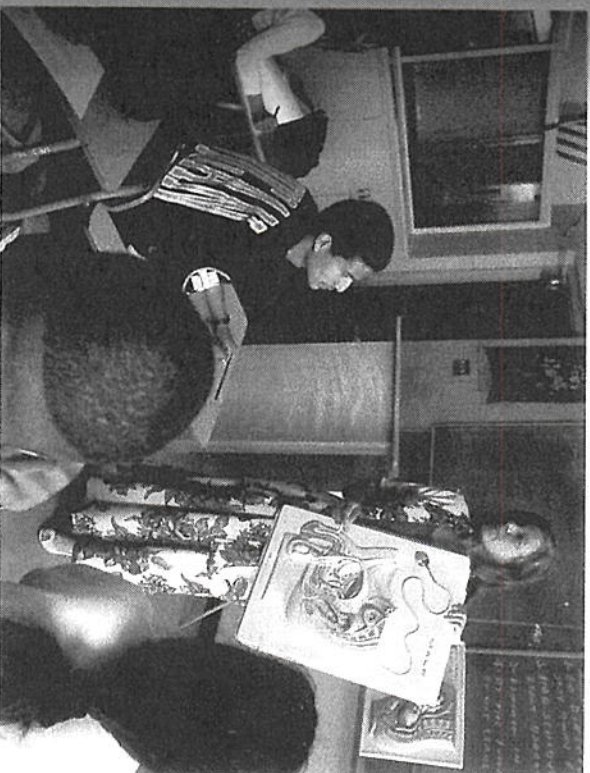
On the frontline of the heated sex education debate stands Shelby Knox currently a government major at The University of Texas at Austin. Although her hometown's high schools teach abstinence as the only safe alternative, Knox was shocked to learn that Lubbock, Texas, has some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy and STDs in the nation.

At age 15, Knox, a budding opera singer and a devout Christian who has pledged abstinence until marriage, became an unlikely advocate for comprehensive sex education, attracting the attention of documentary filmmakers Rose Rosenblatt and Marion Lipschutz. They documented her efforts in the



*Paris Hilton* (b. 1981): an American celebrity, heiress, socialite, model, actress, and entrepreneur. Here, she attends the Weinstein Co. Golden Globe after-party on January 16, 2006, in Beverly Hills, California.

**STDs:** sexually transmitted diseases. They can be transmitted during sexual activity or intercourse and include chlamydia, *gonorrhea*, hepatitis, herpes, HIV, HPV, *syphilis*, and *syphilis*.



film *The Education of Shelby Knox*, which has been broadcast nationally on the P.O.V. series on PBS and won the Excellence in Cinematography Award in the documentary category at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival.

Through her work with the Lubbock Youth Commission, a group of high school students empowered by the mayor to give Lubbock's youth a voice in city government, Knox began her fight for comprehensive sex education in public schools.

"We decided sex education was going to be our issue because we all knew someone who had been touched by the high rates of STDs and teen pregnancy," Knox said.

The youth commission received extensive media coverage, but little attention from school officials. After repeated requests, the school board finally allowed them to present their recommendations, but to no avail. However, Knox refused to give up, despite being repeatedly discouraged by the pastor of her church and the conservative Southern Baptist culture of the town. She was even told that she was "going to hell," literally.

"I felt like it was my responsibility as a student to use my voice and speak out," Knox said. "I was surprised when we did that the school board didn't

int's interview with Shelby Knox  
 rdered nearly all of the information  
 evidence to support her  
 nment. See the guidelines in  
 ppter 15 to help you plan and  
 duct your own interviews.

LINK TO P. 498

recognize us. They didn't say 'You're students. Maybe you know what's going on.' They were really blasé about the whole thing and that was a little disconcerting.

"That's why I got certified to teach at the local health department," she added. "I became a peer educator in my high school because once I learned that the school board wasn't going to do anything I felt like I should.

