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## **Apostles of Abstinence**

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APOSTLES OF ABSTINENCE

A Dissertation Presented

by

KATHERINE JONES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2018

Sociology

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APOSTLES OF ABSTINENCE

A Dissertation Presented

By

KATHERINE JONES

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## DEDICATION

For Evan

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ABSTRACT

APOSTLES OF ABSTINENCE

MAY 2018

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Directed by: Professor Robert Zussman

My dissertation examines three organizations that promote premarital sexual abstinence.

These three organizations broadly mirror different strands within the New Right: an evangelical Christian abstinence ministry called Purity Ring Posse, Revolutionary Romance, an elite group of conservatives on an Ivy League campus, and Stand Up! a group at a Mormon university that seeks to “burst the bubble” and facilitate outreach between pro-family organizations and students. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and content analysis, my dissertation demonstrates how each group attempts to promote a unique version of abstinence that can be successfully mobilized in the public square. Purity Ring Posse articulates “abstinence as rebellion,” drawing on a performance of “coolness” to encourage young people to choose abstinence as a way of proving their own hipness. Revolutionary Romance articulates “academic abstinence,” focusing on research-based evidence and philosophical arguments that make abstinence seem like a healthy, objectively beneficial choice, distancing themselves from religious arguments and justifications. Stand Up! articulates “abstinence as a family value,” placing the promotion of abstinence as part of a larger strategy to promote a particular understanding of marriage, gender, the family, and sexuality. This version of abstinence

mixes scientific evidence with religious arguments. But each group faces tensions in articulating their version of abstinence to their different audiences. Although in different settings, with different audiences, they all operate in a similar political landscape, one in which the meaning of premarital sexual abstinence has largely been captured by the New Right. I find that there is variance within the abstinence movement, but also tremendous pressure to standardize from various conservative networking organizations. Abstinence groups, regardless of their particular context or environment, exist in a society in which abstinence has been highly politicized. Thus individualized understandings of abstinence created by each particular organization prove difficult to maintain once the group engages in any sort of outreach or engagement with the public.



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## INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when people in the U.S. hear the term abstinence? Many people might picture girls in white dresses kneeling before a cross before attending a “purity ball” with their fathers. Some might picture celebrities like the Jonas brothers or Selena Gomez who once displayed their purity rings as symbols of their commitment to remain virgins until marriage. Others might envision the pastor from the PBS documentary, *The Education of Shelby Knox* (2005), explaining the dangers of sex before marriage. While the term “abstinence” could be stretched to cover a wide range of abstaining behaviors including alcohol, drugs, or food, passionate, public debates around abstinence-only sex education have meant that abstinence means, first, abstinence from premarital sex.

But while premarital sexual abstinence has a strong presence in popular culture and media representations, scholarly attention to the pro-abstinence movement has been largely focused on discrediting abstinence-only as a viable option for sex education, as an effective preventive against either unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease. Few scholars have studied the pro-abstinence movement as a social movement. And fewer still have examined the variety of organizations that make up this movement, or spoken with the young people who are both practitioners and advocates of premarital abstinence.

I was in my early years of graduate school after Bearman and Brückner's piece “Promising the Future: Virginitiy Pledges and First Intercourse” was published in 2001. This was the first time I had ever heard of virginitiy pledges, and I was fascinated.

Growing up I had plenty of Christian friends who had chosen to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. But none of them had felt the need to proclaim their choice in any public way. My sociological interest was piqued and I began to study the burgeoning movement. But my investigations did not uncover a single coherent movement. Instead, I found Ivy League students forming abstinence clubs on their college campuses alongside students at religious schools trying to invigorate their apathetic peers and young evangelicals looking for ways to make abstinence “cool” enough for their teenage audience.

Abstinence has been criticized as a largely adult driven movement directed at young adults. In contrast, I was particularly interested in studying groups where young people themselves took an active role. I wanted to understand why these young people joined organizations devoted to abstinence, what abstinence meant to them personally, and how abstinence was articulated in their particular organization. As I got further into my research I expanded my focus, examining how these different groups navigated a political landscape in which premarital abstinence had become fused with the New Right and conservative advocacy.

In the end, I focused on three very different organizations, each of which promotes premarital sexual abstinence. These three organizations broadly mirror different strands within the New Right: an evangelical Christian abstinence ministry called Purity Ring Posse, Revolutionary Romance, an elite group of conservatives on an Ivy League campus, and Stand Up! a group at a Mormon university that seeks to encourage their fellow students to outreach and activism centered on defending “the family.” Drawing on

participant observation, interviews, and content analysis I argue that each group attempts to promote a unique version of abstinence that can be successfully mobilized in the public square. Purity Ring Posse articulates “abstinence as rebellion” drawing on a performance of “coolness” to encourage young people to choose abstinence as a way of proving their own hipness. Revolutionary Romance articulates “academic abstinence” focusing on research-based evidence and philosophical arguments that make abstinence seem like a healthy, objectively beneficial choice, distancing themselves from religious arguments and justifications. Stand Up! articulates “abstinence as a family value,” placing the promotion of abstinence as part of a larger strategy to promote a particular understanding of marriage, gender, the family, and sexuality, mixing scientific evidence with religious arguments. Each group encounters tensions in articulating their version of abstinence with other organizations that influence and constrain them, even if they are not the group's target audience. Though they are in different settings, with different audiences, they all are operating in a similar political landscape, one in which the meaning of premarital sexual abstinence has largely been captured by the New Right.

My research with these three organizations was based on different combinations of interviews, content analysis, and participant observation. Ethnography provides a particularly rich source of data as it allows the researcher to examine both the public and private discourses mobilized by members. Not only could I review documents, websites, and articles written by and about these groups, I could also observe the interactions and discussions between members in more private settings such as meetings and social gatherings. In organizations that spent much of their official and social time devoted to

discussing strategy, beliefs, and controversies, much would be lost if I focused solely on public or private discourse. By engaging in a combination of participant observation, interviews, and content analysis, this study is better able to trace the processes through which these groups constructed their understanding of abstinence.

As each group attempts to mobilize their version of abstinence, they confront fundamental contradictions in their message, as they attempt to articulate versions of abstinence relevant to their targeted audiences while still remaining true to their conservative constituencies. Using abstinence as a case study, I examine how these contradictions and limitations can help us understand larger tensions within the contemporary conservative movement, structural barriers to social change, and generational splits within the “culture wars.” Feminism, gay rights and counter culture movements have rendered some conservative discourses problematic in the public square, at the same time conservative counter-movements have politicized issues of marriage, gender, and the family. Because abstinence cannot be separated from larger discussions about sexuality, gender, and marriage, groups that promote abstinence must all negotiate the landscape of discourse created by these progressive and conservative social movements.

### Abstinence and Social Science

Social science literature that deals with premarital sexual abstinence focuses primarily on the part of the movement devoted to sex education, especially sex education programs used in US public schools. While they provide some details about the

movement, they are less focused on studying the promotion of abstinence with a social movement lens. Rather, they seek to understand and critique the ideologies and tactics used by abstinence programs to promote their beliefs.

Existing literature on abstinence-only sex education, and the related movements in abstinence promotion, often highlights the potentially damaging aspects of current programs (Carpenter 2005, di Mauro and Joffe 2007, Doan 2008, Fahs 2010, Fields 2008, Herzog 2008). The shift from comprehensive sex education to “abstinence-only-until-marriage” approach funded by the 1996 Welfare Reform Act has received particular scrutiny by social scientists (Carpenter 2005, di Mauro and Joffe 2007, Doan 2008, Fields 2008, Lindberg, Santelli and Singh 2006). Researchers have examined the failure of these programs to draw on scientific research, their tendency to focus on fear-based tactics to encourage abstinence and the inability of those tactics to prevent sexual behavior before marriage (Carpenter 2005, di Mauro and Joffe 2007, Doan 2008, Fields 2008, Lindberg, Santelli and Singh 2006). Abstinence curricula have also been criticized for normalizing heterosexuality and traditional gender roles (di Mauro and Joffe 2007). In addition, these lessons also serve to reinforce racialized understandings of teenage sexuality, painting white (particularly female) teenagers as innocent while portraying black teens as “at risk” or inevitably sexual (Fields 2008).

More recent work by Santelli and Santelli et. al. has expanded the arguments about abstinence-only sex-education (AOE) beyond questions of their efficacy (2006, 2017). Santelli argues that science has been misused in support of federal abstinence-only education policies. Public support for AOE has potentially disastrous consequences when

it comes to the potential damage to public health programs resulting from the withdrawal of funding for organizations that continue to promote comprehensive sex education and safer sex practices such as condom use (Santelli 2006). Furthermore, Santelli and his colleagues argue that AOE curricula withholds information, provides medically inaccurate and stigmatizing information that threatens teenagers fundamental human rights to health, information, and life (Santelli 2006, Santelli et al., 2017).

These perspectives, however, are still fundamentally rooted in debates around sex education. They focus primarily on federally funded programs and while they point out glaring errors in promoting AOE, their focus is not on understanding abstinence promotion as a social movement. Such critiques are important and timely, but they do not shed light on the larger context in which these abstinence organizations function.

Two recent books have examined similar organizations to the ones I profile in my research. Gardner examines programs such as Pure Freedom, Silver Ring Thing, True Love Waits, and Abstinence Clearinghouse. Gardner's focus is on rhetoric, and she compares the rhetoric of US abstinence groups with the rhetoric on abstinence found in Africa. Gardner feels that US abstinence organizations fail their teenage audience by making the rewards of abstinence too much about sexual happiness and fulfillment, without providing realistic information about the complexities of sex. She also finds potential issues with the evangelical reliance on individualism, while hoping to foster ties to the evangelical community.

Moslener's book published in 2015, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence*, helps explain some of Gardner's findings as Moslener traces the roots of the



modern purity movement back beyond the sexual revolution to an older individualist turn in evangelical spirituality. Locating this turn in the 1940's, Moslener argues that modern purity culture adopts an evangelicalism that is a religion of fear and accomodation. Silver Ring Thing, she argues, exemplifies all the components of the evangelical purity culture in their use of popular culture, their reliance on both fear-based and apocalyptic narratives combined with celebrations of the great sex that happens within marriage (2015).

Both studies examine the rhetoric used by these organizations and they tend to conceptualize these groups as fairly static. As my research demonstrates, however, social movements are dynamic. They can change rather quickly or make slower, incremental changes as they adapt to changing political situations, changes in their audience, or even in response to critiques from their opposition. The focus on rhetoric versus process and only on leaders, versus the youth of the movement as my research does, means that their research still leaves an incomplete picture of the youth activists of the purity movement.

And while contemporary versions of abstinence are closely linked to the Religious Right, the concept of abstinence - the practice of abstaining from some or all forms of sexual behavior - is not inevitably a conservative practice. Historical accounts of religious celibates often speak of the empowering potential of abstinence. Religious groups like the Shakers used abstinence as part of their utopian strategy. The gay and lesbian community proposed abstinence from intercourse as a safer sex strategy, advocating alternate ways of expressing sexual desires that were less likely to transmit HIV/AIDs. Past versions of abstinence have been part of progressive social change

efforts rather than as embodiments of a conservative value system.

The contemporary form of abstinence-until-marriage, however, often constitutes part of a larger conservative vision that centers on the defense of “traditional” gender roles, family and sexual expression. Often criticized for its poorly disguised religious underpinnings, abstinence-until-marriage is viewed by some scholars as a cornerstone of the Religious Right, as it allows conservative Evangelicals to indoctrinate young people with the values of premarital abstinence, heterosexual marriage, and sharply differentiated gender roles within nuclear families. But while previous scholarship takes the connection between the promotion of abstinence-until-marriage and other conservative positions as a given, my research illustrates that this connection is often the result of a process of negotiation that can tell us a great deal about the relationship between politics, social movements, and sexuality.

Even within the contemporary abstinence-until-marriage movement, organizations have different relationships to the New Right, to other conservative positions, and to particular arguments promoting abstinence. Different abstinence organizations negotiate this relationship based on their environment, members and audience(s), sometimes exploiting and emphasizing ties to conservative positions and organizations, sometimes distancing themselves from them. Previous studies of the abstinence-until-marriage movements have often overlooked this diversity, focusing instead on the common conservative underpinnings of the movement. This diversity is important to examine, not just because it gives a more complete picture of the abstinence-until-marriage movement, but also because it can help us untangle the connections among

sexuality, religion, and politics, and provide us valuable insights into social movements more generally.

While past scholars have often highlighted the dangers of abstinence-until-marriage policies for young people and their burgeoning sexuality, what also emerges from their research is an image of a movement that is both conservative and horribly out of touch. On the whole, these movements tend to be white and middle-class, even when targeting “at risk” teens who may come from different social locations. The dominant portrayal of the movement as white, conservative evangelical, and adult-driven also serves to demonstrate that the movement has a limited relevance for most American teenagers.

The sexism, homophobia and racism apparent—according to the critics—in abstinence-until-marriage organizations, and the curriculum they produce, point to how out of touch these adults are with the teenagers they hope to convert to abstinence. These adults rely on scare tactics and “cheesy” exercises, like sticking together pieces of tape to illustrate sexual intercourse, to convince young people of the dangers of sex before marriage. This vision of abstinence-until-marriage denies adulthood to its teenage audience, attempting to define teenage sexuality as always dangerous and irresponsible. This risk-avoidance strategy aligns youth culture in opposition to the adult-centered concept of abstinence-until-marriage. It calls on young people to align themselves with middle-class, white and adult values, and to reject a youth culture that promotes sexuality, instant gratification and living in the moment with no thought to future consequences (Wilkins 2008).

Organizations that promote abstinence recognize the problems with abstinence-until-marriage promotion highlighted by social scientists. But these organizations work much harder than most social scientists realize to make abstinence a position that is both relevant and even appealing to young people. In order to convince people that abstinence-until-marriage is a valid and desirable choice, organizations often work to distance themselves from the negative portrayals of abstinence-until-marriage that exist in the press and in scholarship. Some organizations attempt to portray abstinence as a rebellion against the dominant culture, allowing young people to see themselves as transgressive individualists who - rather than supporting an outdated, prudish position towards sexuality - are actually working to enact positive social change. In different ways, dependent on their distinctive audiences and settings, each of the three groups I study attempt to gain relevance and legitimacy for premarital sexual abstinence as a lifestyle choice.

### The Abstinence-Until-Marriage Movement

The abstinence-until-marriage movement is a fairly recent phenomenon, growing out of the welfare reforms of the 90's. At the same time, however, the roots of the movement can be traced further back to debates about gender, sexuality, marriage, and the family which came to the forefront during the 1960's. While I examine abstinence-until-marriage as a social movement, it is one that has extremely close ties to other pro-family movements, including movements against abortion, gay marriage, and changes to “traditional” gender roles. Tracing the history of the abstinence movement is important because it exposes the ties between these movements that continue to shape the way that

abstinence is currently framed and understood. Growing out of larger moral debates, abstinence-until-marriage is always about more than just the delay of sexual intercourse until marriage.

Petchesky argues that sexual and reproductive politics in the 1980s were aimed at silencing and re-privatizing the outward signs of sexuality, (i.e. abortion) more than actual practice (1990). The growth of the abstinence-until-marriage movement signals an expansion in focus to teenage sexual practices themselves. Several authors examine the growing preoccupation with teenage sexuality and attribute it less to actual changes in behavior than to a perception of change. Some authors point to the increasing visibility of teen sexuality in the form of teen pregnancy and the publication of studies focusing on teenage sexual behavior (Nathanson 1991). Others suggest that growing concern can also be attributed to the changes in the sexual behavior of white, middle class girls in particular (Petchesky 1990).

While both the Right and the Left expressed concern over this perceived increase in teen sex, they approached it in distinct ways. Liberals felt that “teens shouldn’t have babies” and focused their efforts on stopping the negative effects of teen sexual activity. Conservatives felt that “teens shouldn’t have sex” and focused on stopping teen sexual activity all together (Joffe 1986, Petchesky 1990). Conservatives further believed that teenage sexual activity was a deliberate choice and that teenagers could exercise self-control, if taught (Joffe 1986, Nathanson 1991). These beliefs shaped their approach to sex education through the promotion of abstinence-only-until-marriage.

In the 1960s as part of the pro-family platform, organizations such as the John

Birch Society, Mothers Organized for Moral Stability and Parents Opposed to Sex and Sensitivity Education had opposed efforts to teach sex education in public schools (di Mauro and Joffe 2007, Irvine 2002). AIDS caused a change in the pro-family approach to sex education. With the advent of HIV/AIDS it became difficult to find support for the prevention of sex education. The pro-family movement thus shifted their tactics from debating *whether* to teach sex education to *how* to teach sex education (Irvine 2002).

In 1981, Jeremiah Denton, a Catholic politician who had run on a “pro-family” platform, spoke “chastity,” a term with religious undertones, took the form of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) which he helped pass in 1981. The AFLA earmarked federal funding for prevention, care and research related to adolescent pregnancy which focused on “chastity,” convincing teenagers to abstain from sexual activity, rather than contraceptives, as the solution (Irvine 2002). This mobilization contributed to the funding of “chastity centers” through the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy (Joffe 1986). The AFLA emerged in a climate of anti-abortion sentiment that led to strict guidelines on the use of AFLA funding. AFLA recipients were required to encourage adoption and were restricted in their ability to speak about abortion (Herzog 2008, Irvine 2002). The AFLA funding furthered the political collaboration among Evangelicals and Catholics and laid the foundation for the abstinence-until-marriage movement (Irvine 2002).

The abstinence-until-marriage movement emerged through the Welfare Reform Act of 1996. Efforts of the Christian Right had successfully redefined adolescent pregnancy as a “black problem” and an issue of welfare prevention. Thus abstinence policy could be linked to welfare and poverty reduction (Doan and Williams 2008, Fields

2008, Herzog 2008, Irvine 2002, Nathanson 1991). Organizations like the Heritage Foundation, the Christian Coalition, Concerned Women of America, and the Eagle Forum backed Title V, Section 510(b) of the Social Security Act established a new federal funding stream to provide grants to states for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, and set strict guidelines for “abstinence-only-until-marriage” education. To receive federal money, programs were required to teach that marriage was the appropriate standard for sexual activity and to encourage students to remain sexually abstinent until marriage. In addition, the guidelines stated that programs should teach that “sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” (US Dept. of Health and Human Services 2002). Abstinence-until-marriage programs go beyond encouraging adolescents to refrain from sexual activity while they are teenagers and instead use (heterosexual) marriage as the standard for sexual activity.

Doan and Williams identify Title V as the result of stealth morality policy on the part of the “Ch candidates” who are backed by Christian Right organizations but do not publicize their ties or run using an explicitly Christian or conservative platform (Doan and Williams 2008). Abstinence-until-marriage policy represents an effort to reduce welfare while simultaneously reasserting control over adolescent sexuality and is an example of the coalitional politics practiced by the New Right.

One result of Title V was the development of organizations that play an important role in the abstinence-until-marriage movement such as crisis pregnancy centers, which in addition to providing services for young mothers also counsel women against abortion,

and abstinence-only sex education providers (Herzog 2008, Irvine 2002). These funds also helped form a commercially-oriented abstinence-until-marriage industry that includes groups that produce abstinence themed jewelry, t-shirts and stickers as well as a wealth of literature devoted to abstinence-until-marriage (Herzog 2008, Irvine 2002). Funds for Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) further expanded the scope of these organizations and in 2006 CBAEs were encouraged to begin teaching the benefits of marriage in addition to abstinence (Fields 2008).

Fields calls abstinence “the cornerstone of the larger conservative effort” (2008). Abstinence-only sex education provides programs that are congruent with an Evangelical belief system including sex/gender values and the promotion of heterosexual marriage (Irvine 2002). Abstinence-only programs also provide a captive audience for this belief system. Evangelicals realize the potential of abstinence-until-marriage programs to help them gain further ground, both politically and culturally (Herzog 2008).

The place of abstinence promotion among the Christian and New Right helps explain why so many conservative organizations are invested in supporting abstinence. The abstinence-until-marriage movement can be best understood as functioning within a wider social movement community. Different abstinence organizations may have closer ties to the New Right or the Christian Right, the anti-abortion movement or the pro-family movement, but there are also multiple points of connection between these movements which are important to recognize when understanding how different abstinence organizations go about crafting the meanings, messages, and tactics they will use to promote abstinence.



### The New Right: A Social Movement Community

The concept of a social movement community is a useful way to conceptualize the overlap between the New Right, Christian Right, pro-family, anti-abortion and abstinence-until-marriage movements while still recognizing them as distinct. Meyer and Whittier argue that a range of movements can compose a social movement community, using the example of “progressive” movements, including feminism, the peace movement, and the civil rights movement (1997). These movements share a common goal of social change. They produce art, texts, and events that are publicly available to members of other movements. They create cultural organizations like bookstores and radio stations that serve the needs of multiple movements. They hold conferences that bring together activists from the different movements, allowing them to share strategy, resources, and ideology. This leads to a cultural overlap of norms and discourses between movements as well as more structural overlap in terms of personnel, coalitions, and material resources (Meyer and Whittier 1997). The connections between these movements, often facilitated by informal friendship networks as much as by formal organizations, provided alternative symbolic systems as well as material resources for political struggle to its members (Taylor and Whittier 1997).

Like the “progressive” social movement community, the overlapping movements I’ve been discussing share both symbolic and structural material. Formal organizations clearly connect these movements but there are also texts, events, and products that may be shared throughout the social movement community. Cultural organizations like churches, Christian radio stations and bookstores, and conservative news programs or

magazines serve the needs of multiple movements and lead to overlap in both structural factors and more symbolic forms of discourse and ideology. The concept of a social movement community is useful in this case because it recognizes the potential for disagreement among different segments of the community. The idea of a social movement community is also useful because it draws attention to the ways that informal networks and connections are equally important to formal ones. Thinking of these related movements as a social movement community also explains the dissemination of strategies between the different movements, especially in the form of legitimization and offensive tactics. Conservative think tanks play an important role in connecting this social movement community through their networking efforts, and the production of material and ideological resources.

#### Abstinence Movement Streams

Beginning in 1996, the promotion of abstinence-until-marriage received significant support from the federal government (Carpenter 2005, Doan 2008, Irvine 2002). Organizations that promoted abstinence through sex-education curriculum were joined by countless organizations that promoted abstinence in numerous ways (Fahs 2010, Herzog 2008, Irvine 2002). Yet much of the existing literature fails to adequately distinguish the variations that can be found within this movement. Social science research tends to focus primarily on education or formal abstinence pledges. But while these groups play an important role in public debates about sex education, there are many other organizations that further the promotion of abstinence outside these channels. And for some groups abstinence is only one part of a larger conservative agenda. As my cases

demonstrate, abstinence organizations can look very different in terms of their audience(s), environments, personnel, mission, and tactics.

Ziad Munson's exploration of the pro-life movement demonstrates that rather than being one unified movement, pro-life activism is characterized by distinct social movement streams (2008). These streams represent collections of organizations and activists that share an understanding of the best means to achieve the goal of ending abortion. Streams constitute particular forms of action, such as lobbying politicians or staffing crisis pregnancy centers, which influence each stream's particular understandings of the issue. While the pro-life movement is united in its ultimate goal to end abortion, movement streams differ in their ideas about the best tactics, arguments, and understandings of the issue (Munson 2008).

While there is definitely coordination among different organizations within the abstinence movement, there are also important divisions among the different groups. Chastity clubs at high schools have different audiences, goals and tactics from abstinence organizations at colleges (Fahs 2010). Chastity clubs at Ivy League schools, in particular, focus on academic arguments, while more evangelically focused groups make emotional appeals to their teenage audiences (Fahs 2010, Gardner 2011). Although groups may see themselves engaged in a common battle, organizations like PRP position themselves as distinct from either sex-education curriculum or university-based groups. In fact, Christian groups like PRP had little contact with chastity clubs or sex education organizations, instead their networks were based on evangelical Christian organizations such as churches, youth groups, and crisis pregnancy centers.

I divide the abstinence-until-marriage movement into at least five different streams, the Education stream, which I will not be focusing on as it has received the most attention from other scholars, the Pop-Culture Proselytizers, the Conservative Elites, Faith & Family, and the Networkers. My three cases fit into three of these streams and I will detail the ways that Networker organizations also play an important role in each of the three groups I studied. In the following paragraphs I detail the three streams that are the focus of my research and then discuss the particular organization I focus on in each stream.

#### The Pop-Culture Proselytizers—Articulating Abstinence as Rebellion

Pop-Culture proselytizers tend to be evangelical organizations that target teenagers with a message of abstinence. Organizations like True Love Waits, Pure Freedom, and Purity Ring Posse are all part of this stream. Using a combination of tours, small group materials, and merchandising these groups usually have recognizable logos and branding. They often encourage young people to wear a visible symbol of their commitment, such as a purity ring. While this stream is typically religious, it also articulates a version of abstinence that focuses on resisting mainstream (secular) pressures to be sexually active. Remaining abstinent until marriage is framed as a choice that sets young Christians apart from their non-religious peers and shows that they are strong enough to fight peer pressure (Gardner 2011).

Sometimes critiqued for “making chastity sexy” these groups must negotiate between making abstinence appear as a hip and cool choice while also articulating more spiritual reasons for practicing abstinence. In their attempts to reach a broad audience that

is both religious and secular the group often focuses on health to avoid coming off as “flaming evangelical Christians.” The discourses present in this stream focus on presenting virginity as a gift, emphasizing the health benefits of premarital abstinence, and promising young people that they will find sexual fulfillment in marriage. This group draws heavily on feminist discourses about bodily autonomy and choice, presenting abstinence as a decision that is based on agency and empowerment. For organizations in this stream “teenagers are constructed as autonomous, choice-making individuals who have the ability to control their bodies and wait for sex” (Gardner 2011).

#### The Conservative Elites--Articulating Academic Abstinence

Starting in 2006 a new stream of the abstinence-until-marriage movement began to form at elite, liberal universities. These groups, though few in number, received a lot of media attention. Formed by college students at these elite schools and targeting their peers, these groups sought to open a dialogue about abstinence on their campuses. These groups worked to craft arguments about abstinence-until-marriage that would be accepted in a liberal, academic environment.

Groups in the Conservative Elite stream draw heavily on social science, biological, and philosophical work to make their claims about premarital abstinence. By relying on “objective data” they hope to challenge perceptions that arguments promoting premarital abstinence are overly subjective, religious or limited in scope. Sometimes these groups will draw on Catholic philosophy, but their emphasis is always on arguments that are applicable to both a religious and non-religious audience.

Conservative Elites use speakers, blog postings, op-ed pieces, discussion groups and

informational pamphlets to outreach to fellow students.

Powerful conservative organizations like The Heritage Foundation provide this stream with financial and ideological resources in the form of speakers, data and talking points. The young people who make up this stream are the future of the conservative movement. They often participate in internships and conferences sponsored by conservative organizations or “networking” organizations that hope to mobilize the next generation through the topic of premarital abstinence.

#### Faith & Family--Articulating Abstinence as a Family Value

The Faith & Family stream is in many ways the most “traditional” stream of the abstinence-until-marriage movement, in that it resembles most closely the media and popular conception of what abstinence groups look like. Most groups in this stream do not focus specifically on abstinence, since they conceive of abstinence in a larger framework of family values or traditional values. The focus is rarely on premarital abstinence alone, but rather a wider range of topics, demonstrating how premarital abstinence relates to support for “traditional” marriage, gender roles, and opposition to abortion.

Unlike the Conservative Elites stream, which usually focuses on the public square, the Faith & Family stream divides their attention between outreach and using social science research to provide personal advice to young people about how to build strong families, successful “traditional” marriages and negotiate gender roles in the face of feminism. This stream often works to balance “academic” arguments that rely on social science, biology or psychology research with more specifically religious,

philosophical, or theological arguments that support both premarital abstinence and “family values.”

This stream does not reject religious arguments, but rather integrates these arguments with practical advice and “academic” evidence. This strand recognizes that individual young people need resources and support to build strong families, but that social policy also has an enormous impact on definitions of marriage, gender roles, and other “family” values issues. Religion is not something to be hidden, but is often one of the main factors driving the individuals involved in this stream. Nevertheless, they also recognize the need to articulate their messages beyond a religious audience and work to equip their members with arguments that can be persuasive outside a religious context.

### Three Streams—Three Organizations

Each of these three streams is represented by one of the cases I use in my dissertation. These different organizations demonstrate that abstinence does not have a fixed meaning. Each group articulates their own position and arguments based on the audience(s) they hope to persuade.

### Chapter I: Stand Up!

Stand Up! began as a student driven group on the campus of BYU, an LDS university. Growing out of activism around issues such as same-sex marriage, pornography and divorce, the members of the group wanted an organization that was more outreach focused than a pre-existing, discussion-focused group on family values. Inspired by the LDS “Proclamation on the Family” this group sought to support and defend family values and give their fellow students a forum to engage more actively with

these issues. Stand Up! organized a successful symposium to network students, conservative family scholars and members of the Provo community. But student organizers faced resistance from the University administration, who were wary of a student-run symposium that focused so heavily on the controversial issue of the definition of marriage.

A confluence of structural factors all led to the group's future attempts to organize another symposium being thwarted.: a tight control over student activities by the BYU administration, a fear of events that were organized with little to no faculty oversight, a limiting of connections between LDS members and other faith communities, and the fact that the conference focused on family values so soon after the controversial Prop 8 anti-gay marriage lobbying, In response, Stand Up! re-formed as an independent organization, Stand 4 Family.

The experiences of Stand Up! expose the challenges of creating a vibrant social movement community, even when most members and organizations share a common ideological stance. While many religious conservatives recognize the importance of outreach, particularly after the important role coalitions played in conservative victories like Prop 8, outreach exposed Stand Up!, along with BYU and the LDS church, to increased public scrutiny and potential criticism and controversy. Stand Up! ultimately fails the challenge of preserving their ties with the BYU administration while remaining true to their goals of outreach and activism.

In the spring of 2011, I traveled to Provo to interview members of Stand Up! I interviewed three members who had been active in organizing the Family Symposium in



the spring of 2010, along with five current members of the group. I was also able to interview two community members who had provided support for Stand Up! in organizing the symposium in 2010. In the fall of 2011 I returned to Provo to conduct participant observation at the new organization Stand 4 Family's Family Symposium.

Most members of Stand 4 Family had been members of Stand Up! and many had helped organize both the 2010 and 2011 symposiums. I arrived a few days before the symposium and assisted the organizing committees in preparations such as assembling gift bags, setting up project tables, handing out programs, as well as helping with tear down once the symposium was over. This gave me the ability to chat with student presenters and volunteers, talk to organizers, and ask about differences between the 2010 and 2011 symposiums, in addition to attending sessions and talks during the symposium, and seeing firsthand the effort needed to put together the symposium.

## Chapter II: Purity Ring Posse

PRP attempts to promote abstinence (and Christianity) to young people through their performance of “coolness.” The group tours the United States putting on live shows, with a mix of music, humorous skits, video, and personal testimony, geared towards middle-school and high-school aged teens. The group seeks to challenge dominant portrayals of abstinence as boring, narrow-minded or conformist. The “I don't give a phunk” attitude cultivated by the touring team members allows them to portray abstinence as something transgressive and rebellious. Their “cool” version of abstinence is based on resisting peer pressure and cultural norms.

The group signals their “coolness” through the physical appearance of the touring

team, the use of popular music and movies (as opposed to a strictly Christian cultural references), and their confident, fun-loving attitudes. They create a program that deliberately pushes the envelope for the adult members of the audience. To make their performance credible, the group must actually transgress at least some boundaries. The group challenges adult authority and many “traditional” ideas within the conservative Christian community. This includes encouraging racial diversity, challenging the sexual double standard, discussing taboo topics such as pornography or sexual desire, and respecting the voices of young people over those of preachers or professional speakers.

Yet Purity Ring Posse's transgressions are always carefully kept within acceptable boundaries. While they incorporate some transgressive-one might even argue progressive-elements into their live event, they still find it necessary to uphold certain ideologies and traditions. Such transgressions are limited by both ideological and structural factors. Working within a mostly white, conservative evangelical community limits the group's discourse, as well as their potential to create true cultural change. By attempting to please both an adolescent audience and the adults who book their shows and provide resources and support, PRP ends up being less transgressive on-stage than they are off-stage. And their individualized perspectives on race, gender and sexuality leave larger structural inequalities unchallenged. While the group succeeds at portraying a more “cool” version of abstinence, they also undermine the potential of this version to make the sweeping social change they are hoping to accomplish.

In total, I spent over 400 hours with Purity Ring Posse. In 2009, I stayed with two team members and attended orientation for the touring team. I also toured with the group

for 10 days, attending several live events, school presentations and participating in set-up and take down for the live shows. I conducted a follow-up visit in fall of 2011, touring with the group for an additional 8 days and attending a new version of their live event. In addition to participant observation, I also joined an email list to receive follow-up emails from the touring team. In addition, I followed the group's online presence on social media sites such as Facebook, through videos and photos posted on the group's website and through a blog written by members of the staff and touring team.

### Chapter III & IV: Revolutionary Romance

Based on an Ivy League campus RR initially attempted to articulate a version of abstinence that incorporated more progressive discourses of feminism, sexual health and promotion of diverse sexualities. The group struggled to make this version of abstinence palatable to their more liberal student body, though the controversy they generated did result in a large amount of publicity for the group.

This articulation of “progressive” abstinence was partly accomplished by silencing discussions of any other conservative issues including abortion, same-sex marriage or gender roles. For a time, the group was satisfied with this balance, though it continuously encountered pressures from conservative speakers and organizations to widen their official position. A new networking organization, University Chastity Network, tipped the balance for RR when they began organizing campus organizations into a stronger social movement community. RR was offered both structural and emotional connections through their alliance with UCN.

The opportunities for emotional, material, and ideological support led RR to shift their official position, adopting a wider platform that included official positions on issues such as marriage, gender and the family. Because they were never able to fully embrace a completely progressive position, the group was better able to fill a niche on campus, and maintain ties to their social movement community, by shifting to this more conservative position.

Though the group chose to remain “embattled” within their campus community and adhere to acceptable practices for their social movement community, they were ultimately limited by emotional, ideological, and structural constraints on both sides. The group shows how these relationships can shift over time as RR changed so significantly that they ultimately decided to take on a new name.

I began my research with Revolutionary Romance in February 2008. I conducted fieldwork with the group from the spring semester of 2008 through the spring semester of 2009 and then resumed fieldwork, after a year abroad, in the fall of 2010. In addition to conducting fieldwork at the group's events and meetings, I also reviewed coverage of the group in both campus and national news media. This includes op-ed pieces written by group members, op-ed pieces written about the group and news articles profiling the group or group members. I joined the open email list for the group and received regular updates about group activities. This list was also a forum where group members made announcements about other local events of interest to the group and posted links to topical articles. In 2009, I also began following the recently created RR blog, where group members would post their own writing or links to articles by other members of the

movement. I traveled with the group to the Family, Fidelity, and the University Conference in 2008 and 2010. Additionally, I conducted interviews with group leaders and members in 2008 and 2010.

### The Conservative Networkers

Faith & Family advocacy, Pop-Culture Proselytizing, and Conservative Elite philosophizing all represent distinct strands in the abstinence-until-marriage movement. Implicitly and explicitly, each offers a different image of abstinence and its meaning. But the three strands also operate within a social movement community and this community exerts a powerful pressure to abandon those differences to share a single image of abstinence with similar justifications. To understand these pressures, I suggest that there is a fourth stream, something closer to a *mainstream* that brings together those individual streams. This mainstream consists of a series of networking organizations that tie the abstinence-until-marriage movement to the broader New Right, Christian Right, and pro-family movements. While the Networker stream is not the only force that limits the variations in the meanings of abstinence, it is one of the primary forces impacting the three groups.

The Networker stream of the abstinence-until-marriage movement focuses on linking pro-abstinence organizations, religious groups, and conservative organizations and think tanks. Organizations like the Ruth Institute, the University Fidelity Network (UFN), conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, and pro-life organizations like Care Net are part of this stream. These organizations work to make connections between abstinence and larger conservative or religious issues. Networker organizations

help facilitate the connections between conservative organizations and the Conservative Elite stream, between religious organizations and the Pop-Culture Proselytizer stream, or between pro-family organizations and the Faith & Family stream.

Organizations in the Networker stream organize conferences, sends out newsletters, and often provide ideological, financial, and community resources for other groups. These organizations attempt to bring pro-abstinence organizations into a wider social movement community. They provide resources, but also place pressure on pro-abstinence groups to adopt particular stances on related issues, to frame abstinence in a more standardized way, and are largely responsible for limiting the variation in abstinence organizations.

In his work on think tanks Thomas Medvetz identifies think tanks as the conservative “counter-intelligentsia,” think tanks provide an alternate outlet to the university for conservative activist-experts (2012). So it is not surprising that think tanks like the Heritage Foundation would have an interest in the student activists from Revolutionary Romance and Stand Up! Both groups formed at universities and their members tend to be especially interested in both the public square and in mobilizing academic discourse in support of abstinence.

Medvetz identifies the work of think tanks as a game of balancing and assembling various forms of capital: academic, political, media, and economic. Think tanks disseminate their work in novel forms, responsible in part for the growth of policy research. Their ideas are supported by powerful clients in the political and economic fields. And they blur the distinctions between intellectuals and non-intellectuals (2012).

Much like the abstinence groups I study, think tanks seek “public credibility.” And similarly to the three groups I profile, the specific kind of credibility depends on the public to which the think tank is oriented. Think tanks succeed in part because they tailor their credibility to their audience. Thus think tanks provide an important model for examining various abstinence organizations and the claims they make. While abstinence organizations rely on think tanks to help provide them with credible information, this credibility rests in part on a good fit between the think tank's conservative audience and the overlap between this audience and the audience targeted by a specific abstinence organization.

A think tank such as the Heritage Foundation carries credibility with the conservative audiences served by Stand Up! and Purity Ring Posse, but is viewed with much more skepticism by the students at Old Ivy. Academic audiences take issue with the “research” done by think tanks, but within the public square these findings might carry equal credibility to a more rigorous, peer-reviewed piece of research.

