

Where We're Going

by Erin Fitzgerald

Let me tell you my favorite anecdote from popular culture regarding young people's understanding of the facts of life. In the beginning of the movie "Addams Family Values" we find Pugsley and Wednesday Addams in the waiting room of the maternity ward. They are awaiting the arrival of a new sibling. Another child is there, she regales them with a tale of where her parents were getting her new baby brother or sister from. The tale is a complex one involving fairies, storks, cabbage patches, and miracle babies. Wednesday Addams upon hearing this story turns toward the camera with a dead pan expression, tonelessly replies, "My parents had sex." This movie scene was greeted with a roar of laughter including my own. In retrospect I now see that Wednesday had the physical facts but I wonder if she had them in the context of a spiritual, emotional and cultural value system that religious community has to offer.

The world which birthed the *About Your Sexuality* program is indeed a different one than the new curriculum *Our Whole Lives* has been born into. Our world has been rocked by a number of developments both positive and negative since 1971. We have seen greater gender equality, an understanding of sexuality as a pleasurable experience and not as solely for procreation, a growing understanding of sexual abuse, growing acceptance of diverse family structures, and increasing acceptance of persons regardless of sexual orientation. We have also seen the advent of sexually transmitted diseases that cannot be cured, as well as sexually transmitted diseases which can kill. We have continued to see viewpoints and philosophies that separate mind and body, lack of affirmation of sexuality as a positive and core element of the human experience, and inequities in law, custom, and behavior based on gender, sexual identity, class, age, physical ability and race. We have a long way to go before we can say that our culture is affirming of sexuality and the many forms that it takes.

These and other changes have required a new curriculum to be developed. We certainly did not want to throw the baby out with the bath water. The *About Your Sexuality* program was dated but still incredibly vital. Also many in our denomination had history with and loyalty to the *About Your Sexuality* program; a new program would have very large shoes to fill. While it was clear medical concerns pushed the need for a new curriculum, they were not the only influence. We had also changed as a culture and as a denomination. We wanted more explicit emphasis on what the values inherent in our religious community had to say regarding the healthy development of sexuality. We also expanded our purview by entering into partnership with the United Church of Christ. Specifically this partnership has been with the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries. We have both jointly funded this project and have jointly staffed this project. After a lot of discussion and allocation of resources the *Our Whole Lives* program was born.

The philosophy statement which is the foundation of the program is as follows. "We come together as representatives of two denominations to create a vision for a positive and comprehensive lifespan sexuality education program. It is our religious heritages that compel and guide us to create a safe environment within which people can come to understand and respond to the challenges facing them as sexual beings. We are grounded as faith communities in a common and continuing promotion of justice for all people. We affirm the dignity of the

individual, importance of personal responsibility, and the essential interdependence of all people."

This philosophy statement speaks to one of my core beliefs as a religious educator. I believe that we must educate the entire community if we are to truly create an environment which allows all of us to develop a healthy sexual identity; it is not enough to educate any one group of people no matter how good the education was.

Which brings me to what I believe to be one of the most exciting aspects of the *Our Whole Lives* program. While the junior high school component remains the heart of the program, other age groups will be addressed. This program is an educational series. There are five different components in the series, for grades kindergarten through first, grades 4-6, junior high grades 7-9, senior high grades 10-12, and one for adults. This will give me something to say to those parents who over the years have said, "This program is great. I wish that I could take it." Now you will be able to do just that. I can only guess at how this commitment to lifespan sexuality education will affect our community. In my heart, my hope is that we will be on the cutting edge of effecting a change in our culture that would allow us to view our own and others' sexuality in a holistic way.

Naturally we understand that the home is the place that the most profound learning for everything takes place. We in the field of religious education have always known that parents are the most important religious educators. The *Our Whole Lives* program recognizes this fundamental truth by offering a Parents' Guide for the K-1 grade and 4-6 grade programs. This creates a bridge between the religious education program and the true religious educators, parents. The adult program will also offer assistance in this area by recognizing that adults are learners in older bodies. Parents as well as other members of the congregation can have their questions regarding sexuality answered with the same gentle frankness that the children/youth will experience. Our young people will truly be given the message in a concrete fashion that sexuality is a part of everyone's life and that learning is a life long process.

We are able to offer this program with the generous support of members and friends through our annual canvas. So I say thank you to each of you who have contributed to the well being of this community and our denomination. If you have ever wondered like George Bailey did if you have made a difference in the world, I can reassure you that you have. We have effected a positive influence on the lives of thousands of young people and their families with the *About Your Sexuality* program; who knows how far our influence will reach through the *Our Whole Lives* program. I would hazard to offer my optimistic guess at what the future might bring to us. I believe that lives will be saved, brokenness will be healed, shame and doubt will be removed, and the seeds of wholeness will be sown.