"Most students were very supportive of sex education," she said. "They realized that the fact that we didn't have sex education was a big problem. Once students realized that I had the information they were looking for, they would ask me questions about where they could get tested for STDs and how they could get condoms.

"If a student asks a teacher about sex," she added, "the teacher is required to answer with 'Abstinence is the only way to prevent STDs and teen pregnancy.' If they don't, they're in danger of losing their job."

During the time the youth commission led the comprehensive sex education campaign, STDs and teen pregnancy rates in Lubbock dropped. The Texas Health Department attributed this to a "rise in responsibility" because of the youth commission's advocating condom use.

By her senior year, Knox committed to working with a group of gay teens who decided to sue the Lubbock School Board because they were denied the right to form a gay-straight alliance in school. This was not a fight the other members of the youth commission, afraid of adding more controversy to their already contentious agenda, wanted to join. Soon after, the mayor of Lubbock announced that he was considering doing away with the youth commission because of a city budget shortfall. The youth commission agreed to operate without funding and, in the process, abandoned the sex education campaign. Since that time, the rates of STDs and teen pregnancy in Lubbock have gone back up. An infuriated Knox resigned from the youth commission, but continued fighting for what she felt was right.

When an organization came to Lubbock to protest the gay teenagers' lawsuit, Knox, along with her mother, joined a counter protest, carrying a sign that read "God Loves Everybody," an affirming belief that has guided Knox into adulthood.

"I think that God wants you to question," Knox said. "To do more than just blindly be a follower, because he can't use blind followers. He can use people like me who realize there's more in the world that can be done."

During the Spring 2006 semester, Knox will participate in the UT in D.C. program, which offers qualified students the opportunity to study and intern in Washington, D.C. She hopes to do an internship with Advocates for Youth or the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. She is



Shelby Knox at home in Lubbock, Texas, with her parents, Danny and Paula Knox

also a member of the Student Senate, University Democrats and Madrigal Choir. She continues to be an advocate for comprehensive sex education and has spoken with teen activists across the nation in conjunction with the film.

"Getting to connect with teens who can make a difference in their communities is the best part of this," Knox said. "I wish that I would have known of other teens that were doing this. When I speak I give them my e-mail and tell them we can talk because I know how hard it is to be a teenager in high school who is doing something controversial."

**RESPOND •**

1. What sort of ethos does Shelby Knox create for herself during the interview reported here? What role(s) does her faith play in that ethos? Would her narrative or ethos be different if Knox were an atheist? Why or why not? (For a discussion of ethos, see Chapter 3.)
2. What causal arguments do you find in the narrative of Shelby Knox's experiences? Why are these arguments crucial to the argument made by the selection? (For a discussion of causal arguments, see Chapter 11.)
3. In paragraph 15, Knox contends, "I think that God wants you to question." What does Knox want people of faith to question? Why? Why do you imagine Knox believes "he [God] can't use blind followers"? (Obviously, Knox is using "blind" metaphorically in this case.)
4. This article first appeared in *Life & Letters: A Publication of the College of Liberal Arts of the University of Texas at Austin*, a magazine that highlights the research and achievements of faculty and students in the college. It's distributed within the college and to its friends and supporters, including donors, many of whom would be politically conservative and would identify as evangelical Christians. How can you see awareness of the magazine's intended audience in the selection of Shelby Knox as the topic of an article? In the way her story is presented? How might the selection challenge readers holding various political or religious beliefs? How does the illustration on page 875, which was published with the article in *Life & Letters*, contribute to the argument?
5. This selection represents an especially popular genre in American culture, a narrative about an individual who, motivated by a set of principled beliefs—whether sacred, secular, or both—was moved to action in the public arena. Find another example of this genre that you believe to be especially effective, and write a rhetorical analysis of it. (For information about writing a rhetorical analysis, see Chapter 5.) In your analysis, be sure to include information about why you find the narrative you've chosen effective and perhaps moving. Be sure to include a copy of the text you analyze when you turn in your rhetorical analysis.