For organizations in the Networker stream “academic” arguments—those based on research by conservative scholars or policy research conducted by conservative think tanks-- are perceived to be most effective in the public square while religious arguments are often seen as the moral grounding that can be successfully mobilized in more private interactions. Because these groups focus on networking a wide range of organizations, they often struggle to make their arguments relevant not only to non-religious individuals, but also to speak across different faith traditions using arguments that will be persuasive to evangelical protestants, LDS members, and Catholics. Thus the Networker

stream is a force of isomorphism that confers legitimacy on pro-abstinence groups that are willing to fit a more uniform model. This model varies based on the social movement community a group belongs to. The Pop-culture Proselytizers face pressures to adhere to certain religious, specifically Evangelical Christian, models and arguments. While the Conservative Elite face pressures from more secular conservative groups. Finally, Faith & Family groups face competing pressures between their specific religious community and the Networker organizations that hope to connect them into a wider religious, conservative network.



## CHAPTER I

### BURSTING THE BUBBLE: THE CHALLENGES OF PRO-FAMILY ACTIVISM AT BYU

In the fall of 2008 I had my first encounter with the larger “pro-family” movement and began to realize that studying abstinence in isolation was simply not possible. I had accompanied a few members of Revolutionary Romance, including Esther and the secretary of the group, Ann, to the first annual “Family, Fidelity and the University” conference. The conference was held on the campus of Kingsford University, another Ivy League school. Organized by the recently formed University Fidelity Network (UFN) the conference was co-sponsored by the Kingsford abstinence group, the G.E.M. Society<sup>1</sup>, and several other conservative groups. The conference brought together students from already formed campus groups that dealt with issues of abstinence as well as “pro-family” issues, along with students interested in forming campus groups of this type.

I was surprised to find the speakers at the conference focused more on pro-family issues than on abstinence. When abstinence was discussed, it was defined as a step towards protecting “traditional” marriage and the family, rather than a final goal. After my time with Revolutionary Romance, I was surprised by the taken-for-granted assumptions by most participants and speakers that everyone in attendance was pro-life, anti-gay marriage, and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Christian. For this group, unlike my

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<sup>1</sup> The G.E.M. Society was named after Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, a Catholic philosopher who wrote extensively about marriage, sexuality, and chastity.

experience with Revolutionary Romance, abstinence was part of a larger battle to “defend” the family, traditional values, and (Christian) morality.

None of the groups I studied are able to completely divorce themselves from the larger political battles surrounding abstinence, or the other pro-family issues of traditional gender roles, the definition of marriage, or legal abortion. While groups like Revolutionary Romance would struggle to preserve their independence, other organizations were founded with much more comprehensive platforms that viewed abstinence as part of a larger conservative worldview. Yet, like the other groups that I studied, the more traditionally “pro-family” organization Stand Up! found that their association with the larger social movement community led to both opportunities and limitations.

Sitting with Esther at dinner, I was surprised to hear that the young man sitting next to us was from Brigham Young University. “You have an abstinence group there?” Esther asked, sounding as surprised as I was. “Oh yeah,” the young man joked, “we have big problem with the hook-up culture at BYU.” To make sure we were in on the joke he went on to explain that BYU actually makes all students sign an abstinence pledge when they are admitted. Breaking the pledge is grounds for expulsion. “So then why does BYU need an abstinence group?” I asked. The young man then went on to give me my first explanation of the “BYU Bubble.” At BYU almost everyone shares the same beliefs. They all agree that abstinence until marriage, strong families, and religion are good things. But once students leave the “BYU Bubble” they suddenly have to explain their beliefs to people who aren't familiar with LDS theology, or are even hostile towards their

beliefs. Stand Up! He explained, was founded to help students explain their beliefs to other people, both one-on-one and in the public square.

But what really made me want to learn more about Stand Up! was an encounter I had at a later UFN conference. Two members of Stand Up! gave a presentation on a family symposium they'd hosted at BYU the year before. The conference had been an enormous undertaking: it was attended by hundreds of students, featured art projects, academic presentations, guest speakers, and a huge team of volunteers. By all accounts the symposium had been a success. So I was surprised to overhear one of the BYU students talking about the negative reaction the group was getting from the BYU administration as they attempted to plan another conference. "They've gone so far as to send spies to our meetings" the student reported to the small crowd gathered during a coffee break.

If I had been shocked to find the BYU had a campus abstinence group, I was even more shocked to find that this group was not supported by the university administration. I had spoken with several members of abstinence groups at Catholic schools and they had reported a completely different experience. At Catholic schools abstinence groups garnered widespread support, had large budgets, free publicity, and the encouragement of faculty and administrators. Why were the students at BYU having such a different experience?

In many ways, Stand Up! is the most standard abstinence organization of the three groups I study, in that the group primarily focuses on a much wider range of issues besides abstinence. Primarily a pro-family organization, Stand Up! views abstinence as

only one method of defending the family. Premarital sexuality, pornography, divorce, abortion, and same-sex marriage are all current trends that threaten the family. The position endorsed by Stand Up! is shared by the LDS church and the BYU administration. The challenge presented by Stand Up! is their desire to burst the “BYU bubble.” Stand Up! members are not content with academic discussions that take place on campus with only a small group of interested students. Formed with a more activist orientation Stand Up! hopes to make connections to other individuals and organizations working to defend “the family.” They also want to engage their peers in actively working to defend the family, rather than relying on the “bubble” to protect them from recent trends working to undermine strong marriages and healthy families. It is their goals of outreach and student activism that provoke the less than supportive reaction from the administration.

While BYU would seem like the ideal place to support a pro-family student group, the anxiety around politics, especially after the backlash around Proposition 8 (a statewide ballot proposition in California to make same-sex marriage illegal), makes BYU much less supportive. The administration is nervous about activism around these topics, particularly same-sex marriage. BYU's anxieties are that student-lead dialogue could brand the university as intolerant, but they are also nervous that in their commitment to dialogue around these issues Stand Up! will open up the potential for critical students to voice their views in a way that would be equally disastrous for public relations.

The case of Stand Up! also demonstrates the difficulty in disentangling abstinence

from a wider pro-family platform. Though I was initially introduced to Stand Up! as an abstinence group, and it was the reason I was interested in including it in my research, it quickly became clear that abstinence was not the main focus of the group. As I would find throughout my research, abstinence politics are embedded in larger debates around sexuality, marriage, and gender. While many students involved in Stand Up! were concerned with how abstinence at BYU was being undermined by pornography and the NCMO, (non-committed making out), they saw abstinence as part of a larger agenda to defend “the family.”

The students who formed Stand Up! already had ties to the wider pro-family social movement community. After the activism around Proposition 8 they understood the value in coalitions across lines of faith, engaging in networking with Catholics and Evangelical protestants. And pro-family organizations were excited to work with such engaged, organized, and enthusiastic students. Yet while BYU and the LDS church shared many of the beliefs and values of the pro-family movement, they preferred to maintain the “bubble” especially when it came to controversial issues such as same-sex marriage.

### Provo

Utah looks like a movie set, I think as I touch down at the Salt Lake City airport. As I drive my rental car from Salt Lake to Provo, I marvel at the mountains and beautiful natural landscape. Heading into the “BYU Bubble” I am not sure what to expect. In most ways Provo seems like a typical college town, though I do notice there are more Jamba Juice's than coffee shops.

Similarly, BYU's campus looks at first like any other large university. The grounds are amazingly well kept, due to the fact that they hire a huge student workforce to do the landscaping. Rather than meeting the students I am interviewing for coffee, I meet them at a shop in the food court that serves hot chocolate and pastries. The biggest difference I notice while wandering around campus is the number of children. At my University I can go days without seeing a child or anyone younger than 18. My first couple hours at BYU I see several families with young children wandering the grounds or having picnics, and students with strollers or babies strapped to their fronts going in and out of the student union.

As I drive around the area I notice the abundance of LDS temples and church meetinghouses. Provo and BYU both exist in a space where people are assumed to be LDS. Many people I speak with or interview are surprised to find out that I am not Mormon.

As several of my research subjects explain to me, the “BYU Bubble” is a big part of BYU's appeal to many students. Several people share stories of growing up as the only LDS family, or one of the few LDS families, in their hometowns. Discussions of their religion, their values, and their lifestyle were often tedious and at times they were called not only to explain, but also to defend, their choices to peers, teachers, even doctors. One woman shares a story of trying to convince her hometown physician that she doesn't need a pap smear or birth control because she is not sexually active. She explains how frustrating it was to not only have to explain her belief in premarital abstinence, but also to be viewed skeptically by the doctor who assumed that since she was going to college

she needed to be protected from all the hook-ups and casual sex she was going to have. This woman explains how refreshing it was to come to BYU and interact with a doctor who was LDS and not only understood, but also supported, her decision not to be sexually active before marriage.

### Brigham Young University

Brigham Young University was founded by the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), and continues to be owned and operated by the LDS church. According to the university website, "a significant portion" of the cost of operating the university is subsidized by the church's tithing funds. Ninety-nine percent of the university's 30,000 students are members of the LDS church. A high percentage of the faculty are also LDS, though I have not been able to find any official statistics about how many.

The aims of a BYU education are both spiritual and intellectual. Students describe the school as intellectually rigorous. But the school is also deeply rooted in religious values. All BYU students are required to provide an endorsement from an ecclesiastic leader with their application for admittance. LDS students are further required to actively practice their faith while on campus. And all students who are admitted must adhere to the university's Honor Code:

Students must abstain from the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances and from the intentional misuse or abuse of any substance. Sexual misconduct; obscene or indecent conduct or expressions; disorderly or disruptive conduct; participation in gambling activities; involvement with pornographic, erotic, indecent, or offensive material; and any other conduct or action inconsistent with the principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Honor Code is not permitted.

Violating the honor code can result in disciplinary action, including removal from the university.

Because it has such close ties to the Church, BYU is particularly cautious about how it is perceived by the public. Student groups must go through a fairly stringent process to be approved. No groups with affiliations outside the university are allowed on campus. Speakers from outside the university must also go through a strict approval process when being invited by a student group. As the “ambassador” for the LDS faith, BYU seeks to avoid controversy, especially in regards to student activities.

#### BYUSA and Student Clubs

The BYU Student Service Association oversees many BYU student clubs and activities. Stand Up! decided to register with BYUSA as a club rather than an academic society, which had consequences for how they were treated by the administration. BYU maintains their “bubble” not only through the Honor Code, but also through policies that keep tight control of student-lead activities and limit student organizations interactions with groups and individuals outside the university.

BYUSA Club Policies state that when hosting an activity beyond a club meeting, extra steps are required to comply with University policy. To host an event, that is anything that might include the public or non-club members or involves an activity different from what is listed in the club's charter, students must submit a "Pre-Event Planning Form." For regular events this form needs to be submitted two weeks in



advance of the event, or four weeks in advance if the group wants to invite a guest speaker. A guest speaker according to BYUSA policy is anyone who is not a club member or the club advisor. Once the form is submitted online it must be additionally approved by the group's advisor before it can be processed by the BYUSA clubs office for final approval. Additionally, some events may need to be evaluated by the Risk Management Department:

For events that are judged by the Clubs Office to have potential risk--including physical, mental, or potential damage to the image and mission of BYU--the Risk Management Department will assess your "Pre-Event Planning Form." If necessary, they will prepare a waiver for all participants to sign to relieve the club of liability.

The risk to BYU's image and mission is the core of the administration's hesitance to hold the symposium.

BYU keeps strict control over student groups, requiring advance approval for all advertising done by a club, DJ's or bands used during club events, and movies shown during club events. In addition BYUSA club policies state that "BYUSA clubs are NOT permitted to travel off-campus." BYUSA Clubs are also not allowed to engage in any level of competition with other colleges, Universities or sporting entities. BYU states that this policy is necessary in order to protect the University's Title IX compliancy with athletics and extramural activities. BYU protects their "bubble" by limiting club contact with outside organizations as well:

BYUSA clubs are not allowed to be sponsored by any organization outside of BYU. This includes non-profit organizations, businesses or local companies, or associations, etc. Additionally, clubs are not allowed to receive ANY donations from outside organizations.

Those eligible for membership in a BYUSA clubs are: 1) Currently enrolled BYU

students and their spouses. 2) Current BYU faculty, staff, and their spouses. All BYUSA club members must comply with the BYU Honor Code, including all dress and grooming standards.

BYU keeps such a strict control over student activities because of their legal liability vis a vis student clubs and organizations. As outlined in their Student Organization Policy document:

In all cases, although related funds belong to the subject club or association and are not the property of BYU, recognition of each organization creates an agency relationship with the university. This can create a legal liability for the university. Therefore, the university must ensure that (1) funds are properly managed, (2) organizational objectives and activities are consistent with BYU standards, (3) there are no undue risks to BYU students, faculty, and staff, and (4) activities of each organization are otherwise compliant with BYU policy.

This policy does not apply to all organizations, most important for Stand Up!, the Law Society falls outside of the Student Organization Policy. The Student Organization Policy states clearly that members need not only to follow the Honor Code, but also to “understand that the club represents Brigham Young University.”

University tax exempt status was also an important consideration:

Clubs and associations using agency accounts are not eligible to participate in the university's tax exemption. Those who desire sales tax exemption status must apply to the State of Utah to obtain a sales tax exemption number.

If students wanted to burst the “BYU Bubble” so they could reach out beyond the campus, the administration feared that a burst bubble might let the secular world in.

#### The LDS Church and the Family

The LDS church promotes “traditional” family values for its members. The

church emphasizes the role of the husband as the head of the family and encourages LDS mothers to remain at home with their children. The church doctrine of the “eternal family”: the idea that families are reunited after death and spend eternity together, further illustrates the emphasis on family within the religion.

The LDS church encourages all families to hold “Family Home Evenings,” a designated night each week for family members to share a meal and then spend the evening doing an activity together:

Every Latter Day Saints family has been asked by the Church leadership to once a week have a special night, where the whole family's at home. They do a lesson, they do activities together, and they have treats if they want to, whatever it is. Just to help strengthen the family and to give families a time during really hectic and busy weeks where they can be together, so you don't have extra-curricular things going on.  
(Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

Additionally, President Gordon B. Hinckley, a leader of the LDS faith issued “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” in 1995. Discussed by multiple interviewees, and handed to me in pamphlet form, this “Proclamation on the Family” was a document that not only laid out the church's view on family and gender roles, it also includes a call to all LDS members to “promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.”

Several of the members of Stand Up! cited the Proclamation when discussing why they had decided to get involved in the organization.

Because the Proclamation for Mormons is a sacred document, and like scripture, there's a call at the end that says, "we urge all responsible citizens and people of governments – responsible citizens and people everywhere are to promote those measures that to strengthen and defend family as the fundamental unit of society." Strengthen and sustain family. And so that was a call for our prophets and apostles to be involved and to battle this

overwhelming tide of threats to the family. And so ultimately, that moral and religious conviction is what drives me, and I think that it resonates with a lot of other students as well. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

The Proclamation was viewed by most members as a plan for the ideal family structure and gender roles within it. Because the proclamation was a “sacred” document as Jen mentions, it carried a lot of weight with BYU students. It also made the LDS position on marriage, gender roles, and the family extremely clear. BYU students who were LDS had explicit guidelines, as well as a call to action. They were also immersed in a religious context that viewed the institution of the family as threatened. As Oaklyn explained, President Hinkley read the Proclamation at a meeting of the General Relief Society, the LDS women's organization. He felt the church needed to make a statement to the world defending the increasingly threatened institution:

He prefaced it by saying, "The family is under attack. We're facing all these different elements that are making it so that families aren't as strong anymore." And then he said that the Church really felt strongly and he, as an inspired leader, felt strongly, that they needed to give an official statement about this. So then he read the statement.  
(Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

Stand Up! was founded in an atmosphere where concerns about the family were taken seriously by the LDS faith, but the “BYU bubble” was also often accused of making students apathetic about engaging with issues of the family at a more political level:

So I think it was important, because it just gave us a foundation and a basis for we were all on the same page in our organization. We all have the same foundational beliefs. And so that was really helpful that we didn't have to worry about those kinds of things from the beginning. I think in some ways, though, it almost, kind of like I mentioned, it was a little but limiting, because it's this idea that students on campus have that already available to them, they should already know it, at least to some extent. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

Around here, where people do have shared beliefs, it's really easy to become comfortable and say, "Oh, well, this isn't really affecting me. All my neighbors think the family's important, and all of my city thinks that family is important." I mean the city where I grew up was voted Family City USA for several years, and different things like that. (Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

### Abstinence at BYU

*Students must abstain from the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances and from the intentional misuse or abuse of any substance. Sexual misconduct; obscene or indecent conduct or expressions; disorderly or disruptive conduct; participation in gambling activities; involvement with pornographic, erotic, indecent, or offensive material; and any other conduct or action inconsistent with the principles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Honor Code is not permitted.*

*Violations of the Honor Code may result in actions up to and including separation from the university.*

--BYU Honor Code<sup>2</sup>

Abstinence at BYU is part of the University culture. All enrolled students at BYU are expected to observe the Honor Code "at all times and...in all places" (Mosiah 18:9). Encompassing a wide range of behaviors including the use of stimulants, sexual conduct, academic honesty, and personal grooming standards, the Honor Code is expected to be followed by all students, whether or not they are LDS. But the Honor Code is only part of the BYU version of abstinence.

As demonstrated by the wording of the Honor Code, abstinence at BYU is about more than simply "sexual misconduct" or intercourse. The LDS version of chastity also encompasses involvement with "pornographic, erotic, indecent, or offensive material," homosexual behavior, and modesty in dress. Strict rules in the residence halls and off-campus housing limit opposite sex visitors from entering bedrooms or bathrooms, and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://policy.byu.edu/view/index.php?p=26> accessed on 3/30/18

stipulate the hours during which these visits can take place. Guests who are not BYU students must receive approval from BYU and are allowed to stay for a maximum of three nights.

The power of the Honor Code was demonstrated by an incident that happened shortly before my first visit to BYU. Basketball player Brendan Davies was found guilty of an Honor Code violation because he had premarital sex with his girlfriend<sup>3</sup>. Davies was kicked off the basketball team, but not removed from the university because he admitted his violation and was sufficiently contrite.

I had multiple conversations with the BYU students I met about the case. Most students were proud of BYU for enforcing the Honor Code—even though removing Davies from the team meant the school's basketball team would suffer. All students I talked to felt the administration had been fair and merciful, they punished Davies by suspending him from the team but allowed him to stay at BYU. They also had positive things to say about Davies. Though they all agreed he had made a mistake, and deserved some form of punishment, the students I talked to also emphasized the fact that he had been honest about it. The story I heard from students was that a friend had turned him in to the administration. Rather than being angry, Davies felt his friend's actions demonstrated true friendship, and he appreciated that his friend had helped him to recognize his mistake and hold him accountable. I came away from these conversations with a sense that these BYU students took the Honor Code very seriously, but also left space for human mistakes and believed that true friends had a responsibility to help keep

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/04/AR2011030401742.html> accessed on 3/30/18

each other in line in terms of obeying the Code.

For the members of Stand Up! abstinence was about more than preventing premarital sex. It was about a more holistic, and more strict, ideal of purity. Advice to LDS young people is rather specific about how to avoid sexual temptation.

Before marriage, do not participate in passionate kissing, lie on top of another person, or touch the private, sacred parts of another person's body, with or without clothing. Do not do anything else that arouses sexual feelings. Do not arouse those emotions in your own body. Pay attention to the promptings of the Spirit so that you can be clean and virtuous. The Spirit of the Lord will withdraw from one who is in sexual transgression.<sup>4</sup>

This same guide cautions against situations such as overnight activities, as well as arousing discussions and media. While Revolutionary Romance and Purity Ring Posse operated in spaces where more secular versions of sexuality shared space with discourses of abstinence, Stand Up! members came from a context in which the majority of their peers attempted to hold themselves to standards of sexual purity that went beyond abstaining from sexual intercourse.

For the LDS students at BYU, abstinence was an important component of their religious identity, as well as a method to ensure a happy and strong family life. Many BYU students felt particular anxiety about their own ability to create successful marriages and families. Becoming full adult members of the LDS church often meant getting married and starting a family. But the pressure to find the right partner put a lot of pressure on the dating scene at BYU:

So with that unrealistic expectations, we as Mormons have been looking forward to the eternal marriage our entire lives. And we've been told it's the most important position in our life, and our companion will define much of what the rest of our happiness looks like. And so there is immense pressure.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.lds.org/youth/for-the-strength-of-youth/sexual-purity?lang=eng> accessed 3/30/18

But second, there's also immense expectation. We've been fantasizing and thinking about it for years. We've watched all of the chick flicks and romances. We're experts in what exactly we do and don't want, because we've spent a lot of time thinking about it, preparing for it, and in dating. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Even in the “BYU Bubble,” social changes had an effect. Students discussed worries about divorce, pornography addiction, and the competing pressures of marrying early versus waiting until they had graduated and had a solid career. Stand Up! members told me that dating was often fraught with pressure, as partners were being evaluated as potentials husbands and wives, often even after the first or second date. Even the “hook-up culture” had impacted students at BYU. While Stand Up! did not have to challenge the expectation that students would engage in random sexual “hook-ups” during college, students told me that the NCMO, the Non-Committal Make Out, was becoming more common on campus.

While it may seem trivial, the NCMO, described as the BYU version of the hook-up or one night stand<sup>5</sup>, was viewed by the students I spoke with as a violation of the Honor Code in spirit, even if the behaviors of the make out did not go beyond kissing. The idea that an LDS member would use someone else for pleasure, without any further contact or commitment was seen as just one more indication that social changes in sexuality happening in the wider world were also impacting life within the “BYU bubble.” Mariah discussed some of these changes in my interview with her:

Talking about commitment patterns and the differences between developing friendships that are leading to hanging out and making out kind of behaviors, as opposed to committed relationships, and eventually marriage.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/695256670/Dating-up-a-storm-BYU-coeds-more-busy-with-pastime-than-most-study-finds.html> accessed 3/30/18.



Because it's definitely an issue here on our campus, with things like NCMOs, just rates of marriage on our campus. And I know that we're already higher than other campuses, but it's lower than it used to be. So it's that kind of concept as an issue. And how to develop friendships that will lead to committed relationships. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

Mariah's concerns that larger cultural shifts were impacting BYU student, even if at less intense rates, was a common sentiment among Stand Up! members. While members were concerned about wider changes in society and outreach beyond the "BYU Bubble," they were also focused on creating strong marriages for themselves and fellow BYU students. They balanced a concern over how changes to the family were harming society in general with worries about how these cultural shifts would impact group members and their peers.

I think there's a really big fear with my peers that we've seen a lot of divorce. I've seen a lot of people fall apart because of pornography. Really some devastating things happened there. Yeah, I've just seen a lot problems in family life. And it becomes discouraging, especially if you're dating and you run into those problems with people you date. That you can't have a happy family. And I think that really at the core of students' desire to do a symposium like this - at least -- I can't speak for everyone, but for me, it's the desire to have a happy family. And then to help foster a culture where that can occur for others. And that's really what it comes down to. I mean, I love my family, I had a great family life, but I want to be able to replicate that. And I want to have a dating culture where that's easily replicatable [sic]. And I want to have a culture and society where it's not antagonistic to that type of environment that I loved growing up. And I don't want to replicate the pain and heartache that now dozens of my friends have gone through. (Joi, a law student from California)

The version of abstinence practiced and promoted by Stand Up! members was unique. Embedded in broader views of family and faith, viewed as a way of life as much as an ideological position, this version of abstinence was also much more compatible with a wider pro-family position. Because Stand Up! members already viewed abstinence as fundamentally tied to the strengthening of both individual families, and families on a societal level, their wider pro-family platform did not require any adaptations in terms of their understandings of abstinence. Similarly, because their audience was partly their peers who were already assumed to be practicing abstinence they could focus more fully

on the nuances of chastity than the other two groups whose audiences had often already been sexually active and who often did not hold negative views towards pornography, making out, or other arousing behavior (such as masturbation).

#### Proposition 8 and Backlash

To understand the difficulties Stand Up! had planning the family symposium, and keeping the group active the next year, it is important to understand the context in which the group found itself in 2010. Prop 8, officially titled “Proposition 8- Eliminates Right of Same-Sex Couples to Marry,” was a statewide ballot proposition in California. On November 4, 2008, voters approved the measure and made same-sex marriage illegal in California.

Prop 8 was discussed by many Stand Up! members as the issue that kick-started their activism. Several of the founding members of Stand Up! had been active in a group that encouraged activism around Prop 8. This student group had also encountered controversy when it was founded at BYU. Initially the group had been open to all BYU students, but the university worried that their support of a political agenda would generate negative feedback and jeopardize their status as a university. So instead, the group was limited to students who had residence in California.

Joi was one of the members who was very active during Prop 8. She describes Prop 8 as a learning experience. One that taught her the limitations of her own understanding of the issues. It left Joi feeling both energized and overwhelmed. Her experiences with Prop 8 were in part the reason she felt a group like Stand Up! was necessary at BYU.

And with Prop 8, being from California, I actually ran out and knocked doors and things, and got really involved, and started thinking really more

critically about my own beliefs, both religiously and politically, and why I thought the way I did. And I realized that in many respects I didn't have really good answers. And so I just thought that was a problem. As I was talking to people, the things I was hearing didn't jibe with me, didn't resonate. And I had some reasoning, but I didn't feel like I could articulate them to others. And so I started really doing more research at that time, as to why and if, you know, my opinions were correct. Really questioning myself and delving more into the nitty gritty of the issue. And that's where I became more involved. There were a bunch of students here at BYU that also were from California and became passionate about that and formed the core of the group that now is Stand for the Family. And so I was involved in that. And after Prop 8 passed, we started to think a lot more about, okay, what do we do now? (Joi, a law student from California)

With the passage of Prop 8 many students reported feeling energized and excited. Prop 8 was a victory for those who supported man/woman marriage. Meeting other students who also felt passionately about the issue was also a bonus. Yet, Prop 8 also led to an incredible amount of negative press and backlash against the LDS church. Many Stand Up! members reported being shocked by the strong negative feelings expressed towards their faith.

There were protests in front of our temples, and they were defacing of our temples in California and here at Salt Lake. There was just a lot of negative media press about the Mormons controlling Proposition 8, and stepping in controlling the elections, and the separation of church and state. Why would church leaders get involved in a political issue? Yeah, it was just kind of like a shaming, like a world-wide shaming of the Mormon church. Like, "How dare you?" And some of our Catholic and Protestant friends stood up and said, "Hey, we did this, too, and we're grateful for what they did." (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Two was the way that we were being treated, I guess by public opinion that people, for example, would storm our temples was very -- like in the LA temple, a lot of people -- they got a big riot together in front of it. And that just seemed to me beyond the pale of anything. And at the core of our constitution is religious freedom. And so the fact that they would so blatantly try to just run over that and silence religious expression to me was really upsetting. (Joi, a law student from California)

In this climate, a symposium on the family was almost guaranteed to generate controversy. If students spoke out in support of same-sex marriage they would be opening BYU and the LDS church up to critique from the outside about dissent within the Church. Yet, if the students spoke out against same-sex marriage the university and the Church could be criticized for supporting bigoted opinions or a political agenda. Students were welcome to discuss these issues, but only in approved settings such as the Fidelio Society—where there was faculty oversight, and no contact with the public.

If you go back and remember what was going on at the time, you had some pretty big court cases and other things afoot. And there was a lot of scrutiny on our troops in particular because of what was going on in California. And I think, again, if you put your institutional stewardship hat on for a minute, you could see where the argument would come from that says, "Let's take it easy on this one." Whether you agree with that or not is another question, but you can see where the thought process comes from. I think whether we realized it or not at the time, that probably had something to do with the caution. (George, lawyer and BYU alumnus)

BYU's very skittish about getting involved, especially after the backlash of Proposition 8, and getting involved in any sort of political, perceived political activities. And nervous that students were running this conference. I think that was the core fear, that they weren't in control, they didn't have a way to control what was happening, and it was students running it. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

The fact that many of the students who founded Stand Up! had been active during Prop 8 probably did not help their reputation among the BYU administration. While Stand Up! members saw their organization addressing a wide range of issues including divorce, pornography, dating, and declining birth rates, they also recognized that other students and the administration saw them as a group focused on debating same-sex marriage. A

group founded to “defend the family” in such a fraught political atmosphere was viewed with suspicion by the administration and this contributed to the many of the challenges faced by the group.

### Stand Up!

Stand Up! grew out of a small group of students who felt that BYU students needed to learn how to defend the family in the public sphere. As stated in their BYU charter (the document used to declare them an official campus organization), Stand Up!'s mission was to “help BYU students answer the Proclamation call to 'promote those measures designed to maintain and strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society.’” Jen helped found Stand Up! with assistance from many of the students who had been active in the Prop 8 lobbying, including Joi, Kevin, and Zeke (who I wasn't able to interview, but who was mentioned by several members as an active force in the group). Jen was first a member of another campus group, the Fidelio Society, that also dealt with family issues. Led by a faculty member, Paul Kerry, the group initially seemed in line with Jen's interests in fostering a public dialogue about family issues.

Well I think it mostly started out as Matt Holland and Paul Kerry, but Paul Kerry, feeling like students really needed to think more critically about the issues and be more rigorous about their thought processes and explore the philosophical foundation of moral issues, basically. And so Janet Jacob was my chair in my graduate program. She knew that I was interested in advocacy, or interested in family issues, especially in marriage in society. She approached me and said, "Jen, we're thinking about starting this student group. We found that students have a hard time articulating their positions about moral issues in a public dialogue. Would you be interested in being involved?" (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Yet as the year went on it became increasingly clear that Jen had slightly different ideas about where to take the group than Paul Kerry and some of the other members.

Described in their mission statement as an interdisciplinary organization “dedicated to exploring the relationship between faith and reason,” the Fidelio Society focused on philosophical discussions and academic readings. Kevin described the group as “very intellectual.” He explained his experience after attending a meeting, “I don't know. I feel like I'm smart, but they were way into it, on a deep level that I thought wasn't practical.” Jen also felt the group was too insular.

Myself and some other people felt really strongly about providing this as a public form, rather than as a small group discussion, and so towards the end of the semester, we started asking the faculty if they would come and speak to us. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

When Stand Up! Members talked about the “outreach” done by their group, this seemed to be what they meant. Unlike the Fidelio Society which held meetings where members would discuss pre-assigned articles, Stand Up! was meant to provide a more public forum for BYU students and give them a way to present their own ideas and opinions, rather than just discussing the opinions of academics and scholars.

Their goal is more of an academic, critical thinking looking at issues. So they'll read and discuss, but not necessarily action motivated, where ours is getting the information out, and allowing people to do something with it and change. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

Jen and the Prop 8 students met after Joi, Kevin and some other students attended a Fidelio meeting. These students were looking for a way to continue the activism they had started around Prop 8, but as Kevin reported they all found the Fidelio Society to be too academic and discussion oriented. While Stand Up! members shared the same ideological stance as the members of Fidelio, they were not content with small, intellectual discussions. Students like Kevin, Jen, and Joi

wanted to enact social change and engage with discussions on a more public level.

Fidelio was more brains, discussion, and helping the group members improve their ability to speak about these issues in a public forum. And our group was more about the effecting change in the world. So not just keeping to ourselves, but I guess activist a little bit. (Kevin, a senior from California)

Jen and these other students realized they had goals that were in alignment with each other. They all wanted to engage with the student body more widely, push toward social change, and empower students to advocate for themselves in the public square on a more practical academic (as opposed to philosophical) level.

The Prop 8 students approached Jen with the idea for a campus wide event that would eventually become the Family Symposium. Jen was thrilled, but not all the members of the Fidelio Society shared her enthusiasm.

And I immediately thought it was a wonderful idea, and I thought, you are my people! This is exactly what I want to do. I want to open this up to other students, and use this as a forum to serve the whole campus. I felt really great about that. But the rest of the presidency, or the leadership core, as we called them, the other ten, didn't feel like we were accomplishing our own purpose per se. Anyway, they really wanted to just focus on the issues and spend less time planning events and more time talking about the issues.

Essentially, at the end of that year, Fidelio Society, well Paul Kerry and myself realized that we had different philosophies on what we wanted the group to accomplish. About half of us wanted to do more outreach to the entire campus, and the other half was content with doing the small group, deeper issues. So that Fidelio Society remained with Paul Kerry as an advisor, and then Stand Up! started with Janet Jacobs and another advisor. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

After their split with Fidelio, Stand Up! members worked to solidify their own group identity. The students who joined the group all professed an interest in “outreach” to the student body and definitely saw Stand Up! as “a little” activist,

but were less comfortable defining Stand Up! as a political organization.

At least for me, it's a lifestyle, it's a way of viewing the world, but in doing so, it has political implications, for sure. There are things like when Prop 8 was happening, we definitely were discussing things like that, and that definitely is political by nature. And that's part of the administration's problem, is almost a poetical battle where we're allowed to address an opinion that someone else isn't allowed to voice, and be conscious of that. So not in purpose, not in its initial goals, but by nature, yeah. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

While students recognized the political nature of the topics they addressed, they challenged the idea that this meant Stand Up! was a *political* group. Part of the reason for this may have been that members were aware that political groups were not allowed at BYU. Group members attempted to create an organization that could deal with politicized topics, without breaking the rules against political organizations on campus.

No, yet I think we're thought of that way. And I think that's why we run into trouble, more than anything else. And we've tried very hard to be non-political, but we're talking about subjects that are heavily politicized. So how you do that? We've not apparently been successful enough to the administration's satisfaction. Purely we just wanted to approach from an academic point of view. Because political organizations are essentially not permitted on campus. (Morton, a senior from West Virginia)

In their BYU charter Stand Up! describes their four main avenues of maintaining and strengthening the family: 1) deepening understanding of the importance of the family in society 2) increasing awareness of current issues that surround the family today 3) learning articulate that understanding in a public sphere, and 4) providing students with tools and opportunities to become effective leaders and advocates for the family throughout life.

Thomas Dean, one of the advisors of the group and a family lawyer,



described Stand Up! as a policy, rather than political, organization:

I think Stand for the Family is educating to encourage people to be public with sharing their opinions, to be informed in their opinions that they share. So I think political tends to be pejorative, that they have some motives. And I wouldn't say political in that sense, but political in the sense that they want what they're doing to have a public impact, absolutely...They have a policy orientation. (Thomas D, advisor to Stand Up!).

In the context of BYU defining a group as political is a very loaded term.

Defining a group as political, Thomas argues, implies that they have a motive. For instance much of the activism around Prop 8 was motivated to get voters to support the proposition. A policy group on the other hand wants to make a public impact without necessarily influencing votes or specific laws. The difference between students encouraging people to vote against same-sex marriage versus students who are educating themselves to share their opinions in the public square is a very important distinction in the context of the LDS affiliated University.

Stand Up! members all felt that outreach was necessary because they and their fellow students would eventually leave the “BYU Bubble” and need to learn how to advocate for family issues in places where everyone would not necessarily share their views.

And most people who are going to school here, they're not going to live in Provo, or in Orem, or in Springfield, or anywhere around here. They'll probably move out to other places. Then they'll be more prepared, and be better able to express their beliefs. (Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

Especially important for Stand Up! members was equipping BYU students with secular arguments in support of the family. While Stand Up! members were inspired by their faith to defend the family, they also recognized that religious

arguments did not carry the same weight in the public square.

And so there is a lot about the family that you need to be able to discuss on a secular level. And so our purpose is to educate students about how to talk about the issues facing the family in a more secular way so they can relate better to others as they leave BYU and go out in the world, and try to strengthen families in their own communities. Basically it's helping them be advocates of the family as they leave BYU. (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

While the group had been founded by several students who had been active in activities around Prop 8, the group did not have a singular focus on marriage or homosexuality. All the group members I interviewed were able to provide an extensive list of issues they felt threatened the family. While gay marriage was usually included, it was far from the main focus of the group.

So pornography addiction is a really big issue among Mormons, among Mormon young men. And that might have to do with the chastity culture, the strong chastity culture. It's another sexual outlet instead. But it's still a perversion of the authentic and holistic relationship between a man and a woman. And so raising awareness that chastity is not just a race to the finish line, which is the wedding day. And then "ahhhh!" Like everything is great. That authentic relationships are a holistic and organic sort of spectrum of interaction between men and women. That includes things like sticking together when the going gets tough, or being selfless, or all those other anecdotal things. But on a larger issue, most specifically we felt like pornography addiction was what was challenging that chastity culture and that preparation into marriage, and driving men and women apart. Anyway, they're all connected, it seems. It's all the same umbrella. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Gay marriage and sex changes and gender identity problems. And also abortion, which obviously has been around for a while, but it is becoming more widely accepted. Also I think the decline of the birth rate, things like that, are all evidence that society is losing its understanding of the importance of the family. (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

Morton, one of the Stand Up! members who felt the most frustration in the way the group had been treated by the administration, felt that most family issues outside of

pornography often made people feel uncomfortable. And gay marriage in particular led the administration to police the group more closely.

I think there's definitely the question of homosexual unions and gay marriage, I think that was definitely on the list of controversial topics. That was number one. Other topics, it's surprising how sometimes -- this is an academic campus. You get a variety of opinions. I'm surprised at how some people on campus in academia have disapproved of things that I thought were pretty fundamental. (Morton, a senior from West Virginia )

Yet, Jen recognized that in the beginning the group did struggle to distance itself from the focus on gay marriage, especially given the way that many group members became involved in family activism. Zeke, in particular, had heavily advocated for discussions of gay marriage in the early days of the organization.

"No Zeke, we can't. We can't do that anymore. And we're not just the anti-gay club. We're the pro-family club, and it's more than that." And that was a very crucial defining time for Stand for the Family, when we realized we did want to equip people with that, the arguments and the ideas for same sex marriage, but all sorts of other issues, to recognize that the atmosphere that we were in was very often toxic to healthy relationships in many, many ways. And we wanted to give air to all of those, rather than giving into the black hole of same sex marriage that just sucked all of the light and all of the energy, and all of the talking and everything. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

After Mark took over as president, Stand Up! also hosted discussion groups, but when they realized the Fidelio Society was already doing something similar, they stopped holding discussions.

So that's their thing. That's pretty much all they do is the discussion side. So we thought, well, they're already doing it, and they do a better job of it, so we're going to let them do that, and try to focus more on the application. (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

Their focus on outreach and public events, coupled with the group's historical association with Prop 8 and “defense of marriage” activism, seemed to be the reasons Stand Up!

made the administration so nervous. So after the Family Symposium, Stand Up! was only able to get a few speakers approved by the administration. With the Fidelio Society already focusing on academic discussions, Stand Up! members were left feeling frustrated.

When I interviewed the group members in the winter of 2010, Stand Up! had already made the decision to disband at the end of the school year. At the same time, some of the current and former members of Stand Up! had formed a new group, Stand 4 Family, which was unaffiliated with the university. A mix of young professionals and students, this organization was planning their own family symposium in Provo in the Spring. This Symposium would follow the exact same format at the 2010 Symposium at BYU, but without the hassles and red tape that came along with hosting the symposium at the university.

#### Stand Up! Members

I've always felt very strongly about the family, and especially about the issues facing the family, because it's one thing to feel strongly about the family. It's another thing to realize that the family is sort of under attack in our society, and that unless we as the members of society stand up and establish what we want and what we believe what the family is, it's going to change. (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

Several members of Stand Up! discussed their interest in family advocacy as a long-term passion that they'd had for many years. But, while many attributed this in part to the emphasis on the family in the LDS faith, they were also very quick to make a distinction between people who thought the family was important and people who were willing to take a stand and publicly address these issues.

This is distinction about militancy. Some students, like Morton, grew up in

areas where there weren't many LDS members. Others, like Oaklyn, grew up in predominantly Mormon areas, but were still unique in the strength of their passion.

Family issues have always been something I've been interested in ever since I was really little. I remember when I was in fourth grade trying to start an anti-abortion club in my elementary school and being told I wasn't allowed to. (Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

I think we're given talents, and desires, for a reason. I've thought about it a lot. And struggling with determining what I'd like to do in life. And I really do. I think some people are disposed towards certain things, and the Lord needs that. I feel like that, and He's given certain people certain interests and talents, capabilities. So we can all, as a full orchestra, do things with different strengths, and specifics. I had a strong desire towards [activism around] same sex marriage, and towards homosexuality. (Kevin, a senior from California)

Like Kevin, many members of Stand Up! felt called to their work on the family.

While this was often seen as part of the larger call from the elders of the Church, they recognized that other Mormons often focused particularly on strengthening their own families while avoiding the public square.

A lot of these things are taken as a given here at BYU, but then we have a tendency to just be quiet and not say anything in the public world, because we feel like it's strictly religious. Well, yeah, we've got a religious bent, that's certainly true, but it's not without academic background. It's not without some academic justification, too. (Morton, a senior from West Virginia)

But I feel like it almost comes down to the fact that we know that family's important, so we just shrug our shoulders and say, "Yup, we know it's important. Cool." And we don't necessarily realize that environment of the rest of the country very much still influences us, even if not to the same extent. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

I have the strong impression that there's a lot of people that support traditional values, but they don't really voice themselves. And maybe they're also intimidated by a more progressive stance that's being voiced in the media, and by just passionate people. And so they're more or less likely to speak out. So I just thought, well if I'm willing, then maybe I can help others. (Kevin, a senior from

California)

### Family Symposium

The Stand Up! Family Symposium took place in the spring of 2010. It featured several prominent speakers, student papers and projects, break out sessions, and a gala dinner. The symposium was open to both students and community members. It had a registration of over 800 participants. 30 students participated by giving papers or presenting projects as part of the conference. The conference also mobilized a team of volunteers made up of BYU students. Some were members of Stand Up! but others had been recruited to help specifically with the symposium.

The symposium was the brainchild of Joi, who had attended the Ruth Institute's summer conference "It takes a Family" and wanted to bring something similar to the BYU campus. Joi and some of the other students who had attended the conference approached Jennifer, who was serving as the president of the Fidelio society, about creating a group on campus that was a little more outreach focused. While the Fideolio Society was less interested in involving the wider student body in discussions of marriage and the family, Joi, Jen and other founding members of Stand Up! wanted to create a forum for BYU students ask questions and present their own thoughts on family issues. Stand Up! was the resulting organization and in 2009 they began planning for the Family Symposium.

Joi and Jennifer were the main coordinators of the Symposium. Jennifer became the president of Stand Up! while Joi took over as president of the Family Law Society. The Family Law Society is a club at BYU "dedicated to providing family law education

and improving our communities.” The group combines education on law practices and principles with an open dialogue about difficult issues of family law, along with “family fun, shenanigans, and great opportunities to serve the community.” Most importantly, it gave Joi access to support from the Law School faculty, a widely respected department at BYU.

The idea for the Symposium grew from a one day conference with speakers to something that allowed students to take a more active role. To fulfill this goal, Stand Up! invited students to submit papers as well as interdisciplinary projects that were tied to the theme of the family. Both Joi and Jennifer felt it was very important to give students a way to feel active in “standing up for the family,” rather than just learning about the issues in an academic way. As Joi explains, it was very important that the Symposium meet the needs of the students themselves.

There just seemed to be a real thirst for students to write, to research, to speak on these topics. And so a big bulk of the symposium was centered around their desire to actually be engaged, to develop themselves in these areas, to think more critically themselves. And then, have some motivation to do that in a public setting. And then also, I sensed a huge, I guess, dissatisfaction among students about what was going on politically, and a sense of hopelessness. That there's not much we can do. And so I think there were a lot of people, and even nationwide, as I talked to people it seems to be the case, that they want to get involved. They want to feel like they're doing something to make a difference that's on a big scale. And so I think just bringing in a couple of speakers didn't really encapsulate that. And so it really progressed a lot from them. (Joi, a law student from California)

George appreciated the way the symposium made space for multiple forms of engagement, from research to art projects, which allowed students to voice their thoughts and opinions rather than simply present facts:

I thought one of the most important things that happened, is it created a place where the students could come in and talk, not just because there were research things, but there were also media projects, other things that they did, so you actually had opportunity, if you wanted to just come in and make statement, as opposed to present facts. I was surprised how many people wanted to come in with an art project or something like that.  
(George, lawyer and BYU alumnus)

And Kevin highlights the way the paper competition both allowed students to use work they were already doing for class, as well as presenting an opportunity to enhance student resumes:

So projects and papers were good, we thought. In two ways, we thought we could make it relevant to students because maybe they could combine a project that they already needed to do in the class, or a paper that they already needed to write, or money that they needed to earn, kind of incentivize that. But also, if they didn't have a project necessarily or paper that was due in class, they could put it on their academic resume, as "hey I wrote this paper and it was accepted by the symposium." (Kevin, a senior from California)

The Ruth Institute sponsored a call for student papers and awarded prizes in three categories: Graduate, Law, and Undergraduate. Over 150 papers were submitted and 18 were chosen for awards. The panel of judges put together by the Ruth Institute reads like a "who's who" of the pro-family movement including: Janice Shaw Crouse, Senior Fellow at the Beverly LaHaye Institute (the think tank for Concerned Women for America), Elizabeth Marquardt, director of the Center for Marriage and Families at the Institute for American Values, Maggie Gallagher, founder and president of the National Organization for Marriage, then senator Rick Santorum, and the author Orson Scott Card. The award winning papers covered a range of topics, including several on pornography or divorce, but five of the 18 papers concerned a defense of heterosexual marriage, or a critique of same-sex marriage. The winning graduate paper, titled "A New Natural Law



Approach to the Family” draws on new natural law to defend the “conjugal”

(heterosexual) family:

So new natural law’s defense of the family lies in the argument that traditional conjugal marriage and family is a basic human good. Basic human goods should be sought after and preserved. Also, the basic human goods bring forth moral judgment by establishing moral norms (George, 2007<sup>6</sup>) which can delineate the rightness or wrongness of actions regarding the family.

New natural law’s defense of the conjugal family (heterosexual marriage) differs from other defenses from natural law. Whereas in the natural law perspective people look to nature to establish social norms concerning marriage and the family, new natural law looks to basic human goods for a foundation. Critics claim that the natural law perspective ignores homosexual-type relationships found in nature. New natural law theory avoids this type of criticism because it does not look to nature (i.e. plant and animal life/behavior) for its foundational norms.

All these papers defended “the family” as it is constructed by the LDS church. One paper, entitled “Heterosexual Monogamous Marriage: The Key to Equal Rights for Women” argues that gender equality will not be achieved without the promotion of heterosexual marriage:

Oscar Wilde once said, “Marriage is the one subject on which all women agree and all men disagree.”[1] It would appear that Wilde’s assertion is a dated one, for these days there is a large population of men who are *very* anxious to be married—to each other. There are also many women who reject the concept of gender roles entirely, and who strongly disagree with marriage. Wilde’s statement, though trivially given, seems to be a strong indicator of how times have changed, as homosexual marriage and other household arrangements besides that of heterosexual marriage are promoted in every sphere from religion to politics. However, it is my belief that if equal rights for women are ever to be achieved, men and women *both* must be overwhelmingly in agreement about the importance of marriage. Unfortunately, the promotion of heterosexual marriage has not seemed to form a part of the feminist movement or the fight for equal gender rights; in fact, some argue that the feminist movement has led society *away* from

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<sup>6</sup> George, R. P. (2007). Natural Law. Unpublished Lecture. Harvard University. Robert George is the advisor of another campus abstinence group and is also mentioned extensively by Revolutionary Romance members as a mentor and hero.

marriage by opening the door for homosexual marriage advocates. Yet the only way to achieve truly equal rights for women is through monogamous, heterosexual marriage, and for this reason it is the arrangement the state must privilege above all other household arrangements.

Yet it is clear that the authors of the same-sex marriage papers realized they were touching on a controversial topic, even if the positions they were taking were not at odds with BYU or the LDS church. For instance, the second place paper in the Undergraduate category entitled “The Same-sex “Marriage” War: Why the Traditional Definition Should Remain the Standard” (written by Stand Up! member Zeke) included the following preface:

I would like to preface my words by stating that my opinions are not meant nor should be taken as personal attacks to those who identify as homosexual. I love and value them as people and my heart goes out to them in any valid injustices they suffer. If nothing else I say is understood in the way I intend it, please understand this: loving people who identify as homosexual and opposing same-sex marriage are not mutually exclusive. There is a difference between loving a person and actively endorsing his or her actions. My statements are to address the issues involved in defining marriage as anything other than the union of a man and a woman. Marriage affects all of society, not just the alleged rights of a minority.

And the author of the paper “Stable Families and Same-Sex Unions” begins by examining the extreme positions taken by some conservatives in the marriage debate:

The question of same-sex marriage has triggered a passionate and polarized debate. Extremists from the conservative side have cried terms such as ‘disgusting’ and ‘perverted.’ Parallels have even been drawn arguing that legitimizing same-sex marriage would quickly lead to marriage with animals. Such exaggerated claims are ridiculous and excessive. Unfortunately, these extremes are often associated with any who oppose same-sex marriage and are labeled as ‘intolerant,’ or ‘bigots,’ when in reality, opposition to same-sex marriage has legitimate concerns. A poignant point strewn across the signs of protestors must be considered in such a debate: “This has EVERYTHING to do with me, and NOTHING to do with you.” But is this true? At first glance this makes perfect sense, but if we take a deeper look, it does indeed have everything to do with us, our

children, and our society. Families in the marriage unit are fundamental to society and same-sex marriage will inherently dilute the institution of marriage and the family.

The author, another Stand Up! member named Tricia, was interviewed in an article about the symposium in which she articulates Stand Up!'s desire to “break the bubble, “Our purpose is to help students to learn about these issues, and also to help them talk about it because we find that once students get out of the 'BYU bubble' they don't really know what to say to others.” At the same time, Tricia also comments on the controversial nature of the symposium:

A lot of the things that we believe we need to strengthen the family...are pretty controversial, and we don't intend to be hateful or discriminate against people, but we want to be able to defend it and also explain to others why we think it should be defended.

The keynote speaker for the symposium was Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse, head of the Ruth Institute, who gave a talk on “ Losing the Marriage Culture: How Did It All Unravel?” and “Restoring the Marriage Culture: Putting It All Back Together.” Morse addressed the marriage debate, but tied the declining marriage culture to a larger destruction of gender roles within the family. The following excerpt from an article about the symposium demonstrates Morse's argument that gender differences are fundamental to humanity, and to successful families:

Americans are being taught to believe they're generic humans, that "we're not men and woman, we're generic parents, we're not moms and dads," she said. "Ladies and gentlemen, there are no generic people!" she said loudly. "There are men and women; there are boys and girls. That's who we are, and to lose the sense of ourselves as gender is to lose a part of our humanity. ...We're dehumanizing ourselves."

The idea of generic humans, according to Morse, undermines the family by

supporting an idea that mothers and fathers are interchangeable, as well as they idea that parenthood is simply a list of jobs that can be fulfilled by any adult. "There's more to me as a mother than a bunch of functions, a bunch of jobs," she says. An article on the symposium in the Deseret News, an LDS news paper, further articulates Morse's arguments:

Morse finished her remarks by lambasting liberal trends among family law, a profession that is "basically a cesspool" and "dominated by radical feminists with an ideology and an agenda." She said they have followed the philosophy of Marxism, and we are ending up with a similar sexual state as the Marx-inspired Bolsheviks after the 1917 Russian Revolution, a time when divorce became available on demand, sexuality ran feral, and abortion was legalized — "All while we've been asleep at the switch," she said.<sup>7</sup>

Morse's statements make a clear connection between changing gender roles, marriage laws, and sexual mores. These trends, which according to Morse can be traced to the Sexual Revolution and second wave feminism, have led to the loss of the marriage culture. While the debates around same-sex marriage are certainly about homosexuality, for those in the pro-family movement they are also about defending the family as they understand it. For Morse, and the Stand Up! Students, "the family" is a man and a woman who are legally married, practicing traditional gender roles, and raising children. Promiscuous sexuality, legal abortion, no-fault divorce, pornography, and same-sex marriage are all current trends that jeopardize "the family."

Morse's talk also highlights the important ties that were forged across faith traditions during Proposition 8.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700014590/Symposium-battles-trends-that-damage-traditional-family.html> accessed 6/11/2017

"I want to thank again all the student organizers for all the outstanding effort they put forward to put this conference together," Morse said, "We found out, particularly during the Proposition 8 campaign in California, that the marriage issue, despite what you might have heard, is actually a unifying issue...in that the people who are orthodox across all of the religious traditions stand together on the issue of the definition of marriage<sup>8</sup>."

The young people of Stand Up!--many of whom were active in the Prop 8 campaign, agree with Morse that the marriage issue is one that needs to be addressed not just by the LDS church, if the goal is to achieve wider social change. Which is one of the reasons Stand Up! made the BYU administration so nervous.

Other invited speakers included: Dr. Douglas Allen (an economist at Simon Fraser University) who gave the talk "No-Fault Divorce: Unexpected Consequences and Long-Term Prospects." Dr. Donald Hilton (a scholar on neuroscience and pornography who also spoke at Old Ivy) who gave the talk "As a Swallowed Bait: How Pornography Addicts and Changes the Brain." William Duncan (a family lawyer and BYU alumn) on "Abandoning Marriage, Abandoning Children." And Professor Lynn Wardle (a family law professor at BYU) on "Standing for Something." These invited talks reflect the wider constellation of issues addressed at the conference including pornography, divorce, declining marriage rates, and a general orientation towards "standing for the family." All the invited speakers are Christian, and with the exception of Morse and Allen all of them are LDS church members<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.law2.byu.edu/news2/byu-law-students-organize-stand-family-symposium> accessed on 6/11/2017

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Allen became infamous for testimony he gave during the Michigan case to overturn the gay marriage ban in which he stated yes to the question: "Is it accurate that you believe the consequence in engaging in homosexual acts is a separation from God and eternal damnation from God?" He is a Christian, but I was unable to find out the specific denomination. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canadian-economist-never-knew-he-would-become-centre-of-a-u-s-firestorm-over-his-research-on-same-sex->

As Joi and Jennifer explained, the support of the Family Law Society was key to getting the BYU administration to sign off on the Symposium. And even with their support both Joi and Jennifer spent countless hours navigating the red tape of university bureaucracy in order to secure venues, permission for invited speakers, and university support for the Symposium. They called in George Waters, the head of a local organization focusing on religion and the family, to help act as an advisor. The administration was initially very resistant to the idea, they were wary of inviting speakers who were not affiliated with the university, of having students present papers at a University event, and perhaps most importantly they were nervous about the subject matter. So soon after the controversy surrounding Prop 8, administrators worried that students would present papers that were critical to the LDS stance against same-sex marriage, or alternately that the Symposium would be viewed as too overtly political by liberal critics of the University.

They wanted to know why we wanted to do it in the first place-- at all-- and thought we were just creating trouble. And we weren't. We just thought, gosh, there's so many students here on campus that are so good, and they share these views, and why not do something about it besides having it in your heart? So those were our aim, and I think they misunderstood, maybe. Maybe they thought we were trying to create a stink or something, I don't know. (Kevin, a senior from California)

Stand Up! members identified two aspects of the conference that they felt made the administration particularly wary. The Symposium was largely student organized and student driven. With limited faculty oversight the university wanted to make sure that the Symposium would run smoothly and with little damage to the university either in terms of property or public relations. While the Family Law Society had sponsored

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symposiums in the past, these had been faculty organized. There seemed to be a worry that student leaders would not be cognizant of the potential PR disasters awaiting a family symposium. While the symposium was supporting values in keeping with LDS theology and BYU policy, student activism (particularly around the issue of marriage) made BYU administration extremely cautious.

Part of their rationale is that the church has to be really careful about publicity. It's a big thing. Particularly since the church got so much publicity after Prop 8, there are some people that are looking for anything they can find to blow up in the media about the church's involvement in this type of issue. So that was a big thing. There's a little bit of hesitancy to allow a student group to put on something like this and have students present and not know exactly what the students are going to say when they present. And then whatever they say reflects on BYU. So that was some of it. That was a big part of it. (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

Anything that took place at BYU also reflected on the entire LDS faith, and after the negative press surrounding Prop 8 in California, administrators were nervous that the Symposium might be used to paint the university as bigoted or political.

BYU's very skittish about getting involved, especially after the backlash of Proposition 8, and getting involved in any sort of political, perceived political activities. And nervous that students were running this conference. I think that was the core fear, that they weren't in control, they didn't have a way to control what was happening, and it was students running it. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

"How do you work with the administration? How do you persuade them that we're not going to burn down any buildings?" And I think you run into pretty normal academic caution. It gets a little bit more frustrating because you're at an institution that is religious, and not just nominally so. It's not just lip service at BYU. They believe what they're saying. But that makes it also frustrating if you think you're doing something that is friendly to those

values, and you still run into the caution and the red tape and everything else, that's a little exasperating, because if you have procedures that take three or four or six months, in a student's lifecycle, what is that? (George, lawyer and BYU alumnus)

Eventually, in part through the intervention of a Law School faculty advisor and the tenacity of Joi and Jennifer, the administration gave their permission for the Symposium to be held and the selected guests to be invited as speakers. Despite the huge undertaking that went with planning and executing the Symposium, it was declared a success by everyone involved.

We've heard only positive things about the symposium, and I wasn't there, but everything we've heard was, "I sure hope that happens again. It was such a neat experience. I learned so much. I never knew that students could do something like this, something so big." (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

We got just a lot of positive feedback, like "This is wonderful", "It's so good to hear these ideas presented in an academic light", "It's given me a renewed energy, and feeling of community, and I want to do more", "I'm grateful that this is happening", and "Please do it again next year", and all of that kind of stuff. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Community members and students provided enthusiastic feedback afterwards and even some church leaders who had attended spoke about the Symposium very positively.

We learned a lot ourselves directly from the presentation, but we also learned a lot about organizing this type of thing, and that was nice. We deemed it a success. And we were glad that it had a good impression on church leaders, those that attended it, and those that quoted it, you know, at places. Really pleased with that. (Kevin, a senior from California)

I loved the symposium. I loved everything that came together with it, I loved the dynamic between the students and faculty and people from off campus that happened, and all the information that was shared. And I just said, "I really want to keep up with this. I think this is such a fantastic opportunity." (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)



Certainly BYU is not against students learning more about pro-family issues, or even discussing them in an academic setting as they do in the Fidelio Society. But because Stand Up! was not content with academic discussions they encountered resistance to their further plans.

Stand Up! members reported feeling full of energy and excitedly looked forward to planning another Symposium the following year.

And then there was the whole weekend was centered on this idea that this is important and we have to be willing to stand up and do something about it, too. So there was a lot of dynamic of now you have this information. Okay, go do something, don't just sit around with it. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

And I feel like the conference provided a venue for students to see that this is viable academically, but also in all of these little budding ways that you helped out with. We found a film student who made a film about this little child that made her own family dinner, because her families didn't eat with her. It was just like this cute little emotionally compelling film about family dinners that she had done for her Media and Family class. And as a result-- She has subsequently been hired by SA Lifeline and the Ruth Institute to do filming work. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Another symposium never happened. When Joi graduated, the group no longer had any members affiliated with the law school, and thus lost the support of the Family Law Society and the Law School faculty. The new leaders approached the administration in the fall of 2010 and were told that another Symposium would not be allowed. Several of the students mentioned being initially shocked by this response, given the positive feedback from the Symposium the year before. When pressed for an explanation, the administration cited a controversial paper that had been produced as part of the Symposium that had been published in a student journal called Stance. Stance is a journal affiliated with BYU that focuses on family issues, publishing a combination of academic

papers, opinions pieces, advice, and even recipes. Most of the students I spoke with were not familiar with the journal until it was mentioned by the administration in terms of the post-Symposium controversy. None of them had read the article in question, but they had strong opinions about it:

And “Stance” published a paper that essentially said that the LDS church was going to change its opinion on homosexual marriage and that this was all just a big joke. It was not a professional paper by any means, and it was not in line with BYU’s views, and it should not have been published. It was not presented at the symposium. It was not something we chose to continue with, but because it was affiliated with that initial call for papers, it got associated back with us. So there was that issue. There were some complaints. Some of the complaints were that students already have a chance to present their material, but when we told them that weren’t going to have students present this year, they still just said no. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

The article, “Homosexuality and the LDS Church,” appeared in the Summer 2010 volume of Stance. Written by a senior English major who identified as “a same-sex oriented man who actively supports church teachings, church leaders, and who chooses to be heterosexually (and happily) married.” The article attempts to examine church teachings about homosexuality, taking a historical perspective and attempting to clarify some finer distinctions:

In recent years, however, the LDS Church has clarified the difference between homosexual feelings and homosexual actions. While the shift has been helpful for many church members who deal with this issue, the new policy has yet to be accepted and understood by some Latter-day Saints.

To my eyes the piece hardly seems controversial, it is clearly written by someone who wishes to remain part of the LDS church, but is frustrated by the negative reactions to SGA (same-gender attracted) individuals, even when they are not engaging in “homosexual actions.”

The main point of controversy seems to be the author's discussion of the “born this way” debate. The author summarizes the Churches position:

The LDS Church’s statements during the latter half of the 20th century seem to be based on three basic, foundational beliefs regarding homosexuality: (1) homosexual orientation is a perversion of natural sexuality, (2) no one could be born homosexual, and (3) homosexuality can and must be changed through proper repentance. Starting in 2006, LDS statements and policy show a distinct and noticeable departure from these basic assumptions.

The author challenges, in particular, the assumption that no one is born homosexual and that homosexuality can and should be changed. First, he argues that attempts to change homosexuality are not successful and can be psychologically harmful:

Currently, most psychologists agree that sexual orientation is not usually changeable. The American Psychological Association recently published its official stance against therapy as a way to change sexual orientation, stating that attempts to alter sexual orientation usually have negative psychological effects.

Then the author goes on to examine the change among church leaders from the opinion that homosexuality is a choice. “There is a falsehood that some are born with an attraction to their own kind, with nothing they can do about it<sup>10</sup>.” The author argues the church has softened their stance towards SGA Latter-Day Saints, and now the Church's official stance on nature versus nurture as “a definite 'we don't know'.”

The author critiques the rejection that many SGA church members face, despite the more tolerant attitude encouraged by official church documents.

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<sup>10</sup> Packer, Boyd K. “To Young Men Only.” Ensign Nov. 1976. This is a print version of a sermon delivered by Boyd Packer, an LDS apostle, that was distributed by the LDS church in pamphlet form until 2016.

Drawing on personal experience he calls for greater tolerance for SGA believers:

However, my personal experience is that the message of tolerance has yet to reach the general LDS Church membership. While the expected place for SGA members in the LDS Church may still be in the closet for now, there is a slow and steady shift toward a more open attitude toward SGA individuals, and one day the future SGA member will be more at home with “the Saints.”

At no point does the author call for full acceptance of homosexuality. He is, after all, involved in a heterosexual marriage. Yet his argument that there is a shift towards a more open attitude toward SGA individuals was apparently taken as a controversial, and used as grounds to penalize Stand Up! A similar controversy would erupt at the later symposium, held by Stand 4 Family, the organization that replaced Stand Up!. Debates about nature versus nurture, and questions about how the Church should stand in regards to homosexuality were considered sufficiently controversial that one of the invited speakers canceled at the last minute.

Stand Up! has a fundamental understanding of pro-family issues that connect abstinence, abortion, gender roles, marriage, divorce, and pornography in their attempts to “defend” the family. None of their stances on these issues contradict official LDS or BYU policy. But the issues of gay marriage and homosexuality are extremely controversial issues among LDS members, even discussing them in a public forum is a cause for anxiety. Yet, Stand Up! is so committed to their goals of standing up for the family that they cannot ignore these issues. In their desire to live The Proclamation for the Family, to “do something about it besides having it in your heart” as Kevin put it, the group made themselves too controversial for the administration.

Kevin argues that the administration misunderstood their intent, the group

had no desire to stir controversy, but their militancy demanded that they engage with all the debates students might encounter outside “the bubble”--including debates about marriage and homosexuality. Stand Up! was ultimately unsuccessful in changing the administrators' minds about the goals of the organization. The Symposium was not the only activity that was blocked. Members complained that they were not allowed to invite speakers or hold events, the students were only allowed to invite BYU faculty to speak and could hold social events, but were discouraged from planning events that would involve the public, or students who were not members of the group. Most members reported being extremely frustrated by the administration's treatment, even if they understood the need for caution:

We were trying for an event this year. I should say BYU administration has always been hostile to us, and still is, and killed it. So we won't be having one this year. And in that, I took a much more active role trying to plan, trying to submit proposals, trying to jump through all the hoops that would be required to have something like this happen. We were ultimately unsuccessful, but I had a very clear idea. (Morton, a senior from West Virginia)

And there are so many other things, as a family club that we would be able to discuss, and able to bring to the students, but because there's this one issue that they feel like would be a sensitive topic and a bad PR kind of situation, they're not willing to let us bring in other speakers. So it's been a really interesting administrative dynamic this year that has really limited what we've been able to do. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

When we're trying to do something so massive with an outreach, I think it's really important that they make sure that what we're doing is in line with BYU standards, with the Church standards, and that we're not opening ourselves up for criticism when we don't need it...So I think it's a good thing overall. It can be frustrating and it can be hard, but I think, in general, there's a really good reason why it's there. And as students of BYU, we've agreed to live by those standards, and so we should follow them. (Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

Oaklyn was one of the only Stand Up! members who supported the administration's oversight of the group. Oaklyn's comments demonstrate a recognition that the outreach done by Stand Up! necessitates a more careful approach from the administration. It wasn't the values espoused by the participants of the Symposium that worried the administration, but the fact that the event was meant to 1) reach beyond BYU to members of the public and the wider pro-family movement and 2) it was meant to galvanize students and encourage them to engage in activism. It is also interesting to note that Oaklyn was also one of the only members of Stand Up! who was also a member of the Fidelio Society, and thus may have been more amenable to a more discussion oriented form of activism than her fellow group members.

#### Aftermath and New Organization

Many students I interviewed were extremely frustrated with how Stand Up! was treated by the administration the year I interviewed them. They had felt an incredible momentum to move forward, but felt blocked at every turn. Joi and Jen had hoped the Symposium would be the start of a larger conversation at BYU, but found this was not the case.

I think there're definitely...people who didn't see as much as the value in helping students to be engaged to find a voice, to do their own research in opinions in this area. I think there are also people who are not very favorable towards doing open discussion about highly charged political matters that can potentially cause riots or, you know, other things, for a lot of people who care about it pretty passionately, so that , that, I think, was probably more at the core of it. (Joi, a law student from California)

It was very deflating, for me, disillusioning to see that my church university would react this way. It was very hard to separate the difference between

gospel principles and what was happening administratively, and not feel less about my school or the administration as a result of these bureaucratic decisions that didn't feel like in the best interest in students. Felt more like laziness or just a lack of desire to truly help those students who were being involved. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

I learned that people are afraid. They're afraid to talk about things like this. They know it's good, they know it's nice, but people are afraid to take on responsibility for difficult issues like this. I think students are less afraid to face them. Student might be more complacent about the issues, but less afraid to face them. So one of the things that's happened out of this is that there's a new student group that's not BYU affiliated, that's combination of students from several universities. They have just organized, and they call themselves Stand 4 Family. They did that so that they could be free of administrative roadblocks, and they felt so strongly about it. We realize that if we don't do something about the family, nobody's going to. (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

I think for that kind of thing to accumulate and make a real difference, you have to do it repeatedly. I think Joi and Jen know that, and that's why they're trying to through whatever means are available to them, to keep recreating a place for that conversation can occur. Whether that happens to be under the aegis of a university is another matter, but to their credit, I think Jen and Joi are committed to seeing that that happens. (George, lawyer and BYU alumnus)

While Stand Up! members were frustrated by the university's response, it did not deter any students from participating in the newly formed group. Their experience with the administration seemed to make them feel more strongly about their involvement in these issues. This may have been thanks to the support of a wider social movement community. While current BYU students, Stand Up! members had to abide by university regulations. Most students, however, saw their future beyond the borders of BYU. As they prepared to exit the “BYU bubble” they took solace in the fact that they were already a part of a larger community that would facilitate their involvement in “pro-family” activities.

I hope that whatever I do will end up, I'll teach other people the importance of, at least standing up for their rights, or standing up for what they feel is right, and what they feel is morally correct, and protecting society. Looking beyond themselves, looking beyond what their interests are, into more of the community based world view. (Oaklyn, a sophomore from Utah)

It's nice to have a desire, turn the corner, and see others doing it. It's really nice. And it's nice to think in the future, there are others, and there are people that I can email or pick up the phone and call, and continue on this. It's nice. (Kevin, a senior from California)

I'm not staying here in Utah at all, and let alone at BYU. And knowing that if I decide to start one of these organizations somewhere else, I can get resources from UCN. If there's already one in place, that there will be some people there, and I can connect them in, but there will be a group of people that I can use as resources to help me continue to do things as I believe. And that was critical for me, because I'm not staying here. I'm going more places. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

### Solidarity and Social Movement Communities

We need to create the community for ourselves and create strength and support for these ideas. So that's kind of what my idea was, or how I conceived a need for a student organization at the very beginning. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

Much like the students in Revolutionary Romance, the members of Stand Up! highlight the role the group and symposium play in connecting them to a larger community. The sense that they are not alone in defending the family is one of the most important things they took away from their involvement.

I think some of the greatest benefits of these events and the conferences are not the actual content of the lectures themselves. It's the relationships that are formed, it's the momentum that happens, the community and the feeling of strength that comes from gathering together about something that's important. And as a result of that conference, I think many students felt a new conviction and strength in their beliefs about marriage and families. (Jen, a Master's student from Texas)

For Mark, meeting other students, from outside the "BYU Bubble" who were also



engaged in with defending the family, made BYU students feel more confident about their work defending the family because they knew they weren't alone:

For us, it was kind of a confidence boost, because here we are with students from all over the country, from all these different universities, and we're seeing all these students from different backgrounds who care deeply about the family. And you don't think about that always. Sometimes you think we're the only ones that are trying to push this thing, but it was neat to see all those students from different backgrounds come together talk about, "okay, what are the struggles we're facing promoting the family o our campuses? What are the things that our students are facing that are hurting their ability to have strong families in the future." Things like that. So it was neat to be able to see so many people that cared about the family... (Mark, a master's student from Utah)

Mariah further stressed the importance of building a network, particularly for those who lived, worked or studied in environments hostile to the very pro-family stances the symposium endorsed. The symposium demonstrated to her that this network already existed beyond the borders of BYU:

I just came away feeling very motivated to do more, to get more involved, and to speak more, and be more involved. I was impressed by how much people would put in at other places where it's not necessarily so well received. I think that was one of things that most impressed me, was just there was this whole network of people out there who have the same values that are willing to push for those. And then I hadn't necessarily understood that before. (Mariah, a senior from Idaho)

And Kevin stressed the importance of these connections for collective action and sustained social change. While individuals have the power to work for change on their own, they are much stronger when they work together:

I think 5000 disconnected people that are all involved, and maybe not influenced either way, but are still gonna be involved. They have much less influence than if they were connected. And sounds really cliché, but it's so true. I mean, I can write to my senator, I can write to the newspaper, and that's one thing, and five students can do that. But if those five students come together, they can put on a symposium, for example. You know? Or

they can create a foundation or an institution. And those things endure and have a lot more, they're a lot more noticed by the public. They're just different. And certainly those five could still continue to do blogging, and that's cool if that's what they feel, but when people come together, bigger things are able to be handled. (Kevin, a senior from California)

To successfully “defend the family,” these Stand Up! members argued, students needed to cultivate networks beyond the “BYU Bubble.” They recognized that these networks were important to boosting morale, sustaining energy for organizing in the face of hostility, and for collective action that could lead to “bigger things” in terms of social change. Their comments highlight the fact that while the “BYU Bubble” was a supportive environment for pro-family values, it could also make students feel very isolated, as if BYU was one of the only places that still attempted to defend these values. Ironically, by “bursting the bubble” through the symposium, Stand Up! members became even more committed to their activism around pro-family issues.

### Conclusion

While Stand Up! was not challenging any of the fundamental values of BYU or the LDS church, in fact their mission was informed by the LDS Proclamation on the Family, they still found themselves facing negative reactions from the BYU administration. In the context of the of a church sponsored university that had recently faced controversy surrounding Prop 8, BYU was especially careful of opening itself to potential critique. A student group focused on such a highly politicized topic was a liability in the eyes of administrators.

A student led symposium, featuring non-BYU speakers and student papers with little faculty oversight, opened the potential for BYU to be viewed either as

harboring critical discussions of the LDS position on same-sex marriage, or as supporting a bigoted view on their campus. Within this context Stand Up! was allowed to hold one symposium, but not encouraged to take any further action. Yet, the group members had already made connections to a larger social movement community that supported them in their mission. Rather than continue to fight the administration, Stand Up! disbanded and former members founded a new organization Stand 4 Family. While this wider community facilitated Stand 4 Family hosting their own family symposium in 2011, this community also placed specific demands on the new organization. The group's continued commitment to open dialogue and civility towards differing opinions caused friction with some members of the social justice community and their wider networking also put them in potential conflict with the LDS church. While social movement communities provide solidarity and ideological resources, they also constrain organizations in various ways.

The story of Stand Up! and the symposium begins with the “BYU Bubble.” At first, the story of Stand Up! seems very different from PRP and RR. Unlike Stand Up!, RR appeared, from its very beginning, in a hostile environment, a “liberal” university dominated by progressive (and sometimes radical) students. And PRP was formed precisely to appeal to skeptical teenagers who see abstinence as “cheesy,” the opposite of the coolness PRP tries to enact. After more consideration, however, the comparison is more complicated. RR faced tremendous pressure to change, not just from its progressive audience, but also

from potential allies who placed abstinence in a broader conservative context. PRP also had to deal with conservative allies, who thought the PRP message too edgy, and, as a result, often toned down its show or customized it to particular audiences. In the case of Stand Up!, the confrontation with opponents and even potential allies with slightly different views was not there from the beginning. The “BYU bubble” protected BYU groups from the sort of pressures RR and PRP had to deal with.

But even at BYU, neither students nor administration could escape the outside world. For the administration, the outside world consisted of a set of legal regulations that threatened their tax exempt status, as well as the protected environment that was one of their main attractions to parents and potential students. For students, even more clearly, the bubble constituted not so much a protection against outside pressures as a constraint against their involvement in issues national in scope. At BYU, the students purposefully burst the bubble. Although the full consequences are not yet fully apparent, the bursting of the bubble opens up BYU students to influences from the abstinence movement elsewhere but also opens up the abstinence movement elsewhere to the influence of BYU students.

## CHAPTER II

### PURITY RING POSSE: MAKING ABSTINENCE COOL

When I attend my first Purity Ring Posse (PRP) live event, I am expecting a lesson in the dangers of sex, a sort of DARE presentation on how and why to “say no” to sex until marriage. So when Pancho comes on stage and leads the audience in a chant of “sex is great,” I know I am going to have some of my preconceptions challenged. As part of a larger evangelical Christian community, PRP works hard to “be in the world, but not of it,” they engage with popular, secular culture while also promoting Christianity and sexual purity. Purity Ring Posse struggles both in their public shows and in private discussions to balance sexual openness and regulation, while also actively working to define a Christian, abstinent identity for young men and young women that is not completely removed from secular culture.

Purity Ring Posse identifies itself as a parachurch<sup>11</sup> youth ministry that also promotes premarital sexual abstinence. They tour the United States putting on live events for middle and high school age young people. The touring team is made up of 10-12 members, a mix of young adults (18-22 years) plus a few members in their mid-twenties or sometimes older. The group often does short promotional shows at public high schools in the days before a live event. They are usually sponsored by local religious organizations including churches, religious schools, or crisis pregnancy centers, in the towns where they perform.

PRP works to portray abstinence as something that is relevant to a wide variety of

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<sup>11</sup> Meaning they operate outside of, and across, denominational boundaries.

young people. Their commitment to diversity, in terms of the various aesthetic styles displayed by the team members but also in terms of race and “background” (often used as a way to discuss class), also signals they are cutting-edge and hip. They distance their organization from portrayals of abstinence as outdated and out of touch with contemporary youth. PRP also tries to make abstinence look like a desirable choice to teenagers beyond the white, middle-class, Christian context (Wilkins 2008).

Purity Ring Posse must work hard to portray itself as cool. They are both a religious group, and a group that promotes abstinence. Church - and Christianity more generally - are often defined as the opposite of cool, often referred to by PRP team members as “corny” or “cheesy.” PRP signals their difference to this approach initially through visual and other cues premised on style: the appearance of the touring team, secular music and pop-culture references.

PRP does not see itself as a progressive or “liberal” organization. In many cases, group members support a largely “conservative” Christian position on issues like marriage, gender roles and homosexuality. Even conservative organizations must frame abstinence in a way that reaches a more progressive young audience, grappling with the political debates surrounding issues of sexuality, gender, and marriage. In their attempt to advocate “abstinence as rebellion,” PRP actually does challenge adult authority and many “traditional” ideas within the conservative Christian community: rejecting some forms of racism and sexism, embracing a form of Christianity that engages heavily with secular culture, and encouraging Christian evangelism to evolve and change to fit a contemporary audience. In an attempt to reach their audience, abstinence groups attempt

to integrate contradictory positions. The premarital abstinence movement must strive for relevance with their audiences, rather than simply hewing to orthodoxy.

Purity Ring Posse's core issue is not simply how to make abstinence appear cool, though that would be a challenge on its own. PRP must also balance their version of coolness, meant to appeal beyond a narrow Christian audience, with their ties to the Christian community. In creating an organization that is both Christian *and* cool, PRP faces challenges from both a skeptical teenage audience and the Christians who they rely on for resources and support. As an evangelical organization, PRP has Christian commitments that inform the tactics they use. PRP draws heavily on contemporary evangelical tactics: engagement with popular culture, making Christian theology accessible to non-Christians, relying on emotional, personal testimonies, and professional quality music and lighting. Yet these tactics are often viewed with suspicion by fellow Christians who see them as cheapening Christ's message. Thus to appear cool often means sacrificing Christianity, while appearing truly Christian often means sacrificing coolness. In addition what counts as truly cool or Christian also shifts depending on the particular audience in question. PRP attempts to create a version of abstinence that is different from conventional versions. But it does not create in a vacuum, there are various forces that push PRP, partially but powerfully, to conventionalize their message. These forces include: the demands of their audience (eg public schools, catholic schools), the limits of their own backgrounds (racial, ethnic, sectarian), and, most importantly, the criticisms of more conventional Christians.

## Purity Ring Posse

PRP was founded by a former youth pastor who is now the president of the organization. Initially started in the Southwest in 1995, the organization was transplanted to the Northeast when the founder moved to lead the John Guest Evangelistic Team in 2000. Between 2003 and 2006 PRP received federal funding for their abstinence education. But after a suit brought by the ACLU the group lost this funding. The group is now supported by private funds. The founder, Jimmy, is supported by a staff of about five employees- and a couple of interns- in the home office. The office books shows, arranges tour schedules and does follow-up with both adults and teenagers who attend PRP shows. On my first tour in 2009 the team, made up of college-aged young people, is lead by Laurie and Dave.

Dave is in his forties, the oldest member of PRP to go on tour. He and Laurie act as the adult authorities for the rest of the team. Dave is from the town where Jimmy had founded PRP and was there for the first Purity Ring Posse event. When Jimmy was able to get funding to continue growing Purity Ring Posse he asked Dave move to the Northeast to help out. When he was younger Dave had been a member of a Christian rock band and had gone on tour with them. He tells me he's always enjoyed touring and had encouraged Jimmy to take PRP on a national tour, rather than just putting on shows in the Northeast. Dave handles many of the tour logistics, helps build sets, coordinates the skits and other acts, and generally is the overseer of what is going to be happening on-stage during the live event. Laurie is the other “adult” on tour, so I am surprised to find out she



is only 30, just a year older than I am at the time. Laurie is working on an MBA while we were on tour. She deals with the merchandise, record keeping, and other business and backstage aspects of the tour. Elena is a member of the 2009 touring team who also worked in the home office and was in charge of follow-up with teens who had put on a ring, sending out individual emails as well as monthly newsletters. Elena had graduated from Robert Morris University with a degree in Corporate Communication. She was in her mid-twenties during the tour.

Purity Ring Posse produces a follow-up curriculum that can also be used in small group settings, but their main focus is their live event. PRP tours the United States putting on a two hour, multimedia show. They tour from September until May and put on approximately 10 shows a month. Shows take place across the United States, hitting locations in the Northeast, Midwest, South, Southwest and West coast. When I tour with the group the first time they start in Tennessee move through Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama, and on the my second tour the group is scheduled to go from the Texas panhandle into Austin.

During my first tour with PRP I also get to attend the promotional assemblies that PRP gave in local high schools before a live event. These assemblies are meant to give students a taste of what to expect from PRP without replicating the live event. Additionally, since most of these assemblies take place in public schools, the group leaves out the religious content and makes a few other changes to their program.

The school events are important because they allow PRP to reach students who might not already be attending the event with their church or youth group, thus helping

them to spread the gospel to those who might not have already heard it. Additionally, PRP views school events as supplementing the limited sex education in US public schools. As Laurie, one of the touring team leaders, explains, PRP did not think discussions of STDs and condoms fully illustrate the dangers of premarital sexuality.

Laurie explains to me what I could expect at the school events:

Laurie says they have to change the show, since they can't talk about God in public schools. She says they do more funny skits but they also do an age appropriate "starting over" talk. I ask who did the talk at their last assembly and she said she has done it in the past. She says that what she remembers from sex ed in school is the condom and the banana. "I must have learned other things but the condom and banana is all I can remember." She doesn't remember discussing any of the emotional consequences of having sex. She realizes that there might have been limits to what the teacher could talk about in school, but she still thinks it is important to discuss things besides STDs and condoms. She says that's why the "starting over" talk is so important. She thinks that personal testimonies "will sink into their hearts" and students will remember them. She tells me that teenagers don't think like we do, their frontal lobe isn't developed, that's why they think they're invincible. They don't always make rational decisions.

Laurie's description of the school events also highlights some of the cornerstones of PRP's approach to abstinence. While STDs are used during shows as negative consequences, emotional consequences are viewed as equally important. Additionally, since teenagers are viewed by many of the adult PRP staff as unable to make rational decisions, appeals to emotion and personal testimonies are thought to be more effective at swaying teenagers. The group still includes statistics and discussions of STDs, but it was clear that emotions and emotional appeals are their true focus.

PRP knows their presentation will be evaluated by adults in the audience, adults who want to make sure the teenagers in their community are receiving a message that will effectively communicate the importance of premarital abstinence. At the same time

the PRP strategy towards teenagers is to present a compelling emotional argument. Just as the rest of the show was consciously structured to balance these two models, school shows were structured to present both “educational” content while also remaining fun and emotionally resonant for the teenagers in the audience.

PRP embraces the evangelical philosophy of “being in the world but not of it.” This task, in the words of Billy Graham, means that Christians must be active in the world, among people who have not yet accepted Christ, and spread the “good news” without being “conformed to the world.” That is, Christians are to act as a positive force for change by evangelizing, without letting the world affect them in a negative way. In their attempts to strike this balance, PRP generates opportunities to make themselves relevant to their teenage audience through the use of secular music, references to popular culture, and touring team members who attempt to be the kind of role-models even “unchurched” teens would want to emulate. Yet, at the same time they must carefully balance using the tools of the “world” without letting them damage or undermine their message. There is much disagreement among Christians about what constitutes being “conformed to the world” and PRP often deliberately bumps up against, and sometimes inadvertently goes over, the boundary.

PRP's ultimate goal is successful evangelism, and PRP's methods, despite being controversial, demonstrate results. The members of PRP are well aware that their approach to abstinence *and* Christianity can put them in direct conflict with the very people they rely on to support their organization, youth pastors and parents. Dave, one of the touring team leaders, and Pancho, the Master of Ceremonies during the 2009 live

events, are firm believers in PRP's methods because they feel sheltering young people is a strategy that leads to failure. Dave explains that the PRP philosophy is not to shelter kids, but to work on fostering an inner commitment to Christ. As Dave explains:

They want to force Christ and moral behavior on them from the outside but PRP wants to work from the inside out. The idea is to be in the world but not of it. If you have an inner commitment to Christ you won't be impacted by the lyrics of a song where they promote lesbianism, premarital sex, or treating women like a side of meat. Because you know it's wrong.

Dave and Pancho believe that by sheltering kids, these adults make it more likely that “as soon as they're away from home they'll go 180 degrees in the opposite direction” because they don't have an inner commitment to their beliefs. There's also the opposite problem, “they'll be so socially inept that they can't function in normal society or the workplace.”

Pancho explains that PRP attempts to create a show that will reach kids while still attempting to please parents and youth leaders because they book the shows. “The reason we play secular music is because we want it to be as mainstream as possible in the beginning.” says Dave. Pancho says, “kids coming into church already have a preconceived idea of what is going to happen and put up barriers,” by playing secular music and focusing on humor PRP hopes to break those barriers down. And PRP members are quick to argue that their methods are successful. Dave proudly tells me that they “Brought 100 kids to Christ at the [last] show.”

Yet as Pancho and Dave's comments demonstrate, PRP's methods are not just about being successful. Pancho tells me he feels “Teaching the kids to make their own decisions is better than making their parents happy. If I did the show by myself I'd go all crazy. I'd probably be shut down in a week.” he finishes with a laugh. Dave and Pancho

clearly feel that giving teenagers the tools to make their own decisions is a better method in the long run, because it will allow them to grow into Christian adults that can successfully navigate the secular world without giving in to negative impulses like lesbianism, premarital sex, or misogyny. At the same time, both Pancho and Dave clearly recognize the careful balance PRP must strike between empowering young people and pleasing adults. As Pancho grudgingly admits, his method of focusing on teenagers would lead to PRP “being shut down in a week.”

PRP demonstrates their coolness, and their ability to be “in the world,” primarily through their engagement with popular culture in their live events. The group draws heavily on secular media when choosing music, and designing skits and “commercials” that encourage both premarital abstinence and Christianity. The group sells t-shirts, jewelry, stickers and other merchandise with colorful images and catchy slogans such as “How to have the best sex ever!”--the answer is to put on a purity ring, of course.

PRP events take place at a mixture of religious and secular locations including churches, crisis pregnancy centers, summer camps, sports arenas, and colleges. Small events might draw a crowd of 400, while large events can have audiences of up to or above 10,000. A follow-up curriculum, marketed primarily to churches and youth pastors, includes a workbook for students, a workbook for parents, and a DVD that shows “behind the scenes” footage from the tour along with personal testimonies from team members. The group encourages the young people who attend PRP events to put on a ring as a symbol of their commitment to purity and passes out PRP bibles to young people who make an additional commitment to Christ. These bibles feature both the PRP

logo and some additional content focused on abstinence in addition to the traditional biblical content.

PRP's traveling team is made up of 10-14 young adults, ranging in age from 18-24. Usually divided equally by gender, these young adults are attractive, articulate and passionate about Christ. PRP staff attempt to choose a diverse group, of adolescents in terms of race, region and background. The 2009 touring team is composed of four team members who are people of color (Jackie, Alex, Gigi, and Pancho), and six white team members (Matt, Tyler, Elena, Dylan, Ingrid and Brittany)<sup>12</sup>. The 2011 team was composed of some team members from 2009: Matt, Alex, Pancho, and Dylan along with new team members Ricky and Emma (who are black) and Jordan, Alyssa, "Red," Kelsey, Taylor, Shelby, and Sarah Ann (who are white). Team members come from locations representing most regions in the U.S. Many of the members of the team come from large "megachurches" and are very active in their congregations. They often have past experiences and skills that they use during PRP events such as lighting and sound technology, drama and public speaking, digital editing and selling merchandise at large public events. PRP features a recruitment statement on their website and team members would often engage in recruitment efforts after their shows, but many touring team members are also recommended by people who have strong ties to PRP such as youth pastors or friends of staff members.

In addition to the logistics of the yearly tour, the five-member staff in the home office, along with Laurie, Dave, and Elena, also produce videos, merchandise, and

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<sup>12</sup> Halfway through the tour, one of the female members had to leave the touring team and she, a white woman, was replaced by a Latina, but this happened after I had conducted my fieldwork with the group.

curriculum for the organization. All of the staff members are Christian. They attend several different local churches which tend to be non-denominational.

### Tensions within the Evangelical Christian Community

While PRP struggles to make abstinence “cool” to their teenage audience, they also have to maintain ties to the conservative Christian community that provides them with the support they need to continue their mission. Many of the techniques PRP uses to stay relevant with the youth, specifically the “unchurched” youth, also open them to critiques by more conservative Christians that their message is not Christian *enough*. This potential for criticism from more conservative, or “traditional” Christians was a source of constant concern for PRP. Throughout my fieldwork with the group I watch as team members and staff both work to balance these tensions.

The tensions Purity Ring Posse finds themselves navigating are a result of the larger religious communities in which they are embedded. While those on the outside often think of “conservatives” as a largely monolithic group, it becomes clear to me that even among those who would define themselves as conservative, traditional, or evangelical Christians there is wide variation in theological belief, religious practice, and attitudes towards controversial issues like gender, sexuality, and race.

In their attempts to reach the largest audience possible, PRP finds themselves directly confronting these differences. While most PRP staff share many ideas about faith, sexuality, and gender, they lack a unifying doctrine to turn to in times of disagreement. Touring team members also come from different backgrounds and faith traditions. In this section I attempt to situate the reader in this larger community,

exploring how potential censure from conservative Christians impacts PRP's methods and message.

PRP often contrast their organization and members with more “traditional” congregations or Christians. This terminology is used to signal several key differences. First it contrasts the PRP model with more “fundamentalist” models of evangelism which are less interested in being “of the world” and often reject more contemporary trappings such as secular music, coffee shops, or megachurches. “Traditional” could also apply to attitudes towards other topics such as race, gender, or aspects of appearance like tattoos or short skirts. In this case “traditional” is used as a way to signify congregations or individuals who have outdated ideas about how Christians should behave, either in terms of holding racist views or shunning people with body modifications.

Many of the members of the PRP team, from the office staff to touring team members, identify themselves and the people they looked up to as people who are seen as “edgy” or “new age” by “traditional” Christians. PRP's methods are linked to both stylistic and theological differences that exist within the larger evangelical community. For instance Rob Bell, author of the book *Velvet Elvis*, is a favorite among several members of the touring team. Pancho explains the premise of the book, “the idea is that people have an idea of Christ frozen in time that they want to carry around forever but that you need to take Christ's message and make it current.” He gives the example of Christ preaching to fishermen and tax collectors, but he says “today those 'low people' aren't fisherman anymore they are crackheads, homeless people, or winos.” Team members Pancho and Colin are



both fans of Rob Bell's books. And Ingrid, another team member, has attended Rob Bell's church. But, Colin points out to me, "some people really hate him." Bell is seen as too modern or "too new age" they explain. "People that complain about PRP are the same people who hate him." Pancho explains with a laugh. Colin says they have similar complaints about the author of *Blue like Jazz*, Donald Miller, who Colin saw speak at a House of Blues.

While popular among younger Christians, Bell and Miller are viewed with some skepticism by older church leaders. Bell and Miller are both often grouped as part of the "emerging church movement," this movement of younger Christians is highly critical of organized religion, Christian dogma, and judgmental attitudes. This is most likely the basis of Colin and Pancho's comments that Bell is viewed as too "modern" or "new age." As a parachurch ministry, PRP holds a unique position. In many instances staff and team members share Bell and Miller's critiques of organized religion, Christian dogma, and the judgmental attitudes of some Christians. At the same time, churches were their main source of sponsorship and audience. While Colin and Pancho see similarities between PRP's critics and critics of people like Bell and Miller, PRP must be much more cautious about their official critiques of "traditional" Christianity than individuals like Bell or Miller.

These tensions are part of a larger split among conservative Christians. Many of PRP's tactics and theology are shared by congregations and pastors across the United States, yet are still viewed with skepticism by other conservative Christians. Early on in my fieldwork I attend a church service with the touring team at a congregation that is

sponsoring a PRP show. The church, which I call Truth Covenant, is completely different from any services I had attended growing up in a small Methodist church in Iowa. But as the tour continues, it becomes clear that model of Christianity practiced by Truth Covenant is the one PRP feels most aligned with. In this excerpt from my fieldnotes I describe the atmosphere of the church:

From the outside Truth Covenant looks more like a high school than a church. It has several double doors at the entrance and each set is staffed by two church members who welcome people coming into the church and hand them a sheet of paper. I assume it is the church bulletin but when I look more closely it is a card where you can fill out your personal information. There is also a reading list of Christian books. The pamphlet has the Gro-Up logo, with TC in the middle of the O. I look around at the people entering the church, while it is clear most of them took care in choosing their outfits most people are wearing casual or dressy-casual clothes. There are a lot of jeans and the children seem more dressed up than adults. The teenagers wear trendy outfits: ripped jeans, sequin tops, leggings. One of the door greeters is wearing a track suit.

Inside the church is an information kiosk in the center of the lobby. There are several TV screens mounted on the wall where you can see the worship band and choir performing. There is a line of computers on the right wall and 'Family Registration' in silver letters posted above. To the back is a coffee machine, to the left people selling hoodies with the Gro-Up logo. We enter the sanctuary, it is huge. Instead of pews there are cushioned chairs, the kind that link together. The main floor is pretty full so we move up to the balcony. The band/choir is singing, there is a smoke/fog machine going. On either side of the stage are two screens that project the singers- there are two men moving around the stage with video cameras and the images onscreen switch from full shots of the stage to close ups of the individual singers. To the right of the stage is a band in a plastic enclosure- I'm assuming to keep the sound down. The choir stands behind two hanging pieces of fabric that change color when different lights hit them. Over the fabric is the Gro-UP logo.

After the baptism is finished the screens show "commercials" advertising a Scrapbook small group, explaining the Gro-Up theme (Gro-Up transforms into Group) with roots and small plant images. Then a man walks onstage. He is wearing jeans and a red t-shirt with a medieval lion or something on it. He has his hair done in a contemporary spiked style. He is the middle

school pastor. He makes an announcement of the PRP show and something called FUSION that is happening in October.

The stage is re-lit and there is a stool with several different types of miracle grow or fertilizer on it. Behind the stool is an aerating device. The pastor comes onstage, he is wearing glasses, a bright orange sports jersey. He has curly hair with lots of gel in it. His sermon is on growing spiritually. He uses the metaphor of fertilizer to talk about ways to grow spiritually. He encourages people to receive transformational teaching, to live in Christ rather than just believe in Christ- because this is the only way they'll get to Heaven. "You wouldn't like it in Heaven" he says, "if you don't like going to church, worshiping, and reading the bible." He says the Church has become lazy. At the end of the sermon he encourages everyone to take notes since he will be giving them different types of "fertilizer." He recommends people that don't have paper should get a CD of the sermon. Some of his suggestions include downloading Christian books on your iPod (have your 8th grader show you if you don't know how, he jokes to the audience), read the pastors' blogs, find online devotionals, listen to CDs while in the car. He asks everyone to think of one thing they will do to grow spiritually. Then a man with a guitar comes on stage and performs Michael Jackson's "Man in the Mirror." When he is done the service is over.

Like PRP, Truth Covenant relies on contemporary music, marketing techniques like creating a yearly "theme," and an emphasis on making faith messages both fun and accessible, as methods for reaching their congregation. Truth Covenant (TC) is clearly quite successful. The service I attend with PRP has to make use of the "over flow" room next door where audience members who wouldn't fit in the main auditorium could watch the service through a live video feed. And this is one of three services offered each Sunday at TC.

But as Dave points out to me at a later show, even though Roger, the pastor at Truth Covenant, is able to bring in large crowds for Sunday services he is still seen as "out there" by other Christians in his southern town. "It's real Bible belt down there and they're like 'this is how we've always done it'." He affects a heavy southern drawl as he

finishes the sentence. The woman I and some other team members stay with during the Truth Covenant show makes similar comments when asking us what we thought of the TC service, remarking that she is a bit “old-fashioned” and can't get into Roger's more contemporary worship style.

These so-called megachurches, a term that referred not only to a particular size of church, but also to a method of proselytizing that included live music, hi-tech marketing, and amenities like coffee shops, are often heavily critiqued by other conservative Christians. Elena, the touring team member who also did follow-up for PRP, explains to me that the first congregation she was a member of, Holy Name, is very different from churches like Truth Covenant. Holy Name is “really against megachurches and very into evangelism,” but she says it is also very in-your-face and critical. She had been attending Holy Name with her now ex-boyfriend, who required Elena to attend Holy Name with him because he did not want Elena to “get disciplined wrong.” The term “get disciplined” applies to how one is taught Christianity. According to Elena's ex-boyfriend and his congregation, there are not only wrong and right ways to learn Christianity, there are also wrong and right ways to *practice* Christianity. Her boyfriend's worry that she would get “disciplined wrong” alludes to the fact that a different church would not provide the same theological foundation (a critique commonly leveled against both megachurches *and*, as I will demonstrate, PRP).

After breaking up with her boyfriend, Elena stopped attending Holy Name and now attends Victory with fellow staff members Dave and J.C.. Elena classifies Victory as a “megachurch,” the exact type of congregation Holy Name is against. She admits that

sometimes Victory is criticized “because we have a cafe and stuff” but that it brings people in. She says this criticism is similar to what happens to PRP, “they say we're too edgy but it draws people in. They did that in the past, too. In a different way than today but still...” Elena's description of Victory, a “megachurch” with a “cafe and stuff” bears striking similarities to Truth Covenant. Like Pancho, Elena sees the value in churches adapting to contemporary needs in order to “draw people in.” Elena draws a connection between older forms of evangelism, what they did in the past, with current tactics used by both PRP and megachurches. Rather than doing Christianity wrong, PRP members see themselves adapting with the times in order to be successful in their evangelism.

The different congregations illustrate some of the different approaches to evangelism among conservative Christians. More “traditional” congregations like Holy Name are against megachurches, while still being highly focused on evangelism. Congregations like Truth Covenant and Victory both rely on contemporary or “edgy” techniques to draw in their audience: using secular music, worship bands, and providing amenities like free coffee or an on-site cafe. While both groups define themselves as evangelicals, they disagree on which methods are “right” for Christians.

I meet John, the Youth Pastor at a local Baptist church, while on tour with PRP in Tennessee in 2009. He further articulates some of the tensions that PRP attempts to navigate. John touches on worship style, denominational divisions, and attitudes towards secular culture as some of the potential clashes between Christians.

We start out by discussing my church background in the United Methodist Church. He says he's heard that Methodists up north are different than in the south, more

'orthodox' or boring. I admit there is definitely a tension between an older worship style and more contemporary worship services. He says they have the same tension in his church, “we've tried to meet halfway but it's resulted in a weird mix.” He says a problem they have is that kids come up in the church and like more contemporary stuff and then when they get to college they can't find a place with that style and end up going to the BIG church, because that's the only place you can find it.

Dave admits to me that he sees Christians fighting amongst each other as a sign of the end times. He tells me he thinks that churches like Northpoint Community church, NewSpring, or Craig Groeshel's church have the right idea. These are all non-denominational, evangelical, megachurches, some of them have multiple “campuses” in various locations. These churches, Dave argues, are more about following God than about denominational divisions. He says that letting the light shine on the Word is more important than talking about "Harry Potter” or what you can't do or can't read. Alluding to a common evangelical rejection of Harry Potter, preached against by some pastors because of its use of magic, Dave argues successful churches focus on evangelizing, “letting the light shine on the word,” rather than telling attendees exactly how to practice their faith.

Dave and Pancho articulate similar critiques in my conversations with them. Like John, Dave and Pancho worry that by sheltering young people from “the world” many pastors and parents are losing touch and setting young people up for failure. Dave and Pancho similarly point to their success in evangelizing to young people as proof that their methods are theologically sound. Pancho's references to Rob Bell and *Velvet Elvis* are

used to prove that evangelicals like PRP, or megachurches like NewSpring, are the ones who are actually following Christ's example.

In order to continue to operate within the larger evangelical and conservative Christian community, PRP often has to soften or silence the critiques of organized religion and “traditional” Christianity that members articulate in private. While their main audience is teenagers, particularly unchurched teenagers who either weren't Christian or were less committed to Christianity, they have to prove their Christian legitimacy to the adults who provide the money and support that keeps PRP running. PRP was often able to deflect critiques from fellow Christians by pointing to the success of their “mission” the number of young people brought to Christ at each show, but this tactic was not always sufficient.

### The Tarnished Purity Ring

You can imagine the feeling I had and the expression on our students' faces when the very song I had just spoken against last Wednesday ("I've Got A Feeling" by Black Eyed Peas, watch the music video on YouTube and you'll see why) began to blast across the room. I was infuriated.

Additionally, there were several other songs being played that were just as sexually offensive as I've Got a Feeling, if not worse. No, there were no cuss words, well, at least not in the portions of the songs they played. Then again, why play a song anyway if you have to dodge certain words?

Especially, at a Christian oriented event! Our bus transportation had dropped us off and was only coming back at 8:30 to pick us up after the event; otherwise, we would've left right then!

During my fieldwork, the greatest challenge to PRP's methods comes from the blog of a youth pastor who had attended a live event. The post entitled “The Tarnished Purity Ring” was posted on the pastor's personal blog and articulates a detailed critique of the PRP show, from the sexually provocative music played to the biblical insufficiency of the

gospel presented by the group.

Well, this sexually provocative music (keep in mind we are at a sexual purity event) finally quit once the show started, but I was already over the whole event before it ever actually began. After the show, once everyone had basically cleared out, I had a conversation with the guy who most often appeared on stage (Pancho) because I didn't know who else to go to. I thanked him for the promotion of sexual purity that they were presenting, but I proceeded to share with him my concerns over the pre-service music. I asked him if he knew the meaning behind one of the songs or if he had seen the video. He said he "thought" he knew the meaning, but he hadn't watched the video. **Shouldn't he know for sure what they are blasting over the speakers?** I'm not even upset that all the songs weren't Christian because I don't think every song necessarily has to be Christian, but there must be a line. According to Scripture, sexual immorality is a distinct line. After all, you can rest assured these students know what these songs mean, and once again, THIS IS A SEXUAL PURITY EVENT!

Though Purity Ring Posse is selective about the music they play before their shows, censoring songs so that curse words are not played, or rejecting songs like Lady Gaga's "Love Game" that have sexually explicit lyrics, they still face potential criticism for their use of secular music. Though the author of this post says he is not upset that the songs "weren't Christian" he still rejects PRP's choices as crossing a line. For this youth pastor PRP could not call themselves a sexual purity group if they played what he felt was sexually provocative music.

The song in question, "I've Got a Feeling" by the Black Eyed Peas, is a fairly standard party anthem. The chorus proclaims, "I've gotta feeling that tonight's gonna be a good night." The music is upbeat and high energy and gives the opening of the show the atmosphere of a party rather than a church event. While the song does contain the lyrics: "Look at her dancing/just take it off," the real objection seems to be to the video for the song which features the band attending a wild party featuring scantily clad women,



alcohol, and women dancing together provocatively and kissing.

The content of the video seems to directly contradict the message of PRP. It glorifies partying, drinking, and while no actual sexual intercourse is shown it is implied by dancing and kissing. Yet Pancho clearly chose the song because of the upbeat tune and celebratory lyrics. Rather than ushering teens into a dour lecture against sex, “I’ve Got a Feeling” encouraged the audience to have fun and enjoy themselves at the PRP show.

The media used in the show is not the only aspect of PRP's tactics that is critiqued in the post. The pastor also finds fault with the way PRP presents their message on Christianity. Echoing Elena's discussion of “getting disciplined wrong” the author critiques PRP's discussion of the gospel, a much more serious critique for a group that prides themselves on successful evangelism.

PRP needs to either present the gospel accurately by teaching on sin, submission, and what it means to truly become a follower of Christ or just leave it up to the people who will take time to do it right. Otherwise, parents and youth leaders have to spend the next several years trying to undo what events like the PRP do to the students' understanding of being a Christian due to the fact they were presented with a gospel that is biblically not sufficient.

PRP is used to these kinds of critiques, especially those that focus on their choice of media. But the critique about PRP's gospel was one that cut to the heart of PRP's mission and demonstrates why PRP goes to such lengths to prove that while they are in the world, they are not of it—their worldly trappings are always in service to the Word. It is the exact opposite claim to the one the blog is making. The author presents Purity Ring Posse's teaching on Christianity as so wrong it must be *undone* by parents and youth

leaders. PRP may pride themselves on the young people who become Christians after their shows, but this youth pastor implies that they are actually doing more harm than good by converting young people to a misunderstanding of what it truly means to be a follower of Christ.

PRP needs to realize that much of the media they use (music and some video clips) contradicts their own message. We have some teens who are VERY committed in their faith, and this was their observation, not mine. These are students who are on fire for Christ and sharing their faith regularly. The PRP needs to clean it up and remember the message they are promoting, which is SEXUAL PURITY. Don't use music and videos that contradict this. If they can't communicate God's truths on sexual purity without these resources, then they need to reconsider their agenda!

While PRP members often present the central tension they navigate as one between pleasing young people and pleasing their parents, this blog exposes a more complex distinction between Christians in the audience and those “unchurched” teenagers who are the audience for PRP's evangelical message. While these teens, who are either less committed to Christianity or not Christian, might be persuaded to listen to PRP's message because they are playing popular music and showing their engagement with secular culture, the Christian teens in the audience might find the music and video clips too be too “worldly” for a Christian event focused on sexual purity.

PRP's methods of evangelism leave them exposed to critiques about their true mission—in the pursuit of coolness PRP jeopardizes their legitimacy as a sexual purity group. The author of this piece, and his youth group, believe that the media used by PRP undermines the message of sexual purity—they reject PRP's implicit claim that they can promote sexual purity using popular songs with questionable content or videos. In their

opinion PRP has crossed the line, they have taken on too much of a “worldly” influence to truly promote either sexual purity or Christianity.

While I will always be interested in identifying with culture and being creative in reaching the unreached for Christ, I will never try to disguise Jesus, Christianity, and the seriousness of following Him behind sexually inappropriate music or a superficial, "magic-potion" gospel. If we are reaching the lost with the sinful music of the world and a half-hearted presentation of the gospel, are we really reaching them with anything at all?

This author does not disagree with PRP's use of pop culture, he argues that using culture in creative ways can be an effective way to evangelize the “unreached,” but he disagrees with the degree to which PRP relies on these “disguises” to promote Christ and sexual purity. While PRP members largely discuss their challenges as a dichotomy between “traditional” and “edgy” Christians, this blog shows that the line is often more difficult to judge. It is not simply that some Christians reject secular culture, but that different Christians draw the line between being in the world, but not of it at different points.

His critique undermines many of the arguments PRP members used to justify the controversies provoked by their methods. PRP members point to the large numbers of teens who put on a ring at their shows and commit themselves to Christ as demonstrations that their methods are justified because they ultimately result in more teens becoming Christians. For PRP the ends justify the means. Yet, much like critiques of churches that used coffee shops or fancy light shows to encourage membership, these methods are presented by the youth pastor as tricks that lure an audience in without providing them with a deeper understanding of the faith. This argument may also be a way for more “traditional” Christians to claim moral superiority in the face of dwindling

numbers. Megachurches and those with more contemporary evangelical methods are definitely much more successful at attracting membership. Yet as this pastor argues, the messages of these “worldly” Christians are too watered-down to be effective. Critiques like this undermine PRP's ability to claim success at encouraging sexual purity *or* Christianity—because they've taken on too much of the world to truly promote sexual purity or Christ. *The Tarnished Purity Ring* exposes some fundamental tensions within the evangelical community about what is really Christian, what is too worldly, what methods are both successful and legitimate.

The blog post, and the following comment, demonstrate that PRP's concerns about negative reactions are not unfounded. Other Christians *are* critical of PRP's use of secular music, secular movie clips, and even their reliance on humor. By creating a show that will challenge the assumptions of the “unreached” teenagers in the audience, they are also challenging the expectations of the Christians in attendance and threatening their legitimacy as a Christian sexual purity group.

Comments by Anonymous on the *Tarnished Purity Ring* blog post:

Honestly, I felt the event was too goofy. Sure a little goofy was good, but I felt like I went to a comedy show more than an event advertising sexual purity. The clips they played were not too good with the women with cleavage and the men half naked. That isn't teaching them to stay pure, that's saying, hey these people dress and act this way, you can too. People think these people are "good looking" you should want to be like them. And the movies that those clips came from were very inappropriate [sic]. I just wish it was more serious. Sure they can make us laugh a bunch, but more serious would have been nice. This is just my opinion.

For a group that prides itself on using “edgy” methods to proselytize and spread the gospel, this criticism in the blog post challenges the arguments team members mobilize to show their tactics are simply good evangelism. While PRP members argue that

“goofiness” is there to reach teens, the anonymous commenter argues that PRP is actually promoting the very thing they are working against. But while Pancho, Dave, and Matt are worried about the potential of this blog to harm the morale of the team, or cause a PR headache, they all seemed secure in the fact that PRP is ultimately changing lives with their tactics. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes:

We get on the bus after the last assembly and Dave tells Pancho they need to have a meeting because he's been on the phone with Jimmy for most of the show. I can hear them talking about some song from the opening. Dave is saying for the San Antonio show they'll just do instrumental techno at the beginning so no one will get upset. Matt goes to the front to sit and listen. I move forward because I can't hear everything they're saying. I hear Dave say something about how a song won't make him promote lesbianism. He says they've already taken out parts of the songs that use swears and they still get complaints because they use secular music. They are sending the folks in San Antonio a video of their show so they can approve the videos but they'll need to have back up videos in case they don't like any of them.

When I get to the front Dave is telling Matt that someone wrote about the show on their blog and criticized their music. Dave explains that they use the Black Eyed Peas song "I've Got a Feeling" Which apparently has a video that contains some images of lesbianism. Matt asks who wrote the blog, Dave says it was one of the youth pastors at the church where they did the last show. Pancho says he knows who it was because he talked to the pastor after the show. He explained that he'd never seen the video. The pastor said he'd been teaching music videos to his youth and that video was one of the examples he used as a negative. Pancho says he said he was not aware of the video but he'd heard the song in a CBS commercial and thought it was a good song. Then he finds out the guy wrote a blog saying he was going to tell everyone not to go to the shows. Dave says this is when there's a problem, when someone is telling other people not to do shows because then Jason gets nervous because his job depends on booking shows. Pancho says he's angry because he discussed it and thought the subject was closed. Dave says not to tell the rest of the team because they want to keep morale high.

I ask if they've had any problems with people not liking the videos they show and they tell me yes. I ask if there are any specific ones. Dave said it varies, you just never know what will set someone off. Once they showed

their "Russian Roulette" video which deals with condom failure and compares it to playing Russian roulette with a loaded gun and they showed it in a place where one of the youth had just committed suicide so it hit too close to home. "Apparently this was somehow our fault," Pancho says sarcastically. I agree that there isn't a way they could have known. Dave says one of their videos has a humorous line about "the town tricycle" "because everybody's had a ride" and some people objected to that. (9-22)

Matt, Dave, and Pancho are all veteran team members. They are used to dealing with critiques leveled against PRP, as their various stories demonstrate. Yet, they worry that newer team members will take the criticisms more personally. And it is clear from Dave's opening comments that Jimmy and the office staff also took steps to respond to these critiques. The touring team makes changes to the music, and sends along a video to the hosting group, as ways of reducing the fallout from this negative publicity. It is also clear that Pancho attempts to address these critiques in his closing Gospel talk at the next show. Pancho's new talk introduces more aspects of gospel and theology, such as sin, crucifixion, and Christ as a savior, while still keeping the language engaging and accessible:

Pancho explains that they are talking about an important three-letter word S-I-N. "Sin is a fancy word for disobedience to God. God is Holy, without blemish, perfect." He tells the audience that "God is gonna give us what we need if we make Him the center of our life." He explains that Jesus Christ was sent and the audience claps and cheers. He says Christ died for our sin, "think about how big that is, how much love that shows" He says that "Christ took a serious beat down." it was so bad they couldn't even show it all in the "Passion of the Christ" He asks "for what though?" He explains that God puts punishment on Christ Jesus, Jesus was crucified, he suffocated then he died and they bury him in the tomb. Pancho explains that you'd think the story would end there, but Christ rose. The audience responds enthusiastically by clapping, repeating "yes yes". He explains that you need to surrender to God, give the Lord control. Because Christ is a savior, "he saved you from destruction" "And we are set apart for His will" but "you gotta have Christ at the center" because you can't do it by yourself. He asks them to pray the prayer either giving their life to Christ or

rededicating their life to Christ. He explains, "it's not the words" that are important "but your heart behind the words."

As I listen to Pancho's talk I can't help but wonder how much the changes have been influenced by the youth pastor's critique. The question at the closing of the blog, "If we are reaching the lost with the sinful music of the world and a half-hearted presentation of the gospel, are we really reaching them with anything at all?" cuts to the heart of PRP's goals. PRP staff and team members can deflect critiques of their methods only if they can also argue that they are effectively preaching the gospel. Marketing staff meetings often center around making sure they aren't "cheapening" the message with their tactics. So the idea that the teens PRP is reaching are hearing a version of the gospel so watered-down it is worthless, undermines PRP's ability to justify both their methods and the reason for their existence.

I was lucky enough to talk with Pancho about the changes to his talk. His response demonstrates the multiple negotiations that PRP must undertake in order to continue their mission:

I see Pancho as I'm exiting the auditorium. I tell him I liked his closing talk and ask him if he changed it up at all? He says he did. He tells me he's been praying for renewed passion. He says after you do it for awhile "it becomes like a job but you really need passion for the last part." He says he's been praying about it for awhile since he's coming back from doing it last year, and there's really nothing new. He pauses and says with a smile "I thank that jerk guy..." I laugh "He's not really a jerk, he's just a guy who doesn't agree with us" he clarifies. "But I think he really helped." He asks me if I've heard of movie "I am Legend" and I say I have. He tells me there's a part where Will Smith says "evil never takes the day off." "The people who oppose this are always working, so we need to bring our A-game." he says.

Much like the changes to the music and the videos, Pancho's revision of his speech is

meant to address the critiques faced by the group, not from secular or “liberal” outsiders, but from members of PRP's Christian community. The reference to Will Smith in “I am Legend” draws on a battle metaphor, as Will Smith is fighting against zombies to preserve some bit of humanity. But the people Pancho is working against are not just people opposed to abstinence, they are also the Christians who don't understand PRP's tactics and attempt to stop them. They are the people who want to shelter teenagers from secular culture, who want to talk about abstinence without talking about sex, who want to preserve Christ as a “velvet Elvis” who never changes. And while Pancho might see himself working against the Christians who oppose them, PRP's relationship to these other Christians is far more complex. PRP cannot simply reject these Christians because the support of these other Christians is necessary to support their organization *and* preserve their identity as an evangelical ministry.

#### Catholics and Protestants

PRP's predominant community is other conservative, evangelical, protestant Christians. The methods, style, and faith traditions of PRP are largely drawn from contemporary evangelical protestant churches and pastors. The members of the touring team all identify as evangelical or non-denominational Christians, but the unspoken assumption is that Christian is interchangeable with Protestant. While PRP experiences tensions stemming from the divisions among conservative, evangelical protestants, they still share enough of a common language to allow PRP to deflect many critiques or smooth over misunderstandings.

PRP's experience with the Catholic community demonstrates the differences that



exist between an evangelical protestant and conservative Catholic approach to abstinence. Much of PRP's approach is not applicable to a Catholic audience. And the method of using toilet humor and “edgy” marketing is viewed even less favorably by the Catholic adults I encounter on tour. As the following example illustrates, while discourses around abstinence have been largely standardized at the political level, local and contextual differences still remain important boundaries among groups, though they share a similar positive stance towards premarital sexual abstinence.

Near the end of my first tour, PRP presents a live event at a Catholic school. Many team members express excitement that they will “get to talk about God” at the school assembly. But even before the event Laurie and Dave have started discussing the changes they will need to make to the show to make it palatable to their Catholic audience.

Laurie tells Dave and Pancho need to call Jason to talk about the Catholic event. Apparently the diocese got involved. “Oh Man.” Dave says with an exasperated sigh. Laurie says there are certain things they want for the show. Dave says to make sure they have the 'Pure Love' packets ready<sup>13</sup>. (9-23)

The involvement of the diocese means that the adults involved with the school are much more vigilant and put pressure on PRP to make sure the content of the live event is consistent with Catholic doctrine. The following conversation between Dave and Laurie highlights some of the differences between the Catholic and Evangelical protestant approaches to abstinence:

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<sup>13</sup> Pure Love is a pamphlet on chastity put together by popular Catholic author Jason Evert. Evert was one of the speakers invited to speak by Revolutionary Romance and was viewed as one of the best speakers by the largely Catholic audience for the talk.

Dave is talking to Laurie about what Jason said about the Catholic event. He says that Catholics teach sex is for pleasure in marriage and for making babies. Any use of contraceptives is killing life. He says they can't talk about condoms in the skits or videos. Laurie doesn't think they do. Dave says they'll use the Chastity Apple videos. He says he's not sure what to do at the parent session since the majority of what he talks about is condoms. (9-24)

PRP comes out of an evangelical context in which arguments against a secular discourse of “safe sex” are viewed as necessary to convince both parents and teens that abstinence is the best choice. Yet at a Catholic school where students are already being warned against contraceptives, PRP's message was less applicable. PRP has done Catholic events before, demonstrated by the fact that they have already produced several Chastity Apple videos, which replace the “Waiting/Not Waiting” videos and their focus on STDs and contraceptives. But the touring team is unprepared for just how different the attitudes of the adults sponsoring the show will be. This interaction between Jackie and some of the parents at the school highlights the clash between approaches, as well as the frustration it causes among PRP members:

Jackie is almost done setting up the Merch display. There are all the different t-shirts hanging on display. I am standing far away so I can't hear exactly what he says. He seems upset. As they talk Jackie gets more and more frustrated. The man walks away and Jackie calls Gigi over. "We're here to say not to have sex without mentioning sex." she says with exasperation. Shannon returns with the man and several other adults. Jackie is laying out the "Herpes kills dates" "Sex causes Babies" and "Guys don't get Pregnant" shirts. Shannon sees them and looks shocked and horrified. "Oh no, no, no." she says quickly. Jackie asks if she needs to put them all away. Shannon says yes. The adults go through and tell Jackie which shirts to take down. One of the women says to another that the diocese is coming. They have Jackie take down "How to Have the Best Sex" "Safe Sex Isn't" and "Safe Sex: Warning no condoms protect 100%" . The man wants to

take down "Don't Drink and Park: Accidents Cause Kids" but some parents think it is funny. There is a discussion and the adults decide it will be safer to take it down. Jackie asks with some frustration if she can put out the "Crabs" stickers. Shannon looks at them, one of the women behind her laughs, but Shannon shakes her head, " No, nothing that implies..." One of the women says to another woman, "We're teaching abstinence-only, no sex."

After they leave Jackie turns around. "I'm so mad Kat" she says to me. "They told us to come and talk to their kids about sex. And they don't want this..." She throws up her hands in frustration.

As one parent comments, the school is teaching "abstinence-only." PRP also sees themselves as an "abstinence-only" organization. Yet the clash over the t-shirts and stickers illustrates the potentially different interpretations of abstinence, even as both define themselves as "abstinence-only." To the adults at this Catholic school "abstinence-only" means not mentioning sex *at all*. But this approach is totally contradictory to the PRP model, which fundamentally recognizes that many kids in the audience have already had sex, and that secular media, their peers, and even public schools actively disseminate messages that are contradictory to abstinence. PRP wanted to "talk to kids about sex" even if the emphasis is on the potential dangers of sex before marriage and an ultimate message to commit or re-commit to abstinence. A culture of silence is viewed by PRP members as deluded and dangerous, sheltering kids will only lead to them being unable to make difficult decisions for themselves. As Jackie's frustration demonstrates, PRP does not believe you can tell kids not to have sex without talking about sex. But this approach is definitely not accepted by all supporters of abstinence.

## PRP Orientation

Touring team members are chosen by Jimmy and his staff, with particular input from Dave and Laurie, based on their application and a phone or video interview. When possible the touring team arranges for in-person interviews while on tour. Pancho explains the preference for video interviews because they help staff evaluate the prospective team member's energy and stage presence.

Once chosen, touring team members come to the home office for several weeks of orientation. The orientation process highlights PRP's multiple functions: a missionary team, a multimedia show, and an abstinence promotion campaign. The days I am there are split into multiple activities meant to bring the team together and help them prepare for the tour. After breakfast the team gathers for a devotional, more experienced team members and staff model this process in the first couple days: choosing a bible verse, giving their testimony, and weaving it into a larger message about Christianity and faith. In this way team members get to know each other. Many testimonies focus on personal struggles to remain abstinent, giving team members an intimate view into the history and struggles of their fellow team members. The devotionals also help the team grow together as a spiritual community.

After the devotion and prayer, the team splits up into groups to work on different projects. This includes building sets, planning and practicing skits, helping create and edit videos, and preparing merchandise. Many team members have skills that make them suited for particular tasks—several members had theater experience both on-stage and backstage, other members had been active in megachurches that had complex light and

sound displays, some had worked merchandise for prominent Christian artists who had visited their congregations, and other team members had training in web design and video editing. The touring team orientation lasts for several weeks. During this time team members learn their roles on the team while also working to put the live event together. The training is largely conducted by Dave and Laurie, the touring team leaders, but the team also interacts with the other PRP home office staff. Everyone eats lunch and socializes together. And the staff and more seasoned team members often plan fun activities for the end of the day: a water balloon fight, a trip to a nearby city for ice cream, or a barbeque at a staff member's home.

While the training is taken seriously, there is also a lot of down time that allows for a relaxed and jovial atmosphere. Team members often engage in silly pranks or stunts such as giving each other rides on the cart meant for loading equipment, or stealing a stuffed animal a staff member keeps on her desk. These stunts and pranks are videotaped and shown to the whole group at the end of the day. Similar videos will be made by the team during tour, allowing fans who access the website or receive follow-up emails to get a “backstage” look at the team's adventures.

While disagreements and tensions among team members do happen on tour, where lack of sleep, nerves, and close quarters challenge patience and elevate tempers, from what I observe team members all got along well during orientation. The atmosphere felt a bit like summer camp, the team works together on various projects, has time to relax and have fun, and generally enjoys getting to know their new team mates. Team members with more experience, like Laurie, Dave, Pancho, or Matt are also adept at

generating conversations that help team members get to know each other in a more casual way than during devotionals, where team members shared their more personal testimonies. For instance eliciting stories about team members' first school dance, or favorite movie, or sandwich preferences.

In addition to concrete skills, orientation is also about crafting this group of young people into a PRP touring team. All members of the touring team are young people whose central identity is Christian, this means that most team members spend at least some of their free time reading their bibles, journaling about their faith, and thinking about evangelism. All team members share a commitment to evangelism and sharing the gospel. Some have past struggles with sexuality that bring them to PRP specifically. Some hope to enter youth ministry or missionary work and see PRP as a way to improve their skills. Many are excited by the opportunity to travel around the country and meet new people. And finally, some team members hope to meet their future spouse while on tour.

Some team members arrive with a cool and confident presence. Other team members are less confident but bring extensive knowledge of lighting, sound design, or video editing. Some team members are especially savvy about current secular fashion, music, or movies. Others are less knowledgeable about secular popular culture but bring a more extensive knowledge of Christian popular culture that lends credibility to the group. And still other team members need more extensive coaching in confidence or public speaking before they are able to appear on-stage during the live event.

A Purity Ring Posse touring team is a cohesive group of young people who are

both cool *and* Christian, but also embody the Purity Ring Posse brand. This means some team members have to tone down their fashion or media preferences, while other team members have to be more accepting of secular music and movies. Orientation does not attempt to change personal beliefs, it is understood that all team members share the same core commitments to Christ and evangelism. Rather orientation aims to teach team members how to represent Purity Ring Posse without completely sacrificing their individuality.

For instance, tattoos are quite common among members of the touring team. Even Dave has some. I witness several very enthusiastic conversations among team members about tattoo designs and placement. At no point does anyone raise a question about whether tattoos are compatible with a Christian identity, this is taken as a given. At the same time, team members are encouraged to cover their tattoos when they are visiting more conservative locations or congregations. Beginning at orientation, team members learn which of their behaviors are acceptable as a representative of PRP and which are not. Some behaviors, like covering tattoos, do not provoke disagreements, other behaviors, such as the apparel choices of female team members, are the sites of much more active debate.

#### Orientation Devotional

We meet in the conference room, most people are sitting around the table, but some of the older staff members--Laurie, Elizabeth, and I--sit a little farther back. I am handed a few sheets of paper with different bible verses printed on them. It begins with the PRP verse<sup>14</sup> which Dave wants everyone to memorize. He explains his mom was at a show and overheard a team

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<sup>14</sup> This was the verse inscribed on the purity rings given out by the group. First Thessalonians 4:3-4: "God wants you to be holy, so you should abstain from fornication. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor."

member who couldn't explain the verse. He wants the touring team to challenge each other to learn it.

Dave explains that PRP is about reconciling people to Christ. More than abstinence, it is really great evangelism. He wouldn't have moved to the city if it was just about abstinence. It is a responsibility and an honor to be part of PRP. Dave explains that team members are Christ's ambassadors, not like Hilary Clinton, more like biblical times when they represented the king and wore his ring when traveling to other kingdoms. From now on during fun time, private time, and anything on the internet, they are representing PRP. Dave mentions that there are some things they (PRP) don't have a problem with, but more conservative people might. He explains most people on the team don't have boy/girlfriends and PRP asks that they keep their relationship status throughout the tour. Team members need to live in such a way that no one stumbles and no one finds fault with their ministry.

In this orientation to Purity Ring Posse, Dave reveals many of the salient points about the organization that will carry through my fieldwork with the group. First, the members of PRP do not see themselves as merely, or even primarily, a sexual purity or abstinence organization. Rather, PRP is able to evoke such passion and commitment from the young adults on the touring team because they see it as a ministry. Elizabeth, the staff member who manages the PRP office, explains to me that many team members view their time with PRP the way they would a mission trip. The team members receive a small stipend to cover basic expenses and their food and lodging are covered while on tour. Some team members take up a collection from their church to help cover any additional costs, such as unexpected medical issues, purchasing new clothing, or free-time activities such as going to the movies or out for coffee. Team members are quick to point out they aren't on tour to make money, but to witness for Christ. Many team members use their experience with PRP as a stepping stone to entering the ministry full-time once they've completed their tour(s).



Underpinning PRP's touring show is their goal to “reconcile people to Christ.” In order to do this, the touring team needed to act as role-models for young people not only in terms of abstinence, but also as Christians. The daily devotionals, which continue while the team is on tour, organized by team leaders Laurie and Dave, and later Pancho and Jordan, are an important aspect of this. Devotionals are there to ensure not only that the team feels supported in Christ, but also to protect the ministry from criticism. Dave's admonishment to all team members to learn the Bible verse from the ring helps ensure that team members can demonstrate a knowledge of the theology underlying the pop-culture trappings, protecting criticisms that the group was cheapening “the Word” by relying too heavily on “worldly” culture to sell their message.

Similarly, Dave's caution that PRP touring members are “Christ's ambassadors” is partially to protect PRP from further criticism. Even in their free time and private time, team members are expected to be role-models of young, sexually pure, Christianity, in order to reflect positively on Purity Ring Posse. As Dave points out, there may be behaviors that PRP leadership is not against, but might be viewed negatively by “more conservative people.” As Dave's final comments to the group illustrate, PRP sees themselves as working against mainstream, secular culture, but also has to guard against criticisms from other, more “conservative” Christians.

Dave points out some verses on the sheet with highlighted passages. One highlights hardships and calamities, he says on tour that includes things like sleepless nights and no snacks. Other passages include “proving ourselves by our purity.” Dave emphasizes “we serve God whether people honor us or despise us,” he explains there will be times when groups feel they are too edgy, bringing in too much of the world. But he believes that the ministry is so powerful that they are doing the right thing. We have brought a lot of people to Christ he tells the team.

Dave's introductory devotional highlights many of the tensions experienced by Purity Ring Posse. The group promotes abstinence, but they are above all an evangelical ministry. The group attempts to make their message relevant and attractive to young people, but also tries to keep more conservative audience members from “finding fault with their ministry.” As a ministry, the group relied on their ability to bring people to Christ, as a way to defend their methods. At the same time, they also attempted to avoid potential criticism by policing the behavior of touring team members, and by giving their team members tools to demonstrate their own commitments to both sexual purity *and* Christianity.

But as Dave's comments also point out, this task is complicated by the fact that there is not complete agreement among US Christians about how good Christians should look, behave, or believe. While PRP navigates the tensions resulting from trying to please both their teenage and adult audience, they must also consciously construct the live event and touring team in ways that can help the group navigate interactions with a wide range of Christians across the United States.

#### Creating the Live Event

During orientation team members learn what roles they will take on during the tour, and get a chance to practice them before taking off. Team members also take a personal role in shaping the live event: creating the videos, sets, skits, and talks that will be used during tour season. This process helps socialize team members into the PRP model of abstinence and evangelizing. Team members learn, through crafting materials for the tour, how to balance PRP's youth orientation and toilet humor with their

reputation as a legitimate Christian, sexual purity organization, as this excerpt from my experience in the editing office demonstrates:

We are sitting in the editing office. On the right wall there is Jared's editing station with two computers, keyboards, editing equipment. Then Dave's desk with two monitors, then another desk with some computers. The editing office looks like a finished basement with track lighting, several mismatched couches, several office chairs, and a shelf. Several of us, Jackie, Alex, Tyler and Colin are there. Dave calls the boys over and tells them their task is to find some new movie clips for the 'Sex is Great!' talk. He goes through the script with them and explains the past clips gives some suggestions for new clips. The boys seem to recognize the movies he mentions and often have their own suggestions. At one point Alex mentions using a scene of dogs having sex from Transformers and Jared speaks up saying they probably can't use that one. Dave agrees says they need to find something that implies sex but won't make people upset. He gives Colin a stack of movies to take home and watch. Alex suggests they find clips on Youtube and then find the part on the DVD.

Jared and Dave's responses to Alex's suggested clip illustrate the PRP approach to pop-culture in their shows. The group is constantly trying to be “edgy,” on the edge of what is acceptable to a Christian audience, without going over that edge into making people upset. The clips used in the show can *imply* sex, but shouldn't have any actual sexual content. For example, one of the clips used in 2009 is a scene of the Saturday Night Live character, the catholic school-girl Mary Catherine Gallagher, making out with a tree while a disapproving nun watches. The group wants content that will be surprising and somewhat edgy to their “unreached” teen audience, but won't cause “people,” such as adults or Christian teens, to get offended or upset. The orientation process helps team members understand where to draw this line. Jared and Dave review the clips chosen by team members and discuss why a particular clip is too edgy, like the dogs having sex. Team members are much more confident about which material to exclude because it is

too dull or too outdated, since many team members have extensive knowledge about current movies and tv shows.

In another example, the team receives a lesson in the PRP ideology while putting together the opening skit for the show. In this skit, loosely based on a popular sketch from Saturday Night Live, a choreographer, played by Colin, is teaching a group of four dancers. When three of the dancers find out during rehearsal that he has slept with each of them it causes problems on the set. The skit is meant to demonstrate the perils of promiscuity in a humorous way. The added humor would come from the fact that the three dancers would be played by male members of the touting team in drag, who would also be horrible dancers. A central point of the discussion was about what song to use. Dave worries that “Single Ladies” by Beyonce, the song used in the Saturday Night Live sketch, will be too over-played by the time the tour ends, nearly a year later.

Dave comes in to watch the skit. He doesn't like the accent Colin is doing for his character. He asks Jackie what song they should use. She says she was thinking Lady Gaga, the chorus from “Love Game.” Dave shakes his head “Lady Gaga is too, too wrong.” “And we have to be careful...” Jackie replies. Dave nods. “We want something that will last all year. Last year “My Humps” lasted all year. It was already popular when we started the tour and then it really took off.” Jackie nods and you can tell she's thinking about possibilities in her head.

Team members brainstorm potential songs that will be familiar to a wide range of teens, but will not lose popularity before the tour is over. Jackie has made up her own choreography for Gaga's popular song “Love Game” and tries to convince Dave to use it for the skit. She performs the dance for the group, demonstrating that the simple choreography will be easy to learn and that the song is just obscure enough that it isn't constantly playing on the radio. But with lyrics like:

*Got my ass squeezed by sexy Cupid/Guess he wants to play, wants to play/A love game, a love game*

or

*Let's have some fun, this beat is sick/I wanna take a ride on your disco stick*

the song was judged to be too racy to be part of the PRP show. Dave's comments that "Lady Gaga is too, too wrong," and Jackie's response that "we have to be careful" illustrate the balancing act performed by the group as they prepare the show. Like the video clips, PRP staff wanted material that is "edgy," content that implies sex without being explicit. So Mary Catherine making out with a tree is okay, but two dogs actually having sex is not.

Yet, clearly it is not just the material that must be taken into account. The song "My Humps," a euphemism for a woman's butt, contains both swear words *and* sexual innuendo. But Lady Gaga, even more than the specific song, was known to be a hyper-sexual and scandalous performer. The video for "Love Game," for instance, features pole dancing, Lady Gaga seducing both a male and female cop, and a provocative dance sequence in which Lady Gaga is wearing nothing but strategically-placed rhinestones. Clearly, and ironically given the later controversy, Lady Gaga is viewed as an objectionable performer in the way the Black-Eyed Peas are not.

PRP watches out for objectionable content, but also for artists or movies that might provoke controversy even if the material being shown is not particularly risqué. Most of the movies they pull clips from are comedies, like *Zoolander*

(2001), *Anchorman* (2004), or *Superstar* (2008), which contain gross-out humor and sexual innuendo, but not any explicit sexual content. They were also all rated PG-13. Thus the specific material used in the show, and their source, are evaluated both for their edginess and their acceptability.

During my observations, team members did not object to any excluded material. While the young people are often viewed as experts on pop culture and “kids these days,” they are quick to defer judgment about what content will cause controversy to the older staff members, or even more veteran team members (those who had gone on multiple PRP tours). Team members are much more hesitant during orientation, still learning their place on the team, and still coming to understand what it means to be part of Purity Ring Posse. Team members are more likely to voice criticisms about policies, particularly the dress code, at a later point during the tour. But during orientation they have not yet internalized their PRP identity enough to feel comfortable making these distinctions on their own.

#### Jackie and Ingrid

After getting clearance from Jimmy to do research with PRP, I am invited to join the team for orientation. This is an opportunity for me to see first-hand how the organization shapes young people into the kind of team that attempts to make abstinence and Christianity seem cool. While PRP looks for teenagers that already had some of the skills necessary to make the tour function: public speaking skills, theater experience, back-stage skills like lighting, editing, or sound design, they also want young people who are committed to their Christian identity and to sexual purity. PRP also wants diversity

among the members of their team, different personal styles, different races and ethnicities, different regions of the country, different personalities. This helps ensure that the range of teenagers in their audience have at least one team member they can identify with, this diversity also helps demonstrate that teens can be abstinent or Christian without having to fit one specific model. Jackie and Ingrid were to team members who exemplified the range of styles, backgrounds, and personalities that made up a PRP team, particularly in how they expressed their Christianity and their coolness. Ingrid and Jackie were both 18 and had each recently graduated from high school, and they were both new members of the touring team in 2009.

During my orientation with the team I lived with Ingrid and Jackie at a house owned by friends of Jason, the assistant director of PRP. The house, located in a relatively new suburban housing development, was a comfortably middle-class home. The yard was well-tended and flower baskets hung from the porch. One of our tasks while staying at the house was to water them each morning and evening. The house was carefully decorated and there were clear indications, from bible verses stenciled on the walls, to a copy of *The Passion of Christ* on the coffee table, that the family who lived there was Christian.

After we settle in to the house, Laurie, a touring team leader, takes the three of us to the grocery store to purchase food for our stay. Lunches will be eaten at the home office, but we are instructed to purchase food for breakfast, snacks, and some dinners. As we wander the aisles of the large suburban supermarket, Jackie comments that this is the first time she's ever shopped for groceries without her mother. I am suddenly struck by

how young she and Ingrid are. For them, the tour will be the equivalent of going away to college. It represents their first time living away from their families and their first time traveling to a new part of the country.

After dinner that night Jackie and I stand on the back porch watching the sun set. Jackie expresses her excitement and anxiety about the tour. She loves PRP, she's seen several of their shows and knows many of the staff from when the program was based in her hometown, but she worries about missing her family, in particular her mother. She explains that she has already bonded with Laurie and Dave, and is happy they will be acting as "Mom and Dad" during the tour.

### Jackie

Jackie is a petite Mexican-American with long dark hair. She is from the southwestern town where PRP was founded and was a member of the church attended by PRP staff while they lived there, including Dave the touring team leader. While in high school Jackie had been a cheerleader, the president of the student government, and active in her high school's theater productions. Jackie had also worked at a boutique that sold children's clothing and accessories.

Jackie is confident and attractive. She dresses in carefully coordinated outfits, with matching bows, earrings, and shoes to compliment her t-shirts, tank tops, and skinny jeans. She is knowledgeable about pop culture and on the drive to the home office she has me put on the radio so she can sing along with the latest hit songs. One of her favorite artists is Lady Gaga.

She has a sharp sense of humor and is very comfortable performing in front of



others. Not only is she a talented actress, she is also a dancer and choreographer. Jackie performs in several of the opening skits during the live event and also works the merchandise booth before and after the show.

Jackie gives her testimony during one of the devotional sessions at orientation. She describes wanting to be part of PRP because of her sister's teenage pregnancy. Though her sister loves her child, Jackie saw the problems the teen pregnancy had caused and wants to help other young women avoid the same. Jackie also discusses her experience of being arrested after police arrive during a high school prank. Jackie spent a few hours in jail waiting to be let out on bail. While there she had “witnessed” to another incarcerated woman, sharing her testimony and encouraging the woman to accept Jesus as her Lord and savior. Jackie explains that initially she'd been upset and embarrassed about her arrest, worrying about how it would impact her future. But through prayer she was able to turn the experience around and now saw it as God presenting her an opportunity to minister to someone who needed to hear the message of Jesus.

Jackie is a perfect example of an evangelical Christian who attempts to be “in the world, but not of it.” Jackie is familiar with and enjoys popular culture. She listens to secular music, watches popular movies, and wears fashionable clothes. Her taste is sometimes shocking to some of her fellow team members—Ingrid sometimes asks me to change the radio when a particularly sexual song comes on, but Jackie has no problems with sexy lyrics. Jackie even tells us she's brought her favorite Hooters t-shirt on tour with her. At the same time, Jackie is committed to her identity as an evangelical Christian. The fact that her narrative includes a tale of using the adversity of being

arrested as an opportunity to “witness” to someone, gave her a lot of cred with the other team members<sup>15</sup>.

Jackie's background in dance and performance make her comfortable on stage and she is used in many of the humorous skits during the show. Her cool appearance and easy confidence made her an excellent representative for PRP, as she challenges the idea that Christians are fundamentally uncool and boring. Her past retail work also makes her valuable at the merchandise (Merch) table. She is adept at selling t-shirts and other PRP items to the teenagers attending the show, using her coolness and confidence to her advantage, but is also friendly and polite to parents who are making purchases.

### Ingrid

Ingrid is a tall brunette from the northern Midwest. She had been home-schooled and attended a megachurch that had hosted PRP shows along with many popular Christian performers. Ingrid is easy-going, humorous, and mature.

Ingrid dresses in fun, trendy t-shirts, featuring humorous images and slogans, and jeans, her long hair often pulled back in a ponytail. She has several older brothers and enjoys playing sports and other outdoor activities. Unlike Jackie, Ingrid is less familiar with popular culture. She admits to me that she doesn't listen to much secular music and has not seen many of the popular movies that are used in skits or videos. But Ingrid has a vast knowledge of contemporary Christian popular culture. One day during orientation she sets up her laptop and gives me a crash course in popular Christian music. She's met

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<sup>15</sup> Most team members had stories about times when they were able to “witness” to people, often in chance encounters that were seen as provided by God. While “witnessing” focuses on sharing a testimony of the good Christ has done in an individual's life, it also carried the implication of proselytizing and most stories of “witnessing” ended with the listener giving their heart to Jesus and converting to Christianity.

many of the big name Christian artists when they performed at her church. She questions me about the types of music I like, then plays me several musicians that have a similar style.

At her church, Ingrid has helped backstage during services and concerts. She and her mother often work the merchandise booth for the artists who performed there. Her dry sense of humor and easy-going attitude make her well-liked by her team members. While she is not a team member who takes a leading role on stage, she is valued by the team for her supportive presence backstage and her excellent organizational skills with the merchandise booth.

Ingrid is much more representative of the type of teenagers I expected to find at PRP: home-schooled, more familiar with Christian culture than popular culture, and less concerned with current fashion trends. Ingrid was raised by parents who wanted to shelter their daughter from the negative influences of secular culture. At the same time, Ingrid is poised, confident, and organized in a way that make her seem much older than her 18 years. Her extensive knowledge of popular Christian culture keep her from appearing backward or out of touch and help her fit in with many of the Christian teens and adults who make up the audience at PRP shows.

The young people who join PRP come from a range of Christian backgrounds. Some team members have fairly sheltered upbringings, but many had re-committed themselves to Christianity after a period of questionable or “un-Christian” behavior including drugs, alcohol, or sexual behavior. Some team members, like Ingrid, prefer to listen to Christian music, while others are much more interested and savvy when it came

to popular culture. Having this mix of team members helps PRP keep their “edginess” while also fitting in to a larger evangelical community.

### iTour Apps for Life

The theme for the 2009 tour is Apps for Life. Heavily inspired by the at-the-time recently released iPhone and the corresponding explosion of different applications (apps) available, the tour showcases different “Apps for Life” that can help young people navigate dating, setting sexual boundaries, and keeping their commitment to abstinence. In the following excerpt from my fieldnotes Jared and Dave demonstrate the different videos created for the tour. The videos are meant to be clever and humorous, while also introducing the different themes of the show.

Jared calls Dave over to look at the different app videos that he's created. The videos will play before the different talks and the app graphic will stay on screen while the talk is going. The first app is about *What to Do on a Date* and there's a humorous sequence about *what not to wear* with different outfits like a convict, an image of a guy in *liederhosen*, etc. One of the apps is *Boundaries* and it has a graphic that looks like a gate. This video is about finding out if your date is taking you to “Make-Out Mountain” and shows a map that gives directions to Make-Out Mountain. Another app is about *Starting Over* and has the reload icon. The final app is *Supernatural Control* and features someone holding a remote control. The video for *Starting Over* features a song by the band The Fray with the lyrics “lost and insecure” the voice over discusses being in a relationship and breaking up and feeling lost and insecure, right before the song starts<sup>16</sup>. I ask Jared about the other song in the rest of the video and he says it's something about the bourgeoisie. Dave adds that it's the song from the iPhone commercials.

The tour's theme draws on consumer culture to “sell” their message, going so far as to use the same song played in the iPhone commercials during their videos. PRPs use of apps

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<sup>16</sup> Lost and insecure/You found me, you found me/Lyin' on the floor  
Surrounded, surrounded/Why'd you have to wait?/Where were you? Where were you?  
Just a little late/You found me, you found me -“You Found Me” The Fray

also showcases their contemporary orientation, drawing on current trends in technology while also demonstrating that the group is knowledgeable about products and cultural changes that are important to teenagers. Unlike some adults in the audience, PRP knows what apps are. Their knowledge is advanced enough that they can cleverly play with the concept to present their message of abstinence and Christianity to teenagers.

The videos also showcase the structure of the show itself. I quickly recognize similar topics from the show I had attended in 2008, whose theme had been Myth Busters. PRP keeps a fairly coherent structure to their live events, but changes up the tour by adding new skits and commercials, changing personal testimonies, and fitting their main topics into the theme of the tour. The live event also follows an atmospheric arc that begins light and humorous content that gradually becomes more serious and gradually incorporates more references to Christianity.

As demonstrated during orientation, PRP staff gave a great amount of thought to the media used during the show. The use of the song by The Fray is a clever attempt to reach both the “unchurched” and active Christians in their audience. The Fray is not a Christian band, but the members are all Christian. Several of the founding members attended the same Christian school and played together in worship bands. The band's songs often have themes with an underlying Christian message, depending on how the listener chooses to interpret them. Many of The Fray's albums are released in both the Christian and secular markets, meaning that teenagers like Jackie *or* Ingrid were likely to have heard the song ("Into The Fray". Retrieved July 8, 2016.). Unchurched kids wouldn't necessarily see the song as religious, and had probably heard it on the radio, but

religious kids would pick up on the subtle Christian message from the song they may have been familiar with from Christian radio.

While the skits, commercials, and videos are all important aspects of the PRP show, and do much of the work of presenting the group as pop-culture savvy and relevant, the real “meat” of the PRP shows are the talks given by team members. Team members who have compelling testimonies to provide are often chosen to give talks, but they also should be confident public speakers and present different “styles” to the teenage audience. Laurie explains to me the different talks, and a little about how specific speakers are chosen.

I ask Laurie about the different talks. She says there are four talks: “Sex is Great”, “Dating and Waiting”, “Starting Over” and “The Gospel”. She says usually it is guy, girl, girl, guy in terms of who does the talks but this year they are trying a guy *and* girl version of the middle talks. I ask how they decided to have guys or girls perform the talks. She's not sure. She says originally the “Sex is Great” talk was a girl but it was decided that it came out differently. They changed it because they needed to reach the most people. She's unable to explain how it was different. “Were guys uncomfortable with a girl saying sex is great?” I ask. She's not sure, but maybe, she says the guys on the team suggested it would work better if it was done by a guy.

Despite further questioning, Laurie isn't able to give me a full explanation about why the opening talk is given by a man, while the middle talks are given by women. Laurie's final explanation centers on the different “gifts” that God has given to team members, some members are very organized, other members excel at public speaking, still others are very creative when it comes to creating skits or videos. Yet the choices are clearly correlated with evangelical understandings of gender and sexuality. “Dating and Waiting,” the talk in which team members discussed setting boundaries, avoiding temptation, and practicing

modesty, requires a girl and a guy focus more specifically on the different temptations faced by young men and young women. “Starting Over,” the talk in which team members shared their testimonies about becoming sexually active before returning to Christ and recommitting to abstinence is given by a woman because PRP recognizes that stigma falls more heavily on women who have been sexually active than it does on men.

The “Starting Over” talk is structured as a story of redemption and being born-again. Usually the narrative begins with the young woman starting a relationship or joining a friend group that encourages negative behaviors and eventually leads to the young woman having intercourse. Often these narratives include heavy subject matter such as abuse, addiction, rape, or abortion. The narrative ends when the young woman realizes she needs help, asks Christ for forgiveness, and recommits to Christianity and abstinence. The speaker then encourages audience members that “nothing you have done or have had done to you” can prevent someone from putting on a ring and making a commitment to abstinence. PRP sends a clear signal that even teenagers in the audience who have already been sexually active can still make a commitment to abstinence. Staff members tell me they try not to put too much of an emphasis on virginity because they don't want to portray sexual purity as something you have and can “lose.” For PRP sexual purity and living an abstinent lifestyle are active choices that do not rely on past experiences.

Much like the videos, the talks begin with the lighthearted and humorous “Sex is Great!” talk which focuses on introducing the topic of sexual abstinence to the audience in a new, more cool and approachable, way. The focus of the talk is challenging

preconceptions the audience might have about an abstinence event and letting young people know that PRP is not anti-sex. In fact, the talk emphasizes, waiting until marriage is a way to “have the best sex ever”--as their t-shirts promise. The “Dating and Waiting” talks were likewise more lighthearted and attempt to give the audience real experiences to identify with, while also inspiring teens with examples of rejecting peer pressure in a commitment to abstinence. The “Starting Over” talk signals a shift in the tone of the show. Both versions of this talk given in 2009 are incredibly emotional and intense, touching not only on sexual activity but also pregnancy, abortion, and relationship abuse. The show is structured similarly each year, despite the changing theme. The skits, commercials, and specific talks are updated each year, and the testimonies change depending on who is giving them. PRP staff and more veteran team members help new team members craft their testimonies to fit into the specific talks given during a show.

At this point the show also becomes more explicit about the role of Christianity in PRP's formulation of abstinence. The final talk, “The Gospel” is the most explicitly Christian part of the show. The final talk is a condensed sermon usually given by Pancho in 2009 that ends with an altar call<sup>17</sup> for the audience. Those who make commitments to abstinence are given a special prayer and those making commitments to Christ are given a separate ceremony.

At the end of each show, Laurie collects and announces the number of teens who put on rings as well as the number of young people who accept the altar call and make a

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<sup>17</sup> An altar call is a practice used some evangelical Christian churches and at evangelical events in which those who wish to make a spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ are invited to come forward publicly. It is so named because the supplicants gather at the altar located at the front of the church building. In most cases the pastor leads those making a commitment in a prayer in front of the assembled congregation or audience.



commitment to Christ. While the number of rings is always celebrated, it quickly becomes clear that it is not as important to the team members as the commitments to Christ they are able to achieve. As Dave explains during orientation, rather than an abstinence organization, PRP and the touring team primarily identify as an evangelical ministry. Yet, the fact remained that the majority of the audience for PRP's shows are adults and young people who are already Christian. PRP relies on youth leaders, pastors, and other Christian adults to book their shows, provide venues, and help the team in various ways such as providing lodging and food, donating time to set up the show, or donating money to make shows and rings free for the young people who attended. PRP must demonstrate their legitimacy to both these audiences, hoping to prove their commitment to abstinence and Christianity, while simultaneously appearing cool and edgy enough to attract the "unchurched" with their message. PRP relies heavily on the bodies and talents of their touring team, particularly in members who embody both coolness and Christianity, to demonstrate their legitimacy in both arenas. Yet, just as with the other elements of the show these attempts to balance coolness and Christianity generate tensions that cannot always be overcome.

### Cool Christians

Two members of the PRP tour in particular seemed like the ideal mixture of coolness and Christianity, yet even they struggled to be respected as Christian authorities. Both Sheera, the lead singer of the Christian rock band Jubilee, and Pancho, the MC for the 2009 show, demonstrate the challenges of presenting a cool performance while also presenting oneself as someone qualified to preach the gospel. While PRP faced the

challenge of convincing teenagers that Christians could be cool, their performance of “coolness” also opened them up to criticism from fellow Christians that by being cool they were somehow less authentic Christians.

### Jubilee

With her long black hair, dangling earrings, tattoos on her upper arm, leather cuffs on her wrists, and tight jeans, Sheera looks the part of a singer in a rock band. Though not a member of the touring team, Sheera is the lead singer of the band Jubilee that toured with PRP during 2009. Jubilee is a Christian rock band, but they perform a mix of covers of secular songs along with their own original compositions during the live event: at the beginning of the show, during set changes, and after the “Starting Over” talk. Sheera is confident performer, with a rich voice, and rock star swagger that is reminiscent of women rockers like Joan Jett. Sheera has Native American heritage and describes herself to me as an “old married lady” at the age of 26.

Often during Jubilee's performance Sheera addresses the audience and gives them inspirational messages. Introducing a song called “Trouble,” Sheera tells the audience:

People will try to label you and tell you what you can do and what you can be. But you can do whatever you wanna do. You can do anything that God wants you to. You just have to believe in yourself, the way God believes in you.

Sheera rejects conforming to people's expectations or norms, instead telling the audience they can do whatever they want. But she follows up by linking this self-direction to Christianity. Rather than simply doing whatever they want, teenagers can and should do what God wants. PRP works to define practicing abstinence as a rebellious act, but also one that brings you closer to God. Drawing on individuals like Sheera, who embody both

rebellious coolness, and a committed Christian identity, is an attempt by PRP to garner legitimacy from both segments of their audience.

Jubilee the band seems successful in striking a balance between coolness and Christianity. They are popular with both adults and teens who would approach them after the show, ask them to sign autographs, and purchase their CD. But while Sheera's personal style is an asset to her role as Christian rocker, it also acts as a liability in her other role as a pastor.

Sheera and her husband are co-pastors of a church in a low-income urban neighborhood. Sheera describes working actively in her community: serving a weekly community meal at the church, and leading by example as a Christian by doing good works without the expectation of recognition and rewards. Yet Sheera's approach to Christianity is definitely not “traditional” or completely accepted, especially by other Christians. Sheera explains to me that even as a pastor, “Some people have problems with me and my husband because we have tattoos, we dress a certain way, we roll with the secular music.” She tells me she is just trying to be herself because that is how God wants her. The very things that make Sheera attractive to PRP--her tattoos, her personal style, her ability to play popular secular music--all become potential liabilities when it comes to being taken seriously by other Christians. Sheera's admonishment that she's trying to be herself challenges the idea that there is only one way, or at least only one *right* way, to be Christian. Sheera's presentation of self gives her legitimacy in certain Christian contexts, but is not fully accepted as “Christian” by other members of the evangelical community.

## Pancho

When I first arrive to do my fieldwork, I hear a lot about Pancho, who had been the M.C. during my first PRP show. Elena describes him as a “spokesperson” for PRP, in part because of his gender, race and class performance. “Pancho has that 'hip-hop' look,” Elena explains to me, “you know he looks cool, kids can relate to him. He gives the show some 'flava flave'.” Even though Pancho's family is from Trinidad, he presents himself in an African-American style that signifies “coolness” to many teenagers in America (Maira 2002, Wilkins 2008). Pancho's “hip-hop look” signifies hipness, and racial diversity, it helps PRP challenge the audiences perceptions about what the live event will be like. Pancho in many ways embodies the opposite of white, middle-class, “cheesy” Christianity. Pancho gave both the opening “Sex is Great” talk and the closing “Gospel” talk during the majority of the shows in 2009, embodying both the light-hearted and more spiritual sides of the PRP show.

While it might be easy to dismiss Pancho as a token, a young man of color used to make the mostly white touring team seem more diverse, Pancho plays a much more active and important role on the team. By the 2011 tour, Pancho is the leader of the touring team and acts as “the face” of PRP both for live events and meetings with adults. Pancho is also the spiritual leader of the group: he organizes regular devotionals, leads group prayers, and is looked to for guidance by other members of the team. It is also clear from conversations with the president and founder of PRP that Pancho is a valuable member of the team not only for his “hipness,” but also because of his spirituality and creativity. Pancho takes an active role in assembling the touring team and has a large

amount of creative control over the 2011 tour. It is clear that his ideas and input are valued by older members of the staff.

Pancho grew up in an immigrant family in a poor, urban neighborhood in Florida. Pancho was raised Christian, he tells me stories of riding a bus to an after-school church program when he was a kid, but drifted away from the church as a teenager. Pancho's charisma and confidence led him to jobs as a promoter and local dj. He tells me he was living a lifestyle many people envied, he had money and local fame, but still felt something was missing. At this point God intervened and Pancho realized that rather than glorify partying and alcohol, he could use his influence to be a role-model for young people in his community and use his talents to bring young people to Christ. After being born-again Pancho attended a PRP show and after speaking to Dave felt that God called him to join the team.

Pancho's presence on the team gives PRP a boost to their coolness. Pancho's ability to connect with young people, but also to appear respectable to parents and other adults, is viewed as one of his many talents. Yet the switch is not effortless, and it is not always successful. As the blog “Tarnished Purity Ring” demonstrates, Pancho's presentation of self leaves him open to critiques that his gospel is not theologically sound, that he is teaching “magic potion” gospel rather than true Christian teachings. And he subtly changes his personal style when he is meeting with adults, just hanging out with the team, or performing during a PRP show. While PRP encourages team members to “be themselves,” they also work to help team members tailor their testimonies, personal styles, and performances to portray both coolness and Christianity.

PRP positions abstinence as a choice young people should make for themselves. It encourages young people to reject peer pressure and commit to a lifestyle of Christianity and abstinence that will make them rebels in the eyes of mainstream society. Purity Ring Posse also tries to show young people that they can “be themselves” while still being abstinent and Christian: they can get tattoos, have nose rings, or even just wear t-shirts and jeans. The underlying message to the “unchurched” in the audience is that they do not have to give up their coolness to put on a ring.

PRP team members include a careful critique of religious authority that helps teenagers claim a space to be "rebellious" Christians. PRP team members respect the authority of Jesus Christ or God, but they articulate critiques of Christians or churches that are too legalistic or conservative in how they practice their faith. But PRP relies on other Christians to book their shows and support their organization, thus PRP also needs their team members to signal their Christian legitimacy. Sheera and Pancho are ideal because of their ability to be both edgy and cool, critical of traditional Christianity, while also deeply devoted to Christ and his teachings. Yet even Sheera and Pancho are not able to be completely successful in this balancing act. The challenges they face point to a larger debates within the evangelical community about what counts as “real” or “right” Christianity. PRP is promoting abstinence, but they are also promoting a particular view of what it means to be Christian, one that is not fully accepted in the larger evangelical Christian community.

### The Show:

Checking into rehab cause everything that we had  
Didn't mean a thing to you  
I used to be love drunk, but now I'm hung over  
I'll love you forever, but now I'm sober  
-“Love Drunk” Boys Like Girls

PRP shows usually open with music blasting over the speakers. Often fog machines and lights are also in use. Team members like Colin and Matt move through the audience with glow sticks and work to get the crowd pumped up with excitement and enthusiasm. The songs are popular top 40 hits or well-known dance songs like "Cotton Eyed Joe," "Cupid Shuffle" and "Cha-Cha Slide." The audience is encouraged to get out of their seats and dance to the songs. The atmosphere is much more like a rock concert than a religious event. When Jubilee is part of the tour they play several songs as well. Once the audience is mostly full, a video screen comes on onstage. In 2009 the screen is made to look like a giant iPhone.

Pancho's phone rings and he goes backstage for the "Lost Rings" video. The video uses clips from the popular Liam Neeson movie "Taken" (in which Neeson's character works to rescue his kidnapped daughter) and intersperses them with Pancho trying to find the rings that have gone missing before the show. Pancho is "asked" by Neeson to describe what he can see, and Pancho describes the crowd "I see blondes, brunettes.." several girls in the audience cheer for their hair color. The video has Pancho lay his phone on the floor so Liam Neeson can hear better, at this point the crowd yells and screams. They scream even more when Laurie suggests Pancho throw some shirts out to the audience. At the end of the video Pancho announces "PRP is starting...right...now." There is a loud explosion onstage and the lights come up, flashing. The song "Love Drunk" begins to play and some of the audience sings along or gets up to dance. People scream and jump out of their seats. Pancho comes onstage with two t-shirts but he says he'll only throw them to people who are excited. "You've gotta be losing your mind." he yells. The screaming and jumping increases.

With this introduction the show begins. Pancho gives the opening “Sex is Great” talk where he introduces Purity Ring Posse as an abstinence event, but also informs the audience that it will not be a boring sex ed lecture, or, he jokes, “a safe sex demonstration given by my grandparents.” Pancho then leads the audience in the chant “Sex is Great” and explains that sex is so great that it is worth waiting until marriage.

Next, the Boundaries app video plays and Jackie and Tyler give their “Dating and Waiting” talks. These talks explore some of the challenges of remaining abstinent, but also set up the idea that abstinence is a form of rebellion:

Jackie discusses clothing for girls, not wearing low cut tops or short shorts. She tells guys to make eye contact and not look at a girl's chest. She also tells people to avoid the "X-spots" (breasts for women, genitals for everyone). She talks about putting on her ring in high school and getting teased by the girls. She says the boys were even worse, some of them made bets about who would take her virginity first. They would point to her ring and say "that's going to be mine." But she says she proved them all wrong.

Tyler gives his talk which he introduces as being "mostly for the guys in the audience." He encourages the audience not to worry about what people think, they have better things to do. He tells them that's what he decided to do. "Look at me," he says, "I'm wearing girl pants."

Tyler's admission about “girl pants” signals his ability to challenge norms and face potential negative judgement. His speech connects his ability to maintain abstinence with his ability to reject peer pressure and do his own thing, regardless of what people might think. Tyler's talk then moves into a discussion of men's sexuality, like Jackie he gives some general advice for “avoiding temptation” including the argument that young men might be tempted by how women dress or



by pornography. Tyler and Jackie present their own experiences with being abstinent, while also giving some general advice on sexual purity.

He tells the audience that guys are primarily visual, which is why girls need to be careful how they dress, and that a problem a lot of guys have is with pornography. He says that besides being gross and disgusting pornography degrades women and portrays them as tools for sex. He says women need to be respected.

Both Tyler and Jackie recognize that abstinence is not a choice respected by most of their peers, and can lead to ridicule and rude comments. But Jackie's ability to prove the boys at her high school wrong, and Tyler's decision not to worry about what people think, demonstrate a confident coolness meant to be impressive to teenagers. Their advice, a fairly standard rephrasing of common evangelical discourses about modesty and pornography, is paired with some videos that explain in more depth things to avoid, as well as a talk given by Matt about setting boundaries and having an accountability partner. The talks are significantly rewritten during subsequent tours and eventually include a short talk devoted entirely to pornography.

#### Broken Heart Skit

After the "Dating and Waiting" talks comes the "Broken Heart" skit. The skit uses half a heart painted on a piece of wood, which is increasingly damaged (by fire, chainsaw, and sledge hammer) to visually represent the negative emotional consequences of sex before marriage:

He asks for a man in the audience to volunteer but he has to be "a ladies man" and clips play of both handsome leading men and humorous leading men like Joe Dirt. He then calls some "lovely ladies" from the audience and clips play of both attractive Hollywood actresses and humorous clips featuring women who are overweight or made up to look unattractive. He then has the young man, an African American who tells the audience he is

a football player, go on “dates” with each girl. First they play a clip of a pick up line from a movie, then he repeats a cheesy pick up line to the girl, then they play a romantic/sexy song and Pancho says where they go on a date: MCDonalds, put-put golfing, and cow-tipping. Then Pancho tells them they "go too far physically" and have to break up and a break up song plays.

One of the clips used in "I'm kind of a big deal" from Weatherman, "I just threw up in my mouth a little bit" from Zoolander. One of the pick up lines is "lets make like fabric softener and snuggle" and "did you have Campbell's soup for lunch 'cause you look mm mm good." One of the songs they play is "She thinks my tractor's sexy." One of the clips they play is from Super Star, the scene where the main character makes out with a tree. This causes scream of "ewww" and "gross" from the audience.

As my fieldnotes demonstrate, this skit is not only about the negative emotional consequences of sex before marriage, it is also meant to be humorous for the audience and is full of pop-culture references. While visually symbolizing the “cost” of sex before marriage, particularly apparent when the “ladies man” is finally paired with his true love who has not engaged in sex before marriage and thus presents a pristine half a heart to her partner. It was an additional demonstration to the teen audience that this PRP is not boring or out of touch. The damage to the heart is inflicted in dramatic and shocking ways, keeping the audience's attention, while also pleasing adults with how explicitly it presents the damage resulting from premarital sex.

### Videos

In between skits and talks, short video “commercials” play on the screen. Many of these videos are modeled after actual commercials. One series of videos is a parody of the Apple vs PC commercials which are popular at the time, the PRP version is "waiting/not waiting"which highlights the negative consequences of not waiting until marriage

including having to spin the “STD wheel,” having to take care of a kid, and dealing with the unpleasant effects of having an STD. Much like the Apple vs PC commercials, “Waiting” the Apple stand-in is portrayed as much more handsome, stylish and cool than his “Not Waiting” counterpart, who is dressed in traditionally nerdy attire such as thick glasses and khaki pants.

Another video is based on the Mastercard “Priceless” commercials, it shows a couple on a date and catalogues the price of the different elements of the date: flowers, dinner, gas for the car, and finally ends with a shot of the couples' purity rings. The knowledge that the date will end with a kiss, without the expectation of more, is the “priceless” element in the video. Most of the other videos are similarly a mix of humor, pop-culture references and a warning of the potential dangers of engaging in sex before marriage with an especial emphasis on STDs and negative emotions. Like the other aspects of the show these videos perform multiple tasks: they demonstrate PRP's pop-culture knowledge, they presented negative consequences of sexual activity, and they are engaging and humorous. Some of the videos have deliberately shocking elements such as a video about “bad breakups” that shows someone getting thrown in front of a bus, or the “Law of the Father” videos which caution a young man about the violent consequences he faces if he mistreats “the Father's” daughter. The videos often elicit noises of surprise and shocked laughter from the audience, with the “Law of the Father” videos being especially humorous to the adults in the audience.

#### Starting Over Talk:

The “Starting Over” talk signifies the shift in the tone of the show. The

light-hearted humor is dropped and the mood becomes more serious. The “Starting Over” app video played before the starting over talk telegraphs this shift with the use of the song by The Fray, as well as the voice-over narration which addressed members of the audience who might be feeling “lost and insecure.” The “Starting Over” talk is given by either Gigi or Brittany. In locations with a predominantly White audience, Brittany, who is white, gives the talk, while in areas that have a higher proportion of people of color, Gigi, who is Black, gives the talk. The mood of the audience both visibly and audibly shifts during this talk, going from a loud and rowdy concert to a quiet, but attentive, audience intent on hearing this intimate personal testimony.

Then Gigi comes out to give her 2nd chances talk. She says that “ I justified my actions" her first red flag because she was in love, she was just sleeping with her boyfriend, not with a bunch of other people and she “Thought he was the man I was going to marry."After getting pregnant she decided "the best plan was to have an abortion. But it was the worst plan. It was the most selfish, most painful decision I could have made." She says her second red flag was becoming "that girl.” “The girl who wore sunglasses and a scarf to the clinic so no one would see what she was doing. I became just one more statistic." Her third red flag was that she was "living a double life.” “I was the perfect little Christian girl at church but with my boyfriend, with my friends, I was someone else. I'd gotten it down to a science." She says she lived like that for two years until she re-committed herself to Christ. She says the night she asked Christ to restore her heart "I received restoration that same night." She says deciding to start over. "It was the best decision I ever made." She asks the audience, "What's your story? Who are you when no one is looking?" Not just who friends think they are, who they want people to think they are. "What do you think about starting over? What do you think about doing it today?" She tells them, "You might think 'you think your story's bad, mine's even worse." But she tells them that is not true and encourages them to "give your junk to God."

Brittany's “Starting Over” talk given during school shows demonstrates how an emotional appeal is an important aspect of the talk that meant to appear natural, while

also being constructed behind the scenes.

Brittany gives her talk. Her first red flag is that "hormones were running the relationship" her second red flag is that "she was in denial" and finally "she was losing close relationships". She recounts the story of her relationship with a blond haired guy in a band that moved from "innocent" to having sex. After they had sex she found out he cheated on her. She stayed with him because he told her she was worthless, damaged goods, had given something away she could never give someone else. His emotional abuse became physical abuse. She mentions she'd become "that girl." She said she was sitting in her apartment covered in bruises, wondering if she wanted to live any more, when she read an email from a friend. She said her friend encouraged her to "make a life changing decision" and asks people to talk to her about it after the show. She ends by saying "there's nothing you can do or have done to you that you can't start over from." Throughout her talk Brittany seems on the verge of tears but never loses control emotionally. The auditorium falls silent as she gives her talk.

While Brittany's talk is edited during school shows to remove direct references to God or Christianity, much of the emotional content remained the same. Several times during my fieldwork Dave or Pancho will work with Brittany giving her talk more structure, without losing the emotional potency.

Pancho is helping Brittany rewrite her talk for the school assembly. She needs to remove the Christian references and also make it appropriate for a high school level. Pancho tells her to think of the practical reasons that having sex before marriage is bad. Brittany says getting pregnant, getting an STD, Pancho says "yeah, cause he was cheating on you so you don't know what he was bringing back." Pancho says the Bible is a practical book, that the advice is practical and good to follow even if you don't believe in the Almighty God, like saving money is good, treating people with respect, and so on.

I overhear him telling Brittany to say that she knew in her heart, she felt guilty, she lost friends, it was a negative experience. They also talk about how to bring in the ring she put on.

As Pancho's coaching demonstrates, while the personal testimonies given by the touring team are meant to be emotionally powerful, they are also structured in a way that

provides a coherent message. Though Brittany and Gigi's stories have important substantive differences, Gigi deals with pregnancy and abortion, while Brittany deals with relationship abuse, they are structured to provide a similar and coherent message. Both talks acknowledge temptation, they demonstrate that even “good Christian girls” can make mistakes, they are tales of woe that present the negative consequences of having premarital sex, and they promise redemption.

Sometimes there are cheers from the audience, while at other shows the audience remains quiet after Gigi or Brittany leave the stage. Often Jubilee takes the stage and performs an acoustic version of a more spiritual song. At this point the atmosphere of the show shifts from a party or a rock concert and begins to resemble a contemporary Christian worship service. The lights dim and shifted color, there are no more humorous commercials shown, the “Starting Over” talk introduces a more somber mood. The Christians in the audience clearly pick up on this mood shift, some audience members raise their hands in praise during the song, close their eyes, and some even sing along. After the intensely personal testimony the music feels very emotional, I still find myself moved despite having sat through the same sequence of events at multiple shows. The show closes with the “Supernatural Control” app video and the “Gospel” talk that leads to the final altar call.

Pancho ends the show with a bible verse about the broad road and the narrow path. He talks about what is expected of teenagers. For men it is that they will get at least one STD, get multiple girls pregnant, that they need to prove they are "real men" by having sex with as many women as possible. But he said that “real men” know this isn't true. For women it is expected

that they will get at least one STD, have at least one abortion and that they will have sex to show a man that they love him, or at least that's what he'll tell her. He says that he doesn't know if women have heard this or will hear it again but they are beautiful. He tells them to "drop anyone who tells you otherwise."

Pancho's ending gospel talk further emphasizes PRP's message that abstinence is an act of rebellion. But Pancho's talk also attempts to connect the practice of Christianity with the practice of abstinence until marriage. Just as Christianity requires sexual abstinence, so does abstinence require Christianity in order to be successful. Christianity provides the "supernatural control" necessary to remain committed to abstinence until marriage. By making a commitment to abstinence and Christianity, the teenagers in the audience are taking the "narrow path" and rejecting society's expectations. "Real men" understand they don't need to have sex to prove their masculinity, while women who know they are beautiful don't need to secure love with sex. In both cases Pancho issues a challenge to his teenage audience, do they want to take the broad, conformist road and give in to societal expectations, or do they want to prove they are somehow better by becoming abstinent Christians who don't care what other people think, only what God has planned for them?

By using this particular bible verse, Pancho is highlighting the idea of evangelical exceptionalism. Christian members of his audience are reminded that they are on the narrow path and that their religion symbolizes rebellion against the secular mainstream. At the same time Pancho's speech also targets non-religious teens, or teens who are less committed to a Christian identity, in hopes of convincing them that they are rebellious enough and confident enough to reject peer pressure and accept both Christianity and

abstinence.

### Conclusion

Much like the other two groups I examine, Purity Ring Posse finds itself attempting to please multiple audiences with often competing interests. Like these other abstinence groups, PRP sees resistance in the form of outside forces such as the government, liberals, the media, and wider secular society. Yet, similar to the other groups, they also find resistance among individuals and organizations who on the surface share the same goals of promoting abstinence and “family values.”

Tensions between PRP's adult and teenage audience provide one type of challenge, but equally difficult to navigate are the divisions among conservative Christians, even when those Christians are all largely Evangelical protestants. As this chapter demonstrates, dealing with these tensions is a constant process for PRP. They consciously construct their show to balance relevance to teenagers with remaining acceptable to youth leaders and parents. They socialize new team members in the PRP model of abstinence promotion and give them tools to both avoid criticism and respond to it once it inevitably happens. Finally, the staff and team remain flexible while on tour, making changes to music, videos, talks, and skits in ways that help them address critiques that they are unable to prevent.

While the other groups I study demonstrate the ways that the politicization of abstinence leads to a hegemonic discourse that is hard to escape, PRP also demonstrates the continuing importance of local and specific context in shaping abstinence messages. PRP certainly deals with the political ramifications of



abstinence, through the federal funding they originally received, the resulting ACLU suit brought against them, and the intense media scrutiny they receive. At the same time, unlike Revolutionary Romance and Stand Up, PRP has a less direct engagement with the public square. While they also hope to create a cultural movement towards abstinence, they are more concerned with doing this through changing hearts and leading individuals to Christ, rather than engaging in public debates or creating community level policy. PRP engages with discourses of “safe sex” but is also less interested in uncoupling abstinence from a religious identity, and indeed argues that abstinence is not possible without a corresponding commitment to Christ. This context means that PRP is largely ignored by more powerful conservative organizations that would pressure them to adopt a more secular definition and discourse of abstinence.

At the same time, as part of a religious community, PRP faces unique pressures due to tensions and divides that exist within this community. Churches, crisis pregnancy centers, Christian radio stations, and religious institutions are the organizations that make up PRP's social movement community. And these organizations apply their own constraints on PRP. PRP's critiques of the Church, along with more controversial opinions on race, gender, and sexuality, must be kept to private spaces to avoid alienating the group from funding and other forms of support. While PRP is not a group with an especially progressive agenda, they present a more conservative front in public than members espouse in private conversations. Unlike the other two groups it is not the pro-family social

movement community that places constraints on PRP, rather they are beholden to a conservative, evangelical Christian community that creates different, yet equally restrictive, constraints on their tactics and discourse.

## CHAPTER III

### VIVE LA REVOLUTION: REVOLUTIONARY ROMANCE AND THE NEGOTIATION OF ABSTINENCE

The bright red t-shirts with black lettering proclaim “Liberté, Égalité, Chasteté.” While meant to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek these t-shirts, produced by the campus abstinence group Revolutionary Romance, also provide an apt illustration of the group's approach. The t-shirts are humorous, but also intellectual. The group pokes fun at itself while it also draws parallels with another revolutionary movement. And while the slogan on the back of the t-shirt “Vive La Révolution” may be a slight exaggeration, it also expresses the style of abstinence the group hopes to portray, not a regressive, prudish movement, but one that is intelligent, lighthearted, and revolutionary.

As a “kind of conservative group” on a liberal<sup>18</sup> Ivy League campus, Revolutionary Romance members sought to create a space for their group and their messages about abstinence. In the early years Revolutionary Romance worked to create its own unique vision of abstinence, one that would fit more smoothly into the discourses of tolerance and diversity that existed on the campus of Old Ivy. The group worked to craft a version of abstinence-until-marriage that was smart and humorous. They argued that abstinence didn't have to be conservative or religious, it could be seen as a “positive

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<sup>18</sup> While the term “liberal” can mean either support for the free-market or “liberal” as in support for progressive values and causes, RR members never used the term progressive when describing their university environment or fellow students. When I use the term liberal in regards to RR it is to describe a position they viewed in opposition to conservative or “traditional” values.

alternative” to the hook-up culture on campus. They sought to bring awareness of abstinence to their fellow students while also offering a support group for students who chose to practice abstinence. And in the end they succeeded in creating a group that a student like Liz, a member of the campus Democrats and co-president of the campus LGBT organization, and Tiffany, a member of the Catholic Student Association and Campus Right-to-life group, felt comfortable joining.

This chapter is about the effort RR made to stake out what has become an unconventional version of abstinence. In order to preserve their version abstinence, RR was forced to draw some hard boundaries between themselves and other organizations. This included conservative and religious campus organizations, as well as other national abstinence organizations. Their stance on abstinence was not fully successful with their peers and ended up isolating them from potential allies. After four years, the group moved in a different direction and became a much more conservative and mainstream campus abstinence group. I deal with this transformation in the next chapter. In this chapter, however, I concentrate on the ways RR generated its own version of abstinence. Revolutionary Romance demonstrates that the meanings attributed to abstinence and the way abstinence is presented are not set. The association of abstinence with conservative movements and, especially, conservative religious movements, was not inevitable (di Mauro and Joffe 2007, Doan 2008, Herzog 2008). The beginning years of RR exemplifies a road not usually taken. As I will show in this chapter, Revolutionary Romance was initially committed to a more progressive form of abstinence that was unaffiliated with any religious doctrine and that attempted to capitalize on a discourse of

diversity and empowerment common on college campuses. I begin the chapter with an introduction to Revolutionary Romance, including the early controversies they faced, then introduce some of the key leaders of the group in hopes of demonstrating the diverse positions that RR was able to accommodate. I finish the chapter with a narrative of the events held by RR and the core values they initially supported. While these core values present a different version of abstinence, they were unable to appease either the progressive students at Old Ivy or the growing pro-abstinence social movement community.

### Revolutionary Romance

Welcome to Revolutionary Romance! RR is a new, non-sectarian student-run organization at University dedicated to the promotion of premarital sexual abstinence. We strive to present another option to our peers regarding sex-related issues, endorsing ideas of abstinence and chastity as a positive alternative for ethical and health reasons. Our efforts focus on community outreach, publicity, and support for those who wish to remain strong in or have re-committed themselves to this cause.

-From the Revolutionary Romance Website, 2008

Revolutionary Romance was founded in June of 2006 at an elite eastern University-which I call Old Ivy- by two seniors, Jacob and Mary Catherine, who were also a romantic couple. Jacob and Mary Catherine, who themselves practiced abstinence, were frustrated by the assumption they saw in university staff that all college students were sexually active. They wanted to form a group that challenged the pervasiveness of the hook-up culture, and that could act as a support group to other abstinent students at Old Ivy, all without taking itself too seriously. They chose the name Revolutionary Romance in hopes it would help make “abstinence look fun, interesting.” As Jacob

argued in an newspaper interview he thought this approach would be more successful at Old Ivy, where “students are more emotionally involved in their causes.”

The leadership of the organization was composed of an executive board: the co-presidents, financial manager, publicity manager and a few other positions. The group was made up of 5-8 core members with a larger, less committed, membership of about 15 people. For the first two years the group was lead by co-presidents: first Jacob and Mary Catherine, then Mike and Tiffany. In the third year the group was mostly lead by one of the co-presidents, Esther who was joined by Mike when he returned from his semester abroad. Esther and Mike continued as Co-Presidents in the fourth year and when Mike graduated Esther remained as sole president of the organization in the fifth year.

The religious composition of the group played an important role in the way the group was initially viewed on campus. Though Revolutionary Romance is officially secular, the first four co-presidents were all Catholic. Many of the members are not only also Catholic but also very active in the Catholic Student Group on campus. Most of the other members (including Esther, a later president of the group) were not Catholic, but still identified as Christian. In an interview, Liz, who did publicity for the group, identified herself as the group's “token atheist.”

The religious affiliations of the members also manifest themselves in ties to campus religious and conservative groups. Members of the Catholic Student Group are also closely tied to the local parish St. Peter's which houses the group's offices. After Wednesday night RR events many group members would head to St. Peter's to attend Welcoming Wednesday, a student-centered service. Tiffany taught Sunday school at St.

Peter's and was their evening receptionist. In addition, group members had ties to organizations like the campus Right to Life group, the Republican Club, and Christian Crusade.

At the same time, most members were involved in several organizations and many of these organizations are not religious or conservative at all, including the GLBT organization, several different musical groups, sports teams and the Campus Democrats. However, the religious and conservative ties, especially the large number of members in the Catholic Student Group, often led the group to be characterized as Catholic, religious, and conservative by the wider campus community.

#### Encountering Hostility

Soon after it was founded, the group encountered controversy. Group leaders and members explained that Jacob and Mary Catherine, the founders of the group, had some problems getting official recognition from the administration for the group. The skepticism of the administration was mirrored by the students at Old Ivy. In an article in a national newspaper, Jacob and Mary Catherine further admitted to being the targets of mockery. And in my interview with another member, Liz, she stated that both Jacob and Mary had been personally attacked in conversation and that several people she knew challenged the group's right to even exist. Students and members of the administration were worried Revolutionary Romance would promote values that were not in-keeping with the liberal environment of Old Ivy. And RR first Valentine's Day campaign, only furthered these concerns.

One of the first events held by Revolutionary Romance was their Valentine's

Day Abstinence Awareness Campaign. As part of the campaign RR decided to send valentine's with the message "Why Wait? Because you're worth it." Because of financial limitations RR couldn't send Valentine's to the whole freshman class and instead decided to send them only to first-year women. In an article about the group Jacob explains the decision to target women was not sexist "...we thought they would like them more." This misstep opened the group to even further criticism in the form of an op-ed in the campus paper entitled "Revolutionary Romance is sexist and didactic." Some articles published about the group were less openly critical and more mocking "'Not Tonight Honey, I have a Brain Freeze': Abstinence Group Talks Ice Cream." Many members attributed this hostility to Revolutionary Romance being "kind of a conservative group," as Liz defined it, on a very liberal campus.

But the "liberal" culture of the campus also includes a focus on tolerance, acceptance and diversity. This aspect of the culture was used by the group to advocate for RR's right to have a voice on campus. Several members including Tiffany, Liz, and Mary Catherine recognized the difference between the professed "tolerance" of the campus culture and the widely negative response to RR by the campus community. Both Liz and Tiffany became involved in Revolutionary Romance initially to support the group's right to exist in the face the hypocrisy of a campus that was not as open-minded as many imagined. On a campus that professed to be tolerant of different views, both Tiffany and Liz (despite their quite different political orientations) felt that Revolutionary Romance presented a diverse perspective on sexuality that was largely missing in public discussions on campus.



Furthermore, it was clear that Tiffany and Liz were not the only students who felt this way. One campus op-ed piece focused on chastising students for the different ways the group had been targeted, including hostile comments made about members and tearing down the group's posters. This supportive piece in the campus newspaper similarly focused on the disconnect between Old Ivy's professed tolerance and the response to the group. The author argued that Revolutionary Romance deserved respect from students rather than scorn, because they were articulating a minority position in the face of hostility. Still, the majority of students who supported RR's right to exist at Old Ivy were doing so because of their support for tolerance and diversity, rather than their support for abstinence.

This early controversy and negative response led co-presidents Mike and Tiffany to more actively challenge what they saw as misperceptions of the group as judgmental, religious, or bigoted. This included emphasizing the secular nature of the group and refusing to take an official stance on anything other than abstinence. Revolutionary Romance was able to utilize the discourse of diversity and tolerance not only to justify their right to exist but also to emphasize their importance on the Old Ivy campus.

#### Revolutionary Romance Members

When I began my research in 2008, the members of the group included Esther, Tiffany and Liz. Each young woman held a leadership position in RR, but in their interviews each articulated slightly different views on abstinence, as well as RR's primary function on campus. What these interviews demonstrate is how RR's version of

abstinence was able to accommodate a gay rights activist, an unconventional feminist, and an Evangelical pastor's daughter. Even though Liz was clearly a minority in the group because of her progressive beliefs, she was still a welcomed and valued member.

While Revolutionary Romance is a mixed-gender group, I was only able to obtain interviews with women. Part of this was logistics, all of the members of RR were extremely busy, and finding time when their schedules and mine overlapped was always a challenge. But another reason for my lack of interviews with men in the group is structural. Although RR was a mixed-gender group, it was also gender segregated in many of its activities. During my fieldwork I attended several *women's* dinner discussion groups. These more informal conversations over dinner gave me a chance to get to know members and build relationships with them, which made it easier to schedule interviews. While I attended one of the men's discussion groups, it was only after extended discussion, and the discussion I attended only had two members in attendance. I simply was not able to build the same rapport with men that I was with women (a trend I noticed in each of the other abstinence groups I studied). Since I am focusing primarily on organizational processes and group level decisions, this differential access does not impact my current findings, but might be worth noting for future studies.

I use my discussions of Esther, Tiffany, and Liz as case studies of the variety of students who were able to join, and take a leadership role in, Revolutionary Romance. Though Tiffany represents the most typical RR member, Esther and Liz demonstrate the ways the group accommodated different views, religious denominations, and reasons for

joining. Understanding a little more about each of them thus helps us to understand a little more about how RR originally functioned as an unconventional abstinence organization.

### Esther

In the spring of 2008, Esther was nominated as one of the new co-presidents. Like Mike and Tiffany, Esther was incredibly active on campus, and was a member of many other conservative groups at Old Ivy including the executive board of the Republican Club, and Christian Impact, a branch of the Christian Crusade. Unlike Mike and Tiffany, Esther was an Evangelical protestant. Her father is a pastor and she had been nurtured in Evangelical abstinence literature, including such popular books as *I Kissed Dating Good-bye* and *When God Writes Your Love Story*, since she was a teenager.

She had read about the group before coming to Old Ivy and joined her first week on campus. When I interviewed her that spring she described the importance of Revolutionary Romance as a support group, a place where people with common views could come together.

It's purpose for me was just like a community of people who have this, you know, belief of chastity that a lot of other college students don't ascribe to. Especially in my group of friends, and like not all my friends, but just like a lot people I keep company with it's definitely not the norm to like be abstinent, it's like the opposite. So I think it's cool to have this community where people like agree with you and think the same thing. So for me it's more of like a support group than like something that's politically active, you know.

I asked Esther about the balance in the organization between this support group

function and the more “controversial” outreach activities undertaken by the group. Esther responded that she felt both aspects were important but continued to highlight the support group aspect. She tells me that while she does like controversial stuff, and realizes Revolutionary Romance at Old Ivy has a name recognition that goes beyond campus, part of the reason to keep the group's presence known is to challenge the idea that everyone on campus is having sex.

I think the most important reason that we need to make our presence known is so people know that they're not alone. So these people in their rooms who are talking to their roommates like "Oh, I hooked up last night." That's not necessarily the only way of life on a college campus. I just think it's really important to communicate to people who are pondering their values, their beliefs or whatever.

Revolutionary Romance faces the same challenges as other campus groups when it comes to getting students to attend events, since everyone is so busy at Old Ivy.

Yet Esther felt RR's controversial nature gave them an advantage.

You kind of have to be an attention grabber to get people to attend, which is really hard, which is why it's good that our club is so controversial in the first place, because then people do want to come and hear what we're all about.

According to Esther, RR's events that were more controversial in nature helped encourage attendance. She contrasts the Wendy Chand debate, which was standing room only, with Jason Evert's talk, which was well attended by members of the community, but not by Old Ivy students.

Maybe it was because there wasn't that controversy there, and there wasn't that relation to where they were at. It was just abstinence, whereas at the debate, there was, "we understand that there's this whole other way of life, and we're trying to turn it around." So I don't know.

Esther's positive orientation towards "controversial stuff" thus seems to be related to the attention it is able to secure for RR. Esther's main purpose seems to be providing potential support for students who are already abstinent, or those who might be questioning their beliefs. The Wendy Chang debate was more controversial, but was also more related to college students' lives and experiences. Contrary to her later discussions, in her first year with RR Esther's views on RR focused primarily on how they could be a supportive presence for Old Ivy students that were either abstinent or trying to figure out their own opinions and beliefs.

In this interview, Esther drew from ideas about gender roles and abstinence that seemed very closely tied to her Evangelical orientation. Her articulation was distinct from Tiffany, the current president, who drew on more progressive language about choice, objectification, and empowerment. For instance, when asked about the need for separations between men and women in dinner discussions Esther gave me the following answer, one that sounds very similar to discussions of men's and women's sexuality found in Evangelical abstinence literature.

I think, and I say this, being a girl, completely biased, I think guys are more sexually inclined. Guys would be more quick to have the sexual relationship than girls would be. I think a lot of that is hormonal, and it's because girls tend, at this age, to long for a more long term relationship, and guys are like, "Ahhh! I want some of what she's got. What are you doing tonight?" So I just think there is a disparity. Guys and girls don't think the same. That's why we're different genders, and I think both things are okay, and both things have to be addressed. Guys and girls are different. If there's a guy sitting on this table and he has shorts on, he definitely wanted me checking out his legs and I did look at his legs, and it

was so hairless it was disgusting. But if a girl was sitting on a table, and she had nicely tanned brown legs back from her spring break trip, and she had short shorts on, the guys would be like, "She's hot. Yeah." So I just think guys and girls think differently.

The idea that men desire sex without commitment, that they are distracted by women's bodies, that they are “wired” differently than women, are all common threads in Evangelical literature about gender and sexuality. These ideas are the basis of much of the Evangelical abstinence literature. Esther had clearly both read and internalized this literature. As I'll demonstrate in the next chapter, Esther's early essentialist views went on to be replaced by a much more articulate, academic discourse on abstinence as her views matured and developed over her time at Old Ivy. Her relationships with other organizations, including an internship at the Heritage foundation, and mentoring from the University Chastity Network, would help Esther become a much more powerful advocate for abstinence, but would also introduce her to the more dominant discourses that linked abstinence to a much wider conservative agenda.

### Tiffany

Tiffany was one of the co-presidents of RR when I began my fieldwork in 2008. Like Michael, her co-president, she was Catholic and involved in several Catholic related activities. Tiffany was a member of the Catholic Student Association, holding the office of social chair the year before joining RR. She was also active at the Catholic church near campus, teaching Sunday school there and serving as the evening receptionist. She was also involved in several conservative organizations on campus including Campus Right to Life, and Old Ivy Republican Club. She was also working at two different labs: one for

Old Ivy Medical School, and an Early Childhood Development Lab doing psych research.

Because she was already so busy, Tiffany did not initially join Revolutionary Romance. But when she was good friends with the founders Mary Catherine and Jacob, and was upset to see the negative reaction they got from their peers after starting the group:

...all of a sudden these op-eds started cropping up in the Ivy [the campus newspaper]. And all of the op-eds were expressing really antagonistic messages regarding the club. And they were really closed-minded, and I thought it was a shame that people were not really listening to the message. I felt like it was a really important one. And I was also taken aback that a campus that professes to be so open-minded and liberal was, in fact, so closed-minded. So I wrote an op-ed in defense of the club's message, and at that point I wasn't even a member. And I was not intending to become a member, because I was already involved in a slew of other things on campus. And I got so much attention -- mostly negative attention -- for writing that op-ed in the Ivy that my identity became infused with the club. And I ended up getting elected co-president, and that's how I became a member.

Tiffany's first Revolutionary Romance meeting was the one in which she was elected co-president. Not only was Tiffany being called to defend RR after her op-ed piece, she was also seen as a spokesperson for the group by current members. Tiffany's relationships to Mary Catherine and Jacob probably also played a role in her willingness to volunteer for the position. But it was clear that her defense of the group in such a public forum explained much of the reason she was elected to lead the group despite not even being a member.

Michael and Tiffany began trying to “garner legitimacy” for Revolutionary

Romance on campus. They focused a deal of their time and energy on outreach, because “once people attack us, or try to basically paraphrase what we're saying or the message of our club, we're then obligated to explain ourselves.” Tiffany focused specifically on activities that would make the group seem more legitimate to their Old Ivy peers, especially those that would challenge perceptions of the group as closed-minded bigots.

And I roll my eyes only because everyone always tries to turn us into either a Catholic organization or this completely homophobic organization. And the issue that we're trying to talk about here is abstinence until marriage. We don't want to get wrapped up in all of these other issues like homosexuality, or like religious differences, or partisan differences, all of these things that people are like, "Oh! This has to relate to this." But let me answer the question. Basically what we always say when people bring that up is we don't officially take any position on homosexuality or gay marriage or anything like that. We don't take a position on it because we don't want to distract people from what we're trying to say. But we say that, and I think that, abstinence is something that can be embraced by everybody. And we applaud every single step taken in the direction of taking people and their relationships and sex more seriously. That is the message that every person can embrace regardless of whether or not legal marriage is available to them. So I mean that's typically my answer.

Tiffany was incredibly committed to the group's identity as non-sectarian, non-religious, and focused solely on abstinence before marriage. She felt that while other people wanted RR to talk a stand on issues of same-sex marriage or homosexuality more generally, these issues distracted from the true purpose of RR which was to get everyone, regardless of their religion or sexuality to take relationships and sexuality more seriously. Tiffany's opinion that other controversial topics distracted from the group's main purpose were in stark contrast to the perspective the group would take a few years later when they adopted a new platform with official positions on gender, marriage, and the family.



Tiffany was able to mobilize many of her resources to help bring legitimacy to the group. As a young woman who was poised, articulate, and intelligent, Tiffany was in many ways an ideal spokeswoman in the task of gaining legitimacy for RR. In op-eds, group meetings, and in her interview Tiffany rejected the idea of “a meek, virgin female, and this idea of submission, and abstinence only being for women.” Tiffany felt strongly that RR needed a man and a woman as co-presidents to further illustrate the idea that premarital abstinence was equally applicable to both men and women. Tiffany was educated in discourses of diversity, women's rights, and agency that helped her portray premarital abstinence in a much more progressive light. For instance, when asked about an article that called her an “unconventional feminist” she responded by articulating her vision of the ways the hook-up culture perpetuated inequality between men and women.

And the whole hook-up culture, if you look at it, is exactly perfectly tailored to what men desire, which is little commitment and sexual gratification. Sexual gratification with as little commitment as possible. And what we see on college campuses today is that played out. Women catering to men, men's interests all the time, and giving in, and not thinking that they can have boyfriends or maintain relationships or get male attention unless they're having sex. And so it's really sad, because something I experienced first hand when I came to campus as a freshman, was "wow!" No one dates here, but everybody is just--all of these girls are just bending over backwards to portray themselves as these really sexualized beings and it's really selling them short. But it's just--it propagates this whole culture of loneliness, emptiness. So in terms of women's rights, I think it's so important for women to just demand what they want out of a relationship and demand the respect that they deserve and not date men who won't date them unless they're having sex. So it's just lots of past experiences put into the way that I feel about this. To me it's a very important issue.

Her ability to engage with the discourses that had legitimacy on Old Ivy campus enabled Revolutionary Romance to revitalize its reputation during her term as co-

president with Mike. The group garnered much less negative press than the year before and was even asked to contribute a piece on abstinence to a publication put out by the Women's Center on campus.

Yet what Tiffany articulated to me during her interview was not a new ideology, but a new way of speaking about and defending more traditional models of sexuality and marriage. When it came to marriage and “family values” Tiffany stated “Personally I believe in that so much to my core and all that.” But what she had trouble with was the way that more old-school (and Evangelical) abstinence speakers articulated their beliefs. When asked about RR's stance on the marital aspect of premarital abstinence, Tiffany professed a more traditional ideology, though she framed it in a way that draws on more progressive discourses of objectification, commitment, and social recognition, while avoiding focusing on the legal or religious aspects of marriage. What Tiffany describes could equally apply to a gay couple's secular commitment ceremony as it could to a heterosexual couple's church wedding.

We think that anything falling short of saving sex for marriage is not taking seriously enough the commitment that is entailed between two people. But engaging in sexual intercourse, that's the thing that we have about abstinence: it's this beautiful thing, in order to experience it in its full flower, it's very important to have committed yourself entirely to one person for the rest of your life. It requires that degree of commitment before you can really experience it in its entirety and its full beauty. And also, once you're married to someone, you've taken this vow before your family and friends to stand by them for the rest of your lives. And so you have made this profession of love for them in their entirety, and only after that can you really love them with your entire person, essentially. And know that when you're having sex with them you're not objectifying them at all. You're appreciating every aspect of them. And this is something that even your lives have merged. And at no point before marriage do your lives

completely merge. And you know you're going to be together until the end. Does that make sense?

Tiffany's position is that commitment is a necessity in order to experience the “full flower” of sexuality. Without a commitment, and a corresponding love for the other person in their entirety, there is a risk that sex will become merely objectification. Rather than a simple exchange of pleasure, even if it is reciprocal, Tiffany's view of sex is of something sacred that demands love and commitment. The commitment should be lifelong, and monogamous, but while she references marriage, her description avoids many of the typical definitions of “traditional” marriage that potentially exclude gay and lesbian couples. For instance, while she emphasizes that this commitment needs to be public she does not make any references to the Church or any specific religion. And her definition also completely avoids gendered language. Her explanation leaves open the potential for men *and* women to engage in objectification in their sexual relationships. Similarly, the requirements she mentions of commitment, a public vow, love for the entire person, and a merging of lives, avoid any reference to *legal* marriage, but rather focus on a profession of love and commitment that is witnessed by family and friends. These requirements focus much more on the unique commitment resulting from a marriage ceremony, as opposed to marriage as a legal status or institution. So while Tiffany herself supported “family values,” she left room in her articulation of abstinence for a more progressive reading.

Liz

Unlike many of the other group members, Liz was affiliated with primarily

progressive organizations on campus. She identified as an atheist, was a member of the Campus Democrats, and served as co-president of the LGBT student group. Rather than a personal commitment to abstinence, Liz had joined the group to support what she viewed as a “sexual minority” on campus. Like Tiffany, Liz had been shocked by the negative response to RR by her supposedly “open-minded” peers.

Well I wasn't involved very much the first year. I knew Jacob through the homeless shelter, and thought he was cool. But it was basically just hearing, when the group started, there was a lot of negativity directed at it. And being in a lot of liberal student organizations, I was exposed to a lot of it. It surprised me because even though RR is a conservative group, I would expect people to be more tolerant. And there were a lot of people who personally attacked Jacob and Mary Catherine, and the group's right to exist. And I just found that so surprising that I wanted to support it.

Like Tiffany, Liz hoped to help RR gain legitimacy among Old Ivy students. While Liz herself was abstinent, though she preferred the joking definition “prude,” she joined Revolutionary Romance primarily to support the organization, rather than because of her own personal stance on abstinence.

Yeah. I think my purpose was more of, all this negative energy directed toward them was so ridiculous, I just tried to make it more accepted, I guess. I didn't really think what I had to get out of it. I think I joined the group because I thought it deserved support more-so than because of a personal thing. I happen to be a prude, but I like to think that I would join even if I wasn't, because it was so negative. So my main goal with that was just to make it as accepted as I felt it should be.

But while Tiffany was able to draw on progressive discourse to articulate a largely traditional or conservative ideology, Liz approached the group from a her background in working with LGBT issues. Her conception of abstinence was as an alternative sexuality. Liz's experiences with LGBT organizations give her a different way to think about

abstinence. On a campus where hookups are the norm, Liz argued, abstinence represents an alternative sexual identity. Her conception of abstinence rested on a definition of abstinence as an alternative form of sexuality.

Sometimes I'll use vocabulary that's kind of specific to the LGBT movement when I'm talking about abstinence and people look at me strangely from it. I think the whole identity thing is more from LGBT than from abstinence. And I'll put it in there but I think it works, they're definitely very separate movements but I do think there are parallels.

Liz understood that she often conceived of the group differently than other members.

Liz's view of abstinence as a sexual identity, one that needs to be fostered as part of an open-minded, progressive environment, also challenges the portrayal of abstinence as inevitably conservative. Her understanding of abstinence leaves space for progressive students, including LGBT students, to also adopt this identity.

I'm fairly sure I'm the only active member who is a gay rights activist or supports that. And there've definitely been events that I've found really offensive and homophobic and not inclusive. But I think the ideas are compatible. I've talked to some people, and there's definitely some people in LGBTQA that are interested in checking out RR events, because they feel that RR needs to exist within an Old Ivy environment because it's such a hookup culture. I think that's even intensified in the GLBT community, sometimes, especially in the gay community. Guys are just looking to hook up all the time. I have a few friends who don't do that, who've been really interested in possibly coming to RR events, because they don't do that, although they're not necessarily abstinent until marriage, because if they don't live in Massachusetts they don't have that option. So it's a little weird navigating that, and I understand.

Due to her emphasis on abstinence as a sexual identity, and a sexual minority on the Old Ivy campus, Liz was primarily interested in the role RR served as a support group for students practicing abstinence. She was less comfortable with events that focused on

outreach and was wary of what she saw as the group's tendency to “evangelize” about abstinence.

I put more of an importance, or whatever it is, on the support group aspect than some of the other people in the group do. But I think in this atmosphere that's kind of why it is important. Because ....it's been really interesting being a member of the GLBT group and RR and seeing how people are biased against you as a result. Like I've gotten a lot more negative, negativity, directed at me as a result of RR than the GLBT group. Like, I think here [Old Ivy] being abstinent is a lot more of a sexual minority.

Though she was not conservative herself, Liz felt it was important to have a diversity of opinions represented at Old Ivy, particularly in response to their professed “open-minded” and liberal culture.

Like Old Ivy is seen as a very liberal school. I don't know, not having been to many other campuses, I just have my really, really conservative county in Georgia and here to compare. In general, it's a liberal [campus] and all the activities that are stereotyped as liberal are present here. But the more conservative things, which abstinence is one of, aren't really seen, and I think when you go too far into either extreme, and don't let the other viewpoint exist, it's just negative to everyone involved. So I think, as long as there are some people who want to have this, have this part of their identity or what they're doing, it needs to be present and visible to people. As long as other people who otherwise wouldn't consider abstinence as a viable choice, which, I think, kind of happens here. I don't want to go extreme and say that no one's ever thought about it, but I think in some circles, RR has made people realize that there are people who are actively choosing not to participate in hooking up.

Liz offers an alternate way of conceptualizing abstinence, which while not the one accepted by the majority of RR members, was still viewed as compatible with the group. As the “token atheist” and “the only link between RR and liberal people” Liz represented a lone voice, yet it is voice that was often appreciated by other group members. The majority of RR members held their own conceptions of abstinence, conceptions that were

much more similar to each others than to the more identity-focused conception described by Liz. Yet Liz's presence was prized by the group because: she helped bolster their secular identity, she could speak in a language of diversity, and she challenged the image of RR as a conservative organization. In these early years, Revolutionary Romance was an organization that could accommodate both liberal and conservative members. Their version of abstinence was fluid enough to allow members like Liz to coexist with members who had a more conservative stance on other issues such as gay marriage or abortion. This ability to accommodate differing versions of abstinence further distinguished Revolutionary Romance as a organization.

I don't feel much of a revolutionary, but I guess in the sense that we're going against a norm that is now established, we are. And it's weird because the group, I think, is seen as very much reactionary, conformist, and I do think adopting dialogue with revolutionary is a good way to combat that. So it works.

Liz recognized that while many students at Old Ivy felt RR was a reactionary or conformist organization, in the context of Old Ivy Revolutionary Romance was actually challenging certain norms. While Liz was not convinced she or the other group members were revolutionary, she did feel the group challenged their fellow students to questions their beliefs and offered an alternative to the hook-up culture. Her version of abstinence may have been unique among her fellow RR members, but it was able to successfully co-exist at this point in RR's history.

As these three cases demonstrate, abstinence does not have a fixed meaning: it can be part of a religious faith, a personal identity, or a lifestyle choice

aimed at avoiding the “hook-up” culture at college. While abstinence is often portrayed as an inevitably conservative belief, Liz, Tiffany, and to a lesser extent Esther, demonstrate it is also potentially compatible with a wider range of political orientations. In its early years Revolutionary Romance provided a space where these different orientations, meanings, and beliefs could co-exist. But in the end, the group was unable to withstand pressures pushing it in a more explicitly conservative direction.

### Revolutionary Romance Events

When I began my fieldwork with Revolutionary Romance in 2008, I was struck by what I saw as their unique approach to abstinence. I met the co-presidents Mike and Tiffany at the “History of Valentine’s Day” event they had organized. Located in a dorm lounge with a large fireplace, comfortable chairs, and dark wood trim, the event included a dessert reception and a presentation by Mike and Tiffany about the history of Valentine’s Day. Using a PowerPoint presentation, Mike began with the history of the saints, the ties to a Roman fertility festival, Valentine’s Day’s appearance in Chaucer and its importation to the U.S. in the 1840s. Tiffany’s portion of the presentation focused on Valentine’s Day and romance in different decades. Her presentation highlighted the way that Valentine’s Day was celebrated in each decade, along with that decade’s conception of romance using examples of Valentines from each period along with images of romance from books, magazines or movies of the time. While the presentations were educational, the content was much less political than I expected and had almost nothing



to do with abstinence specifically.

I was to find out that this event typified the approach taken by the group. In 2007-2008 Revolutionary Romance sought to promote abstinence in a fun, lighthearted manner. As stated in their mission statement they sought to balance community outreach and publicity around abstinence with the goal of providing support for students on campus who were practicing abstinence. Unlike several other campus groups formed at the same time on other Ivy League campuses, Revolutionary Romance did not take an official stance on any issues besides abstinence, including marriage, gender, or abortion.

In fall of 2007 Mike and Tiffany took over as co-presidents. Like Jacob and Mary Catherine, Mike and Tiffany were both active in the Catholic student's group. Both Mike and Tiffany hoped to change perceptions of Revolutionary Romance among Old Ivy students. They hoped to foster the group that Jacob and Mary Catherine had founded, a group that was able to support abstinent students on campus, while also presenting abstinence to their fellow students as a valid choice.

The group began advertising in the fall by holding a table at the campus Activities Fair. They also passed out "Sex: 10 Reasons to Wait" flyers outside the Science Center before a University sponsored talk on safer sex. The flyers were smaller versions of the posters they used during their Valentine's Day event. The group also sponsored an ice cream social in the fall. When asked to describe highlights from this semester members often focused on the debate "Revolutionary Romance vs. Wendy Chang" or a talk given by Catholic abstinence author Jason Everet "Romance Without Regret."

Wendy Chang was a student well known on campus for her sex blog "Sex and the

Ivy.” Tiffany explained the idea behind the event:

She's such a salient personality here on Old Ivy's campus that I thought it would be really useful to have an event where I had a discussion with her and we talked about issues, women's rights, and sexuality, and stuff like that. It was actually, as you can imagine, a huge turnout, and everyone wanted to come. And actually, we were able to speak before a number of different people who never would have attended any other RR event. So in that way we definitely tailor our events to the Old Ivy campus just in terms of understanding what people will be interested in and what people will find provocative.

The debate, with Tiffany acting as the representative of RR, was the most well attended of all RR's events. Group members have described it as “standing room only” and some members thought nearly 100 students might have been in attendance. While the event was advertised as Revolutionary Romance vs. Wendy Chang it was really more of a discussion than a debate with the women respectfully stating their different opinions and striving to find common ground. Much of the discussion focused specifically on their opinions about the place of sex, dating and relationships on Old Ivy campus. In fact, Wendy and Tiffany were friends and the debate grew out of a casual conversation about their different views. The decision to hold this public event demonstrates RR's commitment to respectful discussion as well as their focus on making their message relevant to Old Ivy students.

RR also invited Jason Evert to speak on campus. A well known Catholic author and founder of the organization The Chastity Project, Jason was Mike's choice for a speaker who could present arguments in support of abstinence to the Old Ivy campus. The event was discussed by most members as a success—Jason attracted a good sized

audience and was an eloquent speaker. Nonetheless, Liz mentioned that some of his more conservative views caused problems for the group with the more liberal students on campus. While Mike and Tiffany both enjoyed his talk immensely, Liz had been much less enthusiastic about his invitation because he was Catholic and this challenged RR's stance as a secular organization.

During the fall semester RR also began hosting monthly dinner discussions. The dinner, discussions were informal meetings for members and other students to get together and discuss topics related to abstinence. Dinner discussions were divided by gender with Tiffany facilitating the women's discussions and Mike facilitating the men's discussions. Often discussions would be advertised using specific topics for discussion such as "Creative Dating" or "Mr. Right?" The topics chosen were seen as ones that would be pertinent to Old Ivy University students. They often dealt with discussing questions the co-presidents or other abstinent students faced in their everyday lives such as the following from a women's discussion dinner: "Will I ever find Mr. Right?", "How do I tell him I'm abstinent?" "Are there men willing to wait?" "How do I find them?" "Do I have to be boring in the meantime?"

In February of 2008, Revolutionary Romance once again sent out Valentine's. They included the same card asking "Why Wait..." and a piece of chocolate. This year the cards were sent to the entire Freshman class. The group also organized a "History of Valentine's Day" event. This social event included a dessert reception and a presentation by Mike and Tiffany about the history of Valentine's Day. Using a power point presentation, Mike began with the history of the saints, the ties to a roman fertility

festival, Valentine's Day's appearance in Chaucer and its importation to the U.S. in the 1840s. Tiffany's portion of the presentation focused on Valentine's Day and romance in different decades. Her presentation highlighted the way that Valentine's Day was celebrated in each decade, along with that decade's conception of romance using examples of Valentine's from each period along with images of romance from books, magazines or movies of the time.

This event was well covered by the campus media. A reporter and photographer from the campus newspaper came to cover their event as part of a news story on what students were doing for Valentine's Day. A camera crew for the campus television news program was also in attendance doing a similar story about different responses to Valentine's Day on campus. As Tiffany commented to me while rolling her eyes, "They just can't seem to get enough of us..."

RR also made use of campus media to publicize their message on Valentine's Day. They cosponsored an ad in the campus newspaper titled "Getting the most out of Sex." The ad was cosponsored by an abstinence group from Kingsford, another elite school in the area, and a campus abstinence networking group, The Campus Chastity Network. The ad begins with a vignette about an elderly couple's lasting love and commitment. The ad states that the key to happiness and fulfillment in romantic relationships is "practicing faithfulness while dating." But it clarifies that this does not mean sexual faithfulness through serial monogamy but "practicing fidelity with your spouse even before knowing who that person is." The ad goes on to detail the dangers of premarital sexual relationships due to the release of the "bonding" hormone oxytocin

during sex or other forms of intimacy. This biological bond leads to emotional pain when a sexual relationship ends. The ad argues when we have sex without true, full fidelity we “fail to respect ourselves and our partner.”

The ad is especially interesting because it seeks to challenge myths about chastity. In one section entitled “Chastity: FOR, not against, sex” the ad argues that abstinence before marriage “does not necessitate being irrationally religious, sexually repressed, afraid of the opposite sex, or afraid of sex in general.” On the right hand side of the ad there is a column entitled “Sex Myths” which further challenges common myths such as the idea that “sexual tension builds up over time” “You need to masturbate and experiment sexually in order to be comfortable with your body and sexuality,” “Faith is the only real reason for chastity,” and “You’re just trying to preach to me and force your morals on my lifestyle.” The refutations of these myths argue that humans can handle abstinence and chastity without harm, abstinence is a better way to love your body and respect your sexuality, there are many reasonable arguments for abstinence (even many of the religious arguments are perfectly reasonable) and finally that rather than judging anyone “We simply strive to help others understand why we believe chastity to be the best path to that goal, and we invite them to try it out for themselves.”

During my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, I attended talks by two of the speakers invited by RR: Scott Phelps and Dr. John Diggs. Both speakers illustrated the pro-abstinence community that existed outside Old Ivy's borders. As the reception to both speakers demonstrate, RR's unique version of abstinence did not always mesh well with the more mainstream strands of the pro-abstinence movement. While Diggs was

controversial because of his other conservative views, Phelps clashed with the group due to his more Evangelical and *pop-culture proselytizer* orientation. Revolutionary Romance provided an important platform for these speakers because of the fame and legitimacy of Old Ivy, yet RR members often found these speakers out of touch with the language they used to present abstinence to their peers. As the experiences with these speakers demonstrate, RR members were alienated not only from their peers at Old Ivy but also from the mainstream pro-abstinence movement.

The reactions to these two speakers highlights important tensions between Revolutionary Romance and the wider conservative social movement community. These tensions are especially interesting given the direction that the group would eventually take, adopting a more conservative platform and aligning more closely with other pro-abstinence organizations. These two cases also demonstrate the pressures exerted by the environment of Old Ivy that the group also had to navigate when planning events and inviting speakers. As Esther argued, controversy helped bolster attendance, but it was often attendance by students who were hostile to the speaker's message.

### Scott Phelps

In March of 2008, Revolutionary Romance had hosted Scott Phelps from the Abstinence and Marriage partnership to give a talk entitled “Why Marriage?” Scott Phelps is the founder and executive director of the Abstinence & Marriage Education Partnership, a group that provides training and resources focused on abstinence and marriage promotion to pregnancy centers, public and private schools, churches, and

community organizations. He initially joined Chicago Care Pregnancy Center (now Caris) to develop and implement abstinence programs in public schools across Chicago and the Chicago suburbs. He also worked for Project Reality, a statewide program focused on the development, teaching and evaluation of abstinence programs in the public schools, where he served as National Program Director. He is the author of *Aspire*, *Navigator*, and *Excel*, three abstinence-only sex education programs (two for use in public schools and one faith-based). Phelps holds a bachelor's degree from San Francisco State University and a Master's degree from Trinity International University, an evangelical Christian school. Phelps was not actually invited by Revolutionary Romance, he was in town for another speaking engagement and approached RR with an offer to speak on campus. Because RR was not expected to provide additional funding they agreed to sponsor the event.

It is important to note that after RR was recognized as an official campus organization they were able to secure space and limited funding for speakers and events. Even though the administration did not particularly like the group, it did not actively work against them. This provides an interesting contrast to Stand Up! which was blocked from inviting speakers and hosting events by their university's administration.

The event was held in a smaller event space on Old Ivy campus. There was a podium for a speaker surrounded by a configuration of chairs. A screen behind the podium allowed a speaker to show video clips or a Powerpoint presentation. It was less formal than a lecture hall, but slightly more formal than the dorm lounges where some

smaller events were held. When I entered the room I noticed several RR members in attendance, including Tiffany, Mike, Patrick, and Jacob, one of the group's founders. The crowd was about 20 people in total, but several of them were adults rather than students.

Scott Phelps had an interactive speaking style, he would pause to ask questions to the audience or get their thoughts and opinions on what he was saying. It became obvious very quickly that several of the audience members were attending because they did not agree with Scott Phelps. The most vocal group is labeled in my fieldnotes as “The Feminists in the Corner”: a group of three young women and one young man who challenged many of the beliefs Phelps espoused.

Also in attendance at the talk was Glenn Stanton, author of the book *Why Marriage Matters* and a member of the staff of Focus on the Family, a well known conservative, “pro-family,” evangelical protestant organization. Looking back through my fieldnotes on the talk I was struck by how many similarities there were between the points raised by Scott Phelps and Glenn Stanton, and those articulated by Jimmy, the founder of Purity Ring Posse discussed in Chapter II. Given their common background in the evangelical community, it is not necessarily surprising, but it serves to highlight another reason why the Scott Phelps talk was seen by many RR members as a disappointment. Phelps was articulating a version of abstinence rooted in Evangelical protestant beliefs, drawing on evangelical arguments (even when they were “scientific”), and presented in a style much more similar to the way PRP members talked to parents. Phelps lacked the intellectual and philosophical rigor of speakers like Jason Everett or



Robbie George, as well as the Catholic orientation. Scott Phelps's reception by both RR members and Old Ivy students, served to highlight the tensions within the different strands of the abstinence movement.

Phelps began his talk by emphasizing the importance of marriage. "People are not getting married," he announced, "And that's a real problem." He argued that it was not teen pregnancy driving social ills like poverty or violence, but out of wedlock birth. Abstinence helped provide a foundation for stronger marriage, thus helping to cure many of these social ills.

Phelps articulated many key talking points of the mainstream abstinence education movement during his talk. He and Glenn Stanton pointed out the potential negatives of sex before marriage: including STDs, emotional baggage, and the premature release of Oxytocin inhibiting future intimacy. They laid part of the blame for the anti-marriage, sexually promiscuous culture on the Sexual Revolution. As Stanton stated, "Setting sex free hasn't served women well. It's caused carnage, not more empowerment for women."

Phelps focused particularly on the benefits of marriage, citing the fact that well-being indicators are better for individuals who are married than for people who are single. He compared smokers who were married to non-smokers who were not married and cited social control, or "nagging," as a way that married couples took care of each other. At this point Tiffany raised her hand, asking Phelps if he didn't think people could be well by being single. Stanton answered the question by pointing out that they were talking

about well-being “sociologically.”

After the talk Tiffany continued to criticize Phelps focus on marriage. She argued that too much emphasis is placed on marriage. Women, in particular, are pressured to marry early, and this leads to divorce. While Patrick and Mike backed Tiffany up, arguing that some people are meant to be single, they drew on the Catholic ideals of the clergy and other religious taking a vow of celibacy. The feminists in the corner were quite insulted by the implication that gay people could be expected to refrain from sexual activity for the rest of their lives (because they were not able to marry) because the Catholic clergy made a choice to live a celibate life. And the implication that gay people “are meant to be single” rather than being prevented from their partnerships being formally recognized as marriages.

Phelps also engaged in a discussion about abstinence-only sex education and condom use that paralleled discussions I heard from PRP leaders. While recognizing that statistics showed students were less likely to use condoms at first sex after receiving abstinence-only education, he argued that “Condom use is not the gold standard.” Condom use has increased, but so have STD rates, he stated. Phelps questioned using condom use as the standard of effectiveness, highlighting the delay of first intercourse or the number of sexual partners as alternate ways of measuring a sex education program's success.

Finally, Phelps had a conversation after his talk with several of the male members of RR. They focused on the challenges of “reaching young men” with the abstinence

message. As Jacob noted “It's easy to talk to women, you can focus on pregnancy, on emotional issues.” But abstinence is harder to sell to men. They see abstinence as being nice, being good. But one of Phelps' associates, Simon, argued that the way to present abstinence to young men was as a challenge. “Tell them to be a man. Say, 'you can do it' That's when I really see fire in their eyes.” Jacob agreed with this strategy, arguing, “They're being sold a false idea of real manhood. It is about being in control, self-control, and protecting and helping women out.”

Phelps focus on marriage, distrust of condoms, reliance on traditional gender norms, and presentation style were all closely related to his connections to the Evangelical protestant pro-abstinence community. While some group members, like Tiffany, were troubled by the focus on marriage, Phelps represented the dominant conception of abstinence promulgated by many members of the abstinence-until-marriage movement. And while Phelps clearly saw himself as engaged in a common battle with Revolutionary Romance, it was clear from reactions from several group members that Phelps did not represent the community RR saw themselves as part of.

Tiffany told me afterwards, “I thought Scott Phelps' talk was sub par. I didn't find it interesting or provocative at all. I was disappointed. But we also didn't have a great turn out. So it was disappointing.”

Scott Phelps spoke more about marriage and family values. Personally I believe in that so much to my core and all that. But the way he was going about, articulating some of the issues on marriage and family values and trying to connect what we were saying to what he said, somehow struck me as really off. The only thing I specifically remember was having to raise my

hand and make a comment about something like, "Oh, but don't you agree that people can be happy who aren't married?" Or something like that.

While Tiffany shared Scott Phelps's belief in marriage and family values, she did object to his emphasis on the benefits of marriage. The arguments in support of abstinence made by Tiffany tended to focus on more philosophical issues of valuing the whole person and being committed to them in order to partake of the full benefits of sex. Tiffany's views show strong connections to Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. While Tiffany's views are not explicitly religious, they are heavily influenced by Catholic thought and philosophy. Scott Phelps's emphasis on marriage, social problems, and social science is much more in line with an Evangelical protestant approach to abstinence. To Tiffany, Phelps's ideas appear uninteresting. Revolutionary Romance attempted to articulate a version of abstinence that was more intellectual, as is fitting in their context at Old Ivy University. As demonstrated by the responses of the "feminists in the corner" Phelps was not able to adequately address liberal critiques of some of the core assumptions his arguments rested upon. The way Phelps made his arguments struck Tiffany "as really off" because he was articulating a version of abstinence more suited to a less academic and hostile audience.

#### Dr. John Diggs

Her first year as president Esther opened up RR meetings to all members, which were formerly only attended by the leadership of the organization. Their first big event of the semester was to bring Dr. John Diggs to campus. He was chosen as a speaker because

of his medical perspective on abstinence, which Esther felt had not been represented by past speakers. His medical credentials fit well into the group's focus on secular discourses about abstinence. Esther had invited him speak on the health and medical benefits of abstinence but she also worried during planning meetings that his medical focus would be "too STD-oriented." An additional worry was about Dr. Diggs' stance on issues besides abstinence. Diggs had appeared on the Dr. Laura show and the O'Reilly hour, and Esther described him as "a pretty big name" in the conservative community. Dr. Diggs was also well known for his article "The Health Risks of Gay Sex" and his right-to-life stance. The decision about how to approach and advertise his talk was a subject of a lot of discussion at group meetings that fall.

Liz says she hates to "ramble" and then leave. She mentions a past speaker Jason Everett who was well attended, and he was funny. However, he was also anti-gay so the Women's Center wouldn't help them co-sponsor it. She's heard that Dr. Diggs is also anti-gay and right-to-life, she's already been asked about it. She describes herself as "The only link between RR and liberal people." Esther wants to know "So you're a volunteer at the Women's Center?" No, answers Liz but she says she was on the GLBT student's group board. Esther says that he will not be talking about any of that. She doesn't think that's constructive. Liz agrees, she mentions trying to improve RR's image on campus and it would make a lot of people angry. Esther says she asked him to steer clear of this. Something about "shared vision." She even mentions that Jacob (one of the founders of RR) asked her to make sure this wouldn't happen. [fieldnotes]

Dr. Digg's was one of the first large events that Esther organized as president of RR. At this point, Esther and Liz were still following the vision laid out by Jacob and Mary Catherine, and further articulated by Mike and Tiffany. The group wanted to bring secular speakers, who could also speak about abstinence from different perspectives, but many of these speakers had well known conservative views on other topics that caused

controversy among Old Ivy students.

In the end, Dr. Diggs' talk "Sex Ed: The Sequel. What they didn't tell you" focused on the benefits of abstinence from a medical perspective. Group members agreed that Diggs should avoid discussing homosexuality or right to life issues. Because of the campus culture of progressiveness and tolerance if Dr. Diggs brought up these topics during his talk it would only make students angry and "wouldn't be constructive" to a discussion. A speaker who was anti-gay and pro-life was much harder to defend to more liberal student than one who was simply pro-abstinence. Liz told me after the meeting that some students had threatened to come and make a scene at the event if Dr. Diggs made any anti-gay comments. Keeping Diggs "on topic" helped preserve RR's position as an abstinence group that promoted diversity, without being bigoted or intolerant. The fact that Jacob had contacted Esther in advance of the talk, demonstrates the potential for this event to have disastrous consequences for the group's reputation among students. But though the event was viewed as successful by the group, the surrounding negotiations demonstrate the difficulty RR encountered when it tried to engage with both the Old Ivy community and the larger pro-abstinence social movement community.

### Core Values

In their early years Revolutionary Romance sought to advocate their own unique version of abstinence, one that would be palatable on their more progressive campus while also retaining some sense of moral principles. What emerged from my interviews and fieldnotes is a group with a set of core values that shared some common themes with

other abstinence groups, but that were targeted specifically to the Old Ivy context. In the following section I will more fully articulate these core values.

### Secular

One of the group's core commitments was keeping Revolutionary Romance a secular group. In the context of a perceived "secular culture" of Old Ivy University, the founders of Revolutionary Romance decided to organize the group as secular to "prevent isolation from the rest of the student body" as one student leader put it. RR self-consciously avoided drawing on overtly religious arguments in support of abstinence.

The group sought to distance itself from Catholic and conservative groups in order to challenge the perception, as Liz put it, that the group is "trying to push your religion on other people." When interviewed, members drew a clear distinction between RR, a secular group with a lot of Catholic members, and a group that is explicitly Catholic. Liz in particular applauded the group for its commitment to a secular focus when so many of the members were themselves religious. Esther was always quick to emphasize that abstinence was applicable to everyone. And the group also proudly embraced Liz who identified herself as the group's "token atheist."

Considering the religious affiliations of most of the members and their membership in religious groups on campus, the secular culture also further compelled the group to highlight the non-religious benefits of abstinence. Discussions of the bonding power of the chemical oxytocin are common in articles written about the group. The so-

called “bonding hormone” was released during sexual encounters and led to negative psychological effects when sex was not kept in the context of a committed, monogamous, marriage relationship. While references to oxytocin are ubiquitous in pro-abstinence literature, they are viewed with various degrees of skepticism outside the pro-abstinence community. Many social scientists label discussions about the effects of oxytocin as “pseudo science” in contrast to pro-abstinence scholars who point to oxytocin literature as scientific proof that sexual promiscuity is harmful (particularly to women). This also ties into a focus on the emotional impact of sex on relationships. Group members worked to challenge the perception that an abstinence group must be full of boring prudes who hate sex. In interviews, during dinner discussions, and in articles written about the group, group members emphasized that they are not against sex, but rather are redefining sex.

To further emphasize a secular focus, Tiffany, although herself a practicing Catholic, preferred the term abstinence to chastity when describing the group’s mission because of chastity’s religious connotations in wider culture. Whatever their private beliefs, the group drew publicly on arguments for abstinence that came from a medical, scientific, health and wellness, or ethical standpoint. Group members explained to me in several instances that while they themselves were religious, or had religious reasons for choosing abstinence, abstinence is applicable, and beneficial, to everyone regardless of religious belief.

### Only Abstinence

The founders of Revolutionary Romance also limited their official mission to



abstinence because of their perceptions that the “liberal” administration and student body would automatically be wary of a group promoting abstinence and suspect RR had a larger conservative agenda they were trying to promote. By defining Old Ivy University as “liberal” RR members meant the opposite of conservative. They saw Old Ivy University as supporting feminism, pro-choice views, safe (and casual) sex and same-sex marriage. This liberal orientation also included a public commitment to tolerance and a diversity of viewpoints.

Because of early controversies and some negative responses from fellow students, co-presidents Mike and Tiffany went out of their way to emphasize not only the secular nature of the group, but also RR's refusal to take an official stance on anything other than abstinence. Liz, a group member who in 2008 was also the co-president of the campus LGBT group, was proud of the group's refusal to have a stance on issues like gay marriage, even if most members of the group did not personally support support the legalization of same-sex marriage.

One of the group's most controversial positions was their view that abstinence meant *abstinence-until-marriage*. Supporters of gay rights argued that this made the group less inclusive, as only a few states allowed same-sex couples to be legally married. This was a position that Liz disagreed with, even though she admitted to understanding the reasoning behind it.

It's a little weird navigating that... I understand the need to not tone the message of RR down and say like we support abstinence until some sort of relationship or you know, because that's just kind of really fluffy. So it's

unfortunate and I think that makes the group less inclusive.

The group made the counter-argument that Revolutionary Romance was not anti-gay, they simply supported abstinence-until-marriage and did not take an official stance on the legalization of same-sex marriage. While this was not enough to satisfy some students, it did allow the group to avoid claims that they were bigoted.

To limit further misperceptions the group was careful about co-sponsoring events with other campus groups, for instance in 2008 the group was approached by the campus Right to Life group with an offer to co-sponsor a discussion on marriage and the family. RR declined because the leadership was worried that the event would only further the belief that the group was anti-abortion. During this time period group leaders also asked invited speakers to focus specifically on abstinence in their talks, even when speakers had a well known position on homosexuality or abortion.

### Presenting a Diverse Perspective: Outreach and Support

The group worked to balance their functions as a support group for abstinent students and an outreach organization that promoted the value of abstinence. The monthly dinner discussions hosted by RR in 2008 were meant to bolster their work as a support group for abstinent students. The men's and women's groups were meant to be more casual spaces where group members could get advice and support in remaining abstinent at Old Ivy. Several of the women's discussions groups were well-attended, but I got the sense that women's discussions had much better attendance than the men's<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Mike would not allow me to attend the men's discussion group until he was able to get an okay

Other social events like movies nights or ice cream socials always had low attendance and were quickly phased out because they took too much planning and organization and were often only attended by the people who had organized the event.

In terms of outreach, the group passed out flyers on “Sex: 10 Reasons to Wait” before a University sponsored talk on safer sex, and sponsored a debate between RR (represented by Tiffany) and a notorious campus sex blogger Wendy Chang. This was also a period where the group received a lot of national media attention. An article profiling the group was released in a national news magazine in Spring of 2008 and the group, especially the co-presidents Mike and Tiffany, found themselves spending a lot of time and energy responding to interview requests and questions about the group from outsiders.

Members of RR not only see themselves as the opposite to the hook-up culture but also as providing further visibility for abstinence as a viable choice. As Esther said in her interview, “I think it's important for people to know that there is a different lifestyle...” This was a sentiment echoed not only in my interviews but also in many of the articles written about the group. Because the perception on campus is that everyone hooks up, Revolutionary Romance also functions to publicize that there are other options available and that students on X campus do practice these other options.

#### Alternative to Hook-up Culture

Both RR members and students more generally, regarded the campus as lacking a

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from members who were planning to attend. In the end I was only able to attend one men's discussion group where there were two members in attendance.

dating culture. Wendy Chang, a campus sex blogger, and Tiffany, both agreed during their debate that they were not contented with the casual attitude towards sex and dating on campus. Both men and women RR members discussed the assumption that dating on campus was often assumed to include sex. The young women also mentioned their discontent with the limits of a choice between serious, marriage-focused relationships or casual hook-ups.

This “hook-up culture” is not necessarily the reality at Old Ivy , but it is definitely a common perception. One campus newspaper article even cited the results of a survey showing the disparity between the perception: 70 percent guessed the average student had two or more partners a year, whereas the reality was that only 22 percent of respondents reported having two or more partners. The perception of the hook-up culture, not only on Old Ivy campus but in college more generally, plays an important role in shaping the boundaries and speech norms of Revolutionary Romance. The perceived presence of the hook-up culture also impacts the activities that RR has chosen to engage in.

During both the men's and women's discussion groups, members drew boundaries between themselves and the wider hook-up culture on campus. One example is Mary, a female member, who said, “Yeah some of my same friends here at Old Ivy are like 'you know maybe you have it right' because they have these drunken hook-ups and then they just feel dirty afterwards.” Mary is contrasting her position as abstinent with that of her friends who have “drunken hook-ups” but regret them. John, at the men's discussion, blamed the lack of dating at Old Ivy on the “hook-up culture” and the knowledge men

and women have that they can get sex without having to commit to a more serious relationship.

The core values of Revolutionary Romance were in many ways meant to challenge dominant perceptions of abstinence among liberal Old Ivy students. Jacob and Mary Catherine had hoped to create a group that could make abstinence seem more relevant and less inherently conservative to their peers. At the same time, they wished to create a safe space where other abstinent students could come for support and discussions. Drawing on the dominant discourses of diversity and tolerance, future presidents portrayed Revolutionary Romance as a secular, non-judgmental group that was providing a different perspective on sexuality that was important to consider, even if students did not ultimately choose to practice it themselves.

### Conclusion

The case of Revolutionary Romance demonstrates the possibility for formulations of abstinence that do not rely on solely conservative or religious justifications. Tiffany's critiques of the gender inequality perpetuated by the "hook-up culture" and Liz's discussions of abstinent students as a sexual minority at Old Ivy both fit into more progressive discussions of sexuality and equality. RR attempted to largely uncouple abstinence from other conservative, "pro-family" ideology, refusing to take a stance on potentially controversial issues beyond abstinence. Their core values: that they were a secular group focused only on abstinence, working to present a diverse perspective and an alternative to the hook-up culture at Old Ivy, demonstrate their attempt to mold

abstinence into a form that would be more acceptable on their “liberal,” “tolerant” Ivy League campus. The experiences of members like Liz illustrate that abstinence is not inevitably tied to conservative positions, it can be articulated in ways that could potentially be compatible with some forms of feminism, gay rights, and secularism.

Yet what Revolutionary Romance also demonstrates is challenge of maintaining this unconventional form of abstinence in the face of pressures from both the campus community and the pro-abstinence social movement community. Revolutionary Romance encountered controversy when it invited prominent pro-abstinence speakers to campus because they often promoted other conservative positions that were viewed as intolerant by their peers. But RR was also never fully accepted by other students at Old Ivy, some students were willing to defend RR in the name of tolerance, but the majority of students still viewed a pro-abstinence group with skepticism. In the minds of many students abstinence was always a conservative, religious ideology. In the face of these continuing pressures, and the growing support provided by the pro-abstinence social movement community, Revolutionary Romance was unable to preserve their unique version of abstinence. When I resumed my fieldwork with the organization in 2010, RR looked much more conservative than it had when I'd left.

## CHAPTER IV

### REVOLUTIONARY ROMANCE: THE END OF THE REVOLUTION

In the fall of 2008, a few members of Revolutionary Romance, including Esther and the secretary of the group, Ann, attended the first annual “Family, Fidelity and the University” conference. The conference was held on the campus of Kingsford University, another Ivy League school. Organized by the recently formed University Fidelity Network (UFN) the conference co-sponsored by the Kingsford abstinence group, the G.E.M. Society<sup>20</sup>, and several other conservative groups. The conference brought together students from already formed campus groups that dealt with issues of abstinence as well as “pro-family” issues, along with students interested in forming campus groups of this type.

I was surprised to find the speakers at the conference focused more on pro-family issues than on abstinence. When abstinence was discussed, it was defined as a step towards protecting “traditional” marriage and the family, rather than a final goal. After my time with RR, I was surprised by the taken-for-granted assumptions by most participants and speakers that everyone in attendance was pro-life, anti-gay marriage, and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Christian. For this group, unlike my experience with Revolutionary Romance, abstinence was part of a larger battle to “defend” the family, traditional values, and (Christian) morality.

During a question-and-answer session, Esther addressed one of the keynote

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<sup>20</sup> The G.E.M. Society was named after Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, a Catholic philosopher who wrote extensively about marriage, sexuality, and chastity.

speakers, Dr. Roberts, about the problems RR had encountered after inviting Dr. John Diggs, a conservative with well-known pro-life and anti-gay views, to speak at Old Ivy. Esther explained that they had been encouraged by various group members to have him focus only on abstinence because of how it might be received on campus. Dr. Roberts, a well-respected scholar in the pro-family movement and advisor to the Kingford group, advised Esther to let Dr. Diggs say what he wanted about other topics because they “couldn’t be separated” from abstinence.

At a dinner discussion later that week Esther brought up this exchange with Liz, who disagreed strongly with Dr. Robert’s advice. Given her connections with liberal groups on campus, Liz knew that potential trouble was brewing. After the last week’s RR meeting she had told me members of the GLBT group were planning to come and confront Dr. Diggs about his position on homosexuality. Liz was afraid further controversy would be sparked if Diggs publicly discussed these views. Esther agreed with Liz, stating that Dr. Robert’s advice wouldn’t work for RR. In this instance the group rejected the advice of an outside advisor and decided to focus solely on abstinence. In an article in the campus newspaper about the event, Esther restated the fact that RR did not have an official stance on homosexuality and revealed that RR asked Diggs to respect the group’s position by avoiding the topic in his conversation.

As I documented in the last chapter, Revolutionary Romance struggled to articulate its own unique version of abstinence, one that could be accepted by the progressive students and administration at Old Ivy. Yet, as their experiences bringing



speakers like Jason Evert, Dr. John Diggs, and Scott Phelps to campus demonstrate, this version of abstinence was often challenged by more mainstream elements of the pro-abstinence movement which believed other conservative beliefs “couldn’t be separated” from abstinence. As I will explore in this chapter, RR moved in a more conservative direction in their fifth year. They engaged more heavily with organizations like UFN, changed their platform to adopt a wider range of conservative positions, and became more networked into the wider pro-abstinence social movement community.

### Changing the Platform

Welcome to Revolutionary Romance! RR is a new, non-sectarian student-run organization at University dedicated to the promotion of premarital sexual abstinence. We strive to present another option to our peers regarding sex-related issues, endorsing ideas of abstinence and chastity as a positive alternative for ethical and health reasons. Our efforts focus on community outreach, publicity, and support for those who wish to remain strong in or have re-committed themselves to this cause.

-From the Homepage of the Revolutionary Romance Website, 2008

Welcome to Revolutionary Romance! We are a student organization at Old Ivy that strives to present another option to our peers regarding sex-related issues, endorsing premarital abstinence and sexual integrity, upholding the institution of marriage and the family, and advocating true feminism.

-From the Homepage of the Revolutionary Romance Website, 2010

When I wrapped up my fieldwork with Revolutionary Romance in the spring of 2009, I felt I had a good grasp of the organization. I’d attended group meetings, events, and interviewed several of the leaders for several years. I was impressed by the organization’s stance on abstinence in the face of hostility from some of their peers, but also their commitment to keep their organization secular and focused solely on abstinence. Here was an abstinence group that was working to create a more progressive

version of abstinence, one that could co-exist more easily on the liberal campus of Old Ivy University.

So I was quite surprised to get an email while I was abroad in 2009 announcing that the Executive Board of Revolutionary Romance had voted unanimously to branch out from abstinence and adopt official platform positions on *Premarital Abstinence and Sexual Ethics, Family and Marriage*, and *Sexuality and Feminism*. The email included links to the group's blog containing an explanation of each position. Included below are excerpts of these positions:

The nature of sex is itself unitive—two become one flesh. Sex is thus the actualization of the marital union, concretizing the mutual gift of self between the partners. If experienced outside the context of marriage, therefore, it cannot actualize the union, for no union exists.

We define marriage as the exclusive and monogamous union between a man and a woman grounded in a commitment to mutual love and aid, with the intent to remain committed until death. Across the world, this commitment is recognized by state and social custom.

Revolutionary Romance recognizes that there are inherent physical, behavioral, emotional, and psychological differences between men and women, and we affirm and celebrate these differences as wonderful and complementary. These differences do not evidence the superiority of one sex over the other, but rather serve to show that each sex is complemented and made stronger by the presence of the other.<sup>21</sup>

The following statements give justifications for Revolutionary Romance's official stance on sex before marriage, the definition of marriage, and gender difference.

While these positions could be summarized as “conservative,” that term is far too contested to make sense of what happened. In particular, the group attempted to craft a larger philosophical argument that explain how their definitions of sex,

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<sup>21</sup> Taken from the Revolutionary Romance blog, 2010.

marriage, and gender are intertwined. Sex before marriage is wrong because sex is meant to be the actualization of the marriage union, because marriage is the union of a man and a woman because of the need for each of the complementary genders. Importantly, RR's statement rejects a gender hierarchy while still attempting to reify and preserve gender *difference*. And though this statement is a departure from their earlier stance, it still preserves their commitment to remain a secular organization by avoiding references to God or religion in terms of definitions or justifications.

The group I had thought of as progressive had suddenly adopted a much more conservative position on marriage, the family, and gender. How could I explain this drastic change in the organization? Had the group been co-opted by other more conservative groups? Had it been a strategic choice to access funding from conservative sources?

While I was initially surprised by the platform change, in retrospect the change should not have been unexpected as it initially seemed. From the start Revolutionary Romance encountered tensions when it came to balancing their position on the progressive campus of Old Ivy and their relationship to the larger pro-abstinence social movement community. The group faced continual pressures to resolve that tension in favor of convergence with other pro-abstinence groups. Rather than a drastic shift, the platform change was the culmination of several tensions that existed within Revolutionary Romance from the beginning. These changes were exacerbated by the changing landscape of abstinence groups and conservative organizations with which RR

was in contact.

While it might be easy to see RR's decision as the result of being co-opted by more powerful, conservative forces, evidence provides a more complicated story. Part of the change was due to the need for support from other groups, not only material but also emotional, and intellectual. Though past presidents had worked to make RR more accepted by Old Ivy students, the group remained largely isolated from both conservative and liberal groups on campus. They were largely ignored by students or perceived as "weirdos"—the rare conservative student on a mostly liberal campus.

In the face of uncertainty and the need for legitimacy the RR decided to mimic other, more successful, groups. Revolutionary Romance had slowly been forming ties to a larger pro-abstinence social movement community. It was difficult for group members to preserve their enthusiasm for the group over the long term on Old Ivy campus, where the group was either ignored or subjected to hostility from their fellow students. Ties to the pro-abstinence, pro-family social movement community offered intellectual support and a sense of belonging, along with a stronger sense of legitimacy, but they also put pressure on Revolutionary Romance to shift their positions away from their early focus on a progressive version of abstinence, to the more common conservative discourses that placed premarital abstinence in the context of a larger discussion of "traditional values." Organizations like the University Fidelity Network offered Revolutionary Romances the resources they sought, but required RR to accept many of the conventions of the pro-abstinence movement.

Isomorphism refers to the process by which organizations become more alike, in

particular as the result of their relationships with other organizations. Institutional isomorphism takes a variety of forms, including coercive isomorphism, normative isomorphism, and mimetic isomorphism. In RR, all three types were in play. Coercive isomorphism is the result of formal and informal pressures exerted by the reliance on other organizations for resources. Coercive isomorphism often grows out of a desire for legitimacy, which is fostered through imitating more powerful organizations. Mimetic isomorphism is often the result of symbolic uncertainty. Organizations model themselves after similar, more legitimate or successful, organizations in their same field. Finally normative isomorphism results from the professionalization of a field and the professional networking that leads to a homogeneity among personnel and organizational structure. As Revolutionary Romance became more connected with pro-abstinence networks, they were subject to both coercive and normative isomorphism. As a campus organization with ambiguous goals and an uncertainty about successful strategy, RR was also subject to mimetic isomorphism. Yet as the case of RR demonstrates, isomorphism is not immediate but rather a heavily negotiated, and often resisted, process.

While ultimately Revolutionary Romance was replaced by a new, more conservative organization, it was never a foregone conclusion that isomorphism would be the final result. For instance the group might have decided to give up their focus on marriage and created a more progressive abstinence organization that was more welcoming to students who were frustrated by Old Ivy's hook-up culture, but not supportive of a more conservative value system. The group was unable to sustain itself as an organization that allowed for a progressive version of abstinence both because of

progressive skepticism that abstinence could be anything other than conservative, and because of pressures to adopt more conservative discourses and identities by members of their social movement community, thus in the face of uncertainty the group attempted to redefine itself. This chapter seeks to explore how this process worked.

Focusing on main events during 2010-2011: RR's involvement with the University Fidelity Network, debates about what speakers to invite to campus, and discussions about a potential name change, this chapter uses each as a case to further explore the tensions present even after RR took on a new, more conservative, platform. For instance, even after accepting resources and mentorship from UFN, RR members continued to argue about which conservative speakers would be palatable to Old Ivy students. And discussed whether the platform change meant that the name Revolutionary Romance was no longer an accurate title for the type of group members wanted to cultivate. These events help illuminate the complex process of negotiation that RR engaged in while moving in a more conservative direction, but still attempting to be palatable to their more progressive environment at Old Ivy. As these events demonstrate, RR did not always given in to pressures towards isomorphism, but sometimes made strategic decisions to move in an isomorphic direction.

### A Wider Framework

Group members explained that the platform change was the result of an intense email exchange by the executive board over the summer and several meetings once school had resumed. As I will show, this exchange was simply the culmination of a wide

range of pressures operating on RR. Even after several year RR had not achieved true support from either the student body or the administration. UFN offered financial resources and moral support, but required organizations to adopt their mission statement. And the founders' vision of RR as a support group for abstinent students did not adequately reflect the wishes of the current group members, who viewed RR as a primarily political outreach organization.

### Continuing Tensions

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Revolutionary Romance created its version of abstinence in the context of a hostile environment. Presidents Mike, Tiffany, and Esther all worked to make RR a less controversial presence on Old Ivy campus. Yet, though they were able to respond to overt criticism of the group, they were never fully able to earn widespread support from the student body or administration. RR illustrated a larger trend of conservative isolation at Old Ivy, something that many of the student members of RR said they had experienced both inside and outside the classroom.

Over the course of the four years I followed them, Revolutionary Romance gradually moved away from their original mission as both an outreach organization *and* support group for abstinent students, focusing increasingly on outreach centered activities. As they engaged in more outreach, they found themselves struggling to articulate their ideological position. Increased outreach also increased the need for legitimacy, intellectual support, and academic resources. The shifting intentions of the group also made RR's insularity much more of a liability than a strength. Taken together,

these two continuing tensions also help explain why RR became more embedded in the pro-abstinence social movement community, and why isomorphism was such a logical strategy. I will briefly examine these two contextual factors before moving on to examine three cases in which RR negotiated their new identity and connections.

### Hostility and Controversy: Conservative Isolation

In its early years, Revolutionary Romance attempted to draw boundaries between itself and other groups, even other abstinence groups. They saw their approach to abstinence as unique and were wary of making ties with other groups on campus or abstinence groups on other campuses. Revolutionary Romance hoped to preserve its image as a secular, lighthearted, “progressive” abstinence group by limiting their interactions with groups they felt were too religious, too “political,” or too conservative. Yet, this tactic also had its drawbacks. While Revolutionary Romance received more support from the campus and administration in later years, their relationship with the wider campus was always fairly antagonistic. By distancing itself from other conservative campus groups, RR engaged in a fairly lonely struggle trying to educate fellow students who were often openly hostile to conservatism.

During a meeting in fall of 2010 Esther mentioned that she participated in the University lecture series. The other members were very excited that Esther got invited to this prestigious series. Esther explained that she talked about the Culture Wars. “When I was done some people came up and wanted to know what side I was on.” She laughs, as do the other members, since Esther was widely regarded by most RR members as a



conservative advocate at Old Ivy. She explains that she was very philosophical and academic and that the audience was really receptive, a success in Esther's opinion given the hostility RR regularly encountered with their own position vis a vis the Culture Wars. Esther goes on to propose the group do an "RR speaks" event. Even though RR was fairly notorious on Old Ivy campus, many students did not actually know what RR stood for. This event would allow RR to articulate their positions and challenge negative perceptions of the group. As Ann argues, "They make us out to be..." she pauses, searching for the right word. "Weirdos." finishes Patrick. "Which is totally unfounded." Esther adds sarcastically, provoking more laughter from group members.

As this excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates, Esther had been able to become a moderately acceptable figure on campus, being invited to speak at the lecture series, able to speak to an audience about the Culture Wars in a way that was palatable to the mostly progressive audience at Old Ivy. The same was not true for RR. As happened many times during group meetings, members mentioned, often in passing, as a kind of background assumption, that other students thought RR was a bunch of "weirdos." Despite the valiant efforts of past and current members, misconceptions about RR continued to persist.

The group's own belief that they were perceived as weirdos shaped nearly all decisions they made about public events. At another RR meeting in October of 2010 group members discuss whether they should host events with any other campus organizations. RR continued to be wary of which campus groups they engaged with. Partnering with the so-called "nut job" groups, those who were either extremely liberal or

extremely conservative, was dangerous. Both had the potential to further negative perceptions of RR either because it would be assumed they agreed with all conservative positions or disagreed with all liberal positions. Ann and Patrick were against staging a debate, especially with more progressive campus groups like the Peer Contraceptive Counselors (PCC). The PCC, a group of peer counselors focusing on issues of sexual health, contraception, STIs and testing, relationships, dating, and other topics related to sexual health. The group was also infamous among RR members for passing out condoms at the beginning of the semester and before holidays. But Esther argued that an event with PCC and RR would inevitably become a debate, “if we just did presentations we would present one thing and then their presentation would refute everything we said.” The member's joking comments about the PCC demonstrated their fundamental disagreement with the group's beliefs in condoms and “contraceptive justice.” Yet both Ann and Patrick were wary of making their disagreement with the PCC too public. Patrick didn't want RR to look like it was against everything the PCC did. And Ann worried that a public stance against the PCC would further negative perceptions of RR. As she argued, “Some people might be abstinent or support abstinence but if we start fighting the people passing out condoms then we'll just look like extremists.” As Ann's comments demonstrate, RR was careful not to alienate students who were abstinent or supported abstinence.

After their platform change, RR was no longer able to argue that they were not a conservative organization, at the same time they still attempted to maintain their position as conservatives who were thoughtful and respectful, rather than extremists. In an

interview with the campus paper before the platform change Esther defined discussion and debate during RR events as an important force of unity rather than division. She stated that intellectual conversation and discussion “are healthy and those are the things that bring us together not divide us.” Still, RR remained careful about which groups it debated with. Esther was much more excited about staging a debate with Xtasy, a campus sex magazine featuring racy photos of students, than with the campus LGBT group. Esther clarified that this was because she saw Xtasy as more “against” what RR does. But this distinction may also be tied to nervousness about getting into a discussion with the LGBT group that could potentially portray the group as homophobic or anti-gay. While in its early years, from 2006 to 2009, RR worked hard to distance itself from conservative groups like the Republicans, the right to life group, or the Catholic Student Association, the group was more willing to partner with some of these groups after the platform change. While still careful about being too closely aligned with “extremist” or “nut job” groups, they were more able to align with other conservative groups on campus.

### Conservative Isolation

RR’s position was further challenged by a sense of conservative isolation at Old Ivy felt by many group members. While attending a reception with Esther after an RR meeting we got into a discussion about conservative isolation at Old Ivy with several other students. They expressed their frustration with having to defend their views, often in the face of quite overt hostility:

Esther thinks the Tea Party has some good ideas but they’ve been criminalized. The man, Joe, says that they haven’t been criminalized,

they've been demonized.

I tell them that I'm from [a nearby university] and that I'm not used to hearing these kind of discussions about Republicans. That it's mostly about how evil the Republican party is. "Don't worry, you're not alone." the woman says. She says that she often feels alone on campus. She's heard all the crazy arguments about Republicans, "they're fascists."

"They want to found a theocracy," Joe adds. They go through some other arguments. She says she's been called racist, homophobic. Esther says she's been called a racist, too. She says she's so sick of it.

"You want to cut government spending?" she asks in a deep voice.

"Racist!" she says strongly. They all agree this doesn't make any sense.

**(11-10-10)**

RR existed in an environment where conservative students often felt alone, if not demonized for their beliefs. As the following excerpt from an RR meeting in October 2010 demonstrates, many RR members experienced this isolation inside and outside the classroom. During a meeting Maria posited that conservative students at Old Ivy were afraid to talk about topics like abstinence or gender issues. "They are trying to be politically correct." she argued. "And if they're not then they're liberal. Non-liberals are afraid to speak up."

Maria proceeds to tell a story about her experience in a Diversity class focusing on gender in Disney films. In this class they did an exercise where the teacher asked questions about what they believed and they had to stand on one side of the room if they agreed or disagreed. "I was the only one on the one side of the room" she says. Drawing on critical readings of Disney films, such as Martin and Kazyak's piece on the normalization of hetero-romance, the professor argued that Disney needed to work harder to "break the stereotype that a man and a woman is normal" (2009). Maria shakes her head in disbelief as do the other members. "Only at Old Ivy..." Esther says with a shake of her head. "I was like 'What?!'" Maria

says passionately. “I was so glad class was over because I was like ‘I can’t do this right now...’”

Maria’s experience of being the only one on the one side of the room was a common one among RR members. Frequently they were one of the only conservative students in their courses, and they often disagreed with both their professors and their fellow students. After one of my meetings with Esther and Liz, we were approached by a male student who had overheard our conversation. While he had no interest in joining RR he expressed his happiness at learning there were other conservatives at Old Ivy. He was glad he wasn’t the only one.

This conservative isolation contributed to RR members sense that they were viewed as “weirdos.” In the following excerpt Esther reveals the emotional fatigue she feels after having spent the last two years defending RR. Despite her efforts as RR president, she felt RR was still considered a bunch of “weirdos” but otherwise largely ignored by the majority of Old Ivy students. While the platform change did garner attention for the group, it primarily came from students who most strongly opposed conservative values, characterized by RR members as gays, ultra-liberals, and feminists. The attention did not lead to an increased membership or support for the group, yet required an immense amount of time and energy from the group leaders.

“They think we’re weirdos”

“We have the reputation as weirdos but a lot of people don’t care to find out more about us. The feminists, gay people, the ultra-liberals are the only people who really care about the group.”

Maria is upset by this, “But what about the people in the middle who need...I mean it kind of sounds bad to say it like that, but who need RR?”

Ann and Esther aren't sure they can reach those people. "It's almost like religion," says Maria, "How do you bring people 'to the faith' without..." she searches for the word "scaring them?" Ann finishes. "That's the million dollar question." Esther says in a light tone. She explains that they've taken a different approach to it each year. "The current approach is to lay low." she says in a somewhat sarcastic way. Suddenly her tone shifts, becoming much more serious, she says: "I don't have it in me to be RR." She says that she is a senior, working on a thesis, doesn't have time and she's leaving at the end of the year. Some other people will have to step up if they want the group to continue. She explains that she hasn't done the best job of building up a core, but that she doesn't know how to do it.

Esther, who was normally bubbly and sarcastic, looked visibly overwhelmed during this exchange. Working against the busy schedules of group members, as well as her own other commitments, Esther found herself putting an immense amount of time and energy into "being RR." Yet it was clear that by her senior year that her energy had run low. Esther was ready to give up the difficult job, even as she expressed frustration that she hadn't been able to do more for the group.

RR members inevitably encountered controversy and debate. While they attempt to avoid controversy that would cause the group to be perceived as intolerant or overly conservative, members realize that controversy can also generate attention. For example, while stuffing envelopes for the 2009 Valentine's Day campaign a member wondered aloud if they would cause controversy this year. Rather than worrying about the potential for controversy, he was looking forward to the potential for attention. While discussing who to invite to the Dr. Diggs talk, Esther reiterated that "Our events aren't just for people who are sympathetic to the cause..."

One of the basic dilemmas of social movements is between ideological purity and

a need for flexibility in recruiting new members (Snow et al. 1986, Snow and Benford 1992, Steinberg 1998). In the case of RR, it played out in an unconventional way, with their moving away from a complex position that was hard to understand but allowed for diversity to a more conventional position that has greater currency among conservative students. Again this can be tied to the group's deployment of the discourses of tolerance and diversity. RR audience members who did not support abstinence could help them maintain their status as a diverse voice, and by welcoming potentially unsympathetic students they also advertise their own tolerance.

Yet RR members often found themselves having to defend their views about many aspects of their life at Old Ivy. While RR might have failed as a support group for abstinent students, it definitely offered some sense of support for conservative students at Old Ivy. Yet, much like Esther, RR group members were more prone to withdraw from activism when they felt like a marginalized group that continued to be misunderstood and dismissed as "weirdos." Their association with the pro-abstinence social movement community offered them a sense of legitimacy, a wider community support, and intellectual resources that allowed them to deal with controversial issues without appearing, or attempting not to appear, intolerant, bigoted, etc. This may help explain why the group was comfortable with the controversy generated by their decision to expand their platform to issues besides abstinence. Their exposure to the social movement community provided them with the additional resources to weather controversy at the same time it helped them challenge their sense of isolation at Old Ivy.

### Support Group or Outreach Organization?

In its early years the group worked to balance their functions as a support group for abstinent students and an outreach organization that promoted the value of abstinence. Revolutionary Romance positioned itself in opposition to the “hook-up” culture it saw growing on their campus: the rise in casual sex (or other sexual behaviors) between people who were not in relationships, and sometimes only vaguely knew each other. Group members also bemoaned the lack of a dating culture at Old Ivy, citing a lack of options between hooking up or being in a very serious relationship. The group also challenged what they viewed as the administration’s support for premarital sexual activity. Safer sex workshops and free condom distribution led students to believe that having sex was the only choice on Old Ivy campus. Thus, the group hoped to promote public awareness of the benefits of premarital abstinence as well as a supportive space for students who wished to remain abstinent while in college.

To bolster their function as a support group, RR began hosting monthly dinner discussions in the fall of 2008. The dinner discussions were informal meetings for members and other students to get together and discuss topics related to abstinence. Dinner discussions were divided by gender and focused on discussing questions the co-presidents or other abstinent students faced in their everyday lives. The group alternated these support group activities with more outreach focused ones, handing out flyers about abstinence before a “Safer Sex” workshop, staging a debate between Tiffany and campus



sex blogger Wendy Chang, or sending out abstinence-themed Valentine's to the freshman class.

Yet as my fieldwork demonstrated, the support-group-focused events were never as well-attended as the outreach events. Not only could outreach events draw on a wider audience, members who were only marginally involved in the group would often turn up for these events but not for social events or dinner discussions. Support group events took time and energy to plan and organize, but they often were less invigorating than outreach events. What group members viewed as their most successful events were those with the largest attendance, like the debate between Tiffany and Wendy Chang. This event, described to me by members as “standing room only,” generated attention for Revolutionary Romance and made the planning and logistics seem worthwhile.

Revolutionary Romance members were aware of this tension. In an interview with Tiffany at the end of her term as president she admitted that the group had leaned slightly towards outreach, but she attributed this to the campus, and media, response to the group. In the spring of 2008, just after she'd been elected as one of the new co-presidents, Esther discussed the importance of Revolutionary Romance as a support group, a place where people with common views could come together, “for me it's more of a support group than something that's politically active, you know” she said in her interview.

Yet the group was never able to succeed as a support group. After Mike and Tiffany's term, the group stopped holding dinner discussions. Social activities like movie nights or ice cream socials became more infrequent and then disappeared completely.

Increasing energy was put towards outreach. This excerpt from my fieldnotes demonstrates RR's reputation as a "political" organization, which many members, and other students, believed prevented Revolutionary Romance from being successful as a support group for all abstinent students. Some students who were personally abstinent students did not support additional conservative positions and thus were wary of joining or being affiliated with Revolutionary Romance.

At a meeting on 11-10-10 Patrick arrives late, explaining he was having a conversation with a friend outside who was a member of the Peer Contraceptive Counselors (PCC). The PCC was often discussed by RR members as their direct opponent on campus. With their focus on condoms and sexual health, PCC was viewed as promoting the idea that all Old Ivy students were sexually active, offering safer sex tips rather than alternatives to sexual activity. Patrick's friend on the PCC felt that RR had alienated some of the abstinent students on campus with their conservatism, "some people on campus who are abstinent, personally, don't come to events because they feel politically alienated by the speaker's politics." Patrick recognizes that most abstinence speakers are part of a conservative spectrum. But his friend felt this pushed away some Old Ivy students, who "Don't feel they can get support for abstinence from RR because there is too much political atmosphere... or something."

Esther agrees that this was a concern when the group adopted a new platform. "RR was founded as a "safe haven" for people who were abstinent but no one uses it for that. We realized we were not filling in some structural hole on campus." she pauses, "So how can we seek common ground? How can we not be perceived as overly political?"

RR members were quick to challenge the perception that the group was overly political, arguing that the idea RR was political did not reflect the reality of the group. As Patrick argued, “I was just at the meeting last week. And we didn’t really discuss that much that was political. It was mostly procedural stuff, not politics at all. Maybe if we have a few more of these things, people can come in and see. There’s no need for everything we do to be political. A speaker is going to come across as overly political. But if they come to meetings, it’s not going to feel like they’re in a seething cauldron of politics.”

In fall of 2010, Esther explains this shift in the focus of the group as being the result of the “structural holes” on campus, as well as the needs of the current members. In 2010 group members saw themselves as engaging in a critical dialogue about sexuality and related issues that went beyond acting as a support group. A discussion of the “glory days” of Revolutionary Romance demonstrates these beliefs among group members.

At a meeting on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011 Esther encourages some new members to contribute to the RR blog. Many members were unaware the group even had a blog. Esther then launches into a discussion of the group's past activities, including both the blog and the media attention RR received when they were first founded. This discussion of the “glory days” provokes a discussion of tactics, focusing primarily on whether the group should continue to provoke controversy or keep a lower profile.

Esther says, “We were getting SOOO many hits last year. More than the Republican blog...” Some newer members seem surprised at this. While other members seem impressed that they got more hits than the Republican club blog.

Esther continues, “We got on Google, Newsweek, ABC,” there is more

surprise and excitement from group members. “Yeah, we got a lot of press...we had glory days people...” Esther says with a laugh. Members discuss how they can recapture these glory days. Someone suggests they “Do something more controversial??” Esther explains that they have been taking a non-controversial approach this year. She asks, “How can we use the non-controversial thing? It’s not the worst thing to be non-controversial...” Patrick wants to know “What have our actions shown other than silence?” Some people laugh at this. He continues, “We have to publicly disagree, to be meaningful... in a perfectly civil way. Other groups on campus, like the outing club, don’t have to do that. If we don’t disagree it’s not because we all agree but because we’re not speaking.”

As Patrick’s comments show, Revolutionary Romance “must disagree to be meaningful.” Their “glory days” were viewed as the result of controversial actions, or at least publicly disagreeing with the dominant views at Old Ivy. This conversation points to the fact that current members had a different view of the true purpose of RR than the founding members. Current members viewed RR as a group whose goal was to promote an often silenced perspective. The hole they filled was not about being a “safe haven,” but about taking on controversial issues that weren’t being discussed anywhere else on campus. As a group that was currently committed to outreach and education, Revolutionary Romance sought to bolster their legitimacy by drawing on the resources of their social movement community.

### The University Fidelity Network

In 2007 a group called the University Fidelity Network began working to connect the various pro-abstinence groups forming on college campuses, particularly those in the Ivy League. UFN organized an annual conference, sent out monthly newsletters, and

offered funding and mentorship for campus groups that would accept their mission statement. UFN had ties to other prominent conservative groups like the Ruth Institute, the National Abstinence Education Association, the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, all think tanks that produce research and policy briefs for conservative politicians and advocates. While some groups had co-organized events in the past, or at least were aware of the existence of other groups, UFN formally connected these campus organizations to one another, and to a larger social movement community made up of pro-family, anti-abortion, and other New Right groups.

In the fall of 2008, a few members of Revolutionary Romance, including Esther, attended the first annual “Family, Fidelity and the University” conference organized by UFN. It is clear from the statement of purpose that this conference viewed abstinence and chastity as part of a larger framework that included “defending” marriage and the family:

To equip college students with the resources, support, and arguments they need to uphold the institution of marriage, the special role of the family, and sexual integrity within their university communities. We aim to build a network that will become the nucleus of an articulate and effective new generation of leaders who will advocate for marriage, family, love and fidelity on college campuses and in the public square.

The UFN conference began to connect RR with a more formal network of a larger conservative social movement community. The conference was held on the campus of Kingsford University, another Ivy League school, and was co-sponsored by the Kingsford abstinence group and several other conservative groups: Christian Union<sup>22</sup>,

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<sup>22</sup> By God’s grace, Christian Union is changing culture by discipling, mentoring and training future leaders at the most strategic universities in America, and by building networks of engaged Christian leaders in cities. (<http://www.christianunion.org/about/mission-a-vision>, accessed September 5, 2016)

Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute<sup>23</sup>, The Collegiate Cultural Foundation<sup>24</sup>, The Social Trends Institute<sup>25</sup>, and The Witherspoon Institute<sup>26</sup>. These organizations represent a subsection of the pro-family movement, advocating “Christian values” or “morality” in the public square, while also focusing on mentoring the next generation of conservative leadership. The UFN played an important role in linking RR to this wider conservative social movement community, both by introducing RR members to individuals and organizations that were important players in the conservative community, as well as networking them with other students active around these issues.

UFN's understanding of abstinence and chastity place it in a larger framework that includes defending “marriage” and “the family.” This is clearly demonstrated in UFN's description of the “Family, Fidelity and the University” conference on their website:

Today’s college campuses are saturated with casual attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Moreover, university programs and events often only abet the situation by presenting a one-sided, “anything goes” view of what constitutes moral and healthy sexual behavior. There is an urgent need for college students to know about the negative effects of the sexual culture around them and how they can live out their sexuality in a way that honors the full meaning, purpose and integrity of sex and human relationships.

“Family, Fidelity and the University” is an intercollegiate conference designed to educate students in the arguments upholding the importance of marriage, family, and sexual integrity. It is our hope that participants will return to

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<sup>23</sup> Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute prepares and promotes conservative women leaders. (<https://cblpi.org/our-mission/> Accessed September 5, 2016)

<sup>24</sup> The Collegiate Cultural Foundation promotes Pro-Family and Pro-Life Education and Activities on College Campuses. (<https://collegiatecultural.org/>, Accessed September 5, 2016)

<sup>25</sup> The Social Trends Institute is a non-profit research center that offers institutional and financial support to academics of all fields, who seek to make sense of emerging social trends and their effects on human communities. (<http://www.socialtrendsinstitute.org/about-sti>, Accessed September 5, 2016)

<sup>26</sup> The Witherspoon Institute is an independent research center that works to enhance public understanding of the moral foundations of free and democratic societies. (<http://winst.org/about/mission/>, Accessed September 5, 2016)

their campuses better informed about the lifestyles and behaviors that best enable them to live responsibly, reasonably, healthily and morally.<sup>27</sup>

UFN's stance on abstinence was much more in line with the dominant discourse within the conservative social movement community. These groups were unafraid of taking a stance on issues of same-sex marriage, abortion, or gender roles. In fact, these issues were viewed as fundamentally related to the issue of abstinence or sexual integrity.

The UFN acts as a "mediator" organization: it fosters connections between campus abstinence organizations and other conservative individuals and organizations and works to solidify a common ideological language among these groups (Southworth 2008). At their conference the UFN provides access to literature on pro-family issues. Articles, books, and pamphlets from the Witherspoon Institute, the Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute, and the Center for Marriage and Families are available to conference participants. This literature features talking points for arguing in support of "pro-family" issues in the public square, but also works to inform participants about the deeper connections between issues of marriage, family, and sexuality.

Many of the speakers at the UFN conference have connections to these conservative organizations, or are well known members of the pro-family and anti-abortion movements. After talks, during coffee breaks, and particularly during lunch, the conference facilitates students' connections with these conservative figures encouraging them to mingle, chat, and network. It became clear that

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<sup>27</sup> From the University Fidelity Network website, 2008.

students were being groomed as the next generation of conservative leadership and connections made at the conference could lead to internships, invitations to summer programs, or even potential jobs.

One example was Esther's summer internship with the Heritage Foundation, which grew out of her work with RR. In my interview with Esther, she attributed her commitment to an expanded platform in part to this internship:

I think I started thinking about conservative philosophy on the whole because I had just come out of interning at the Heritage Foundation and their religion and social policy center so I was really engaged in thinking about traditional marriage and civil society that summer, and thinking about my conservative beliefs, they aren't like polka-dotted but they're really part of a framework.

As Esther's comments demonstrate, her experience at the Heritage Foundation encouraged her to develop her own conservative philosophy, one that took a more holistic approach to abstinence, traditional marriage, and civil society. Esther's internship set her own a path towards conservative leadership, but it also encouraged her to reflect and develop her own beliefs within the context of a religious, pro-family environment.

The conference is also an important location for networking among students from different campuses. During group meetings, and in interviews, Revolutionary Romance members talked about the importance of meeting other people engaged in the same struggle. Ann, an RR member, describes the importance of this support in an interview:

I think the best part of it came from just seeing how many other people were there. And talking with them about how they were experiencing this on their campuses, and how they were dealing with things, and how they



presented themselves, and learning from all that. The speakers also helped, because they're all scholars in these areas, so they've actually been devoting time and research to things that we're doing as a hobby. Being able to hear what they had to say about it was really enlightening, and overall, it was a huge confidence boost, at a really necessary time for that to happen. Just a lot of support, both intellectually and emotionally.

RR members were quick to emphasize the importance of the networking provided by UFN and argue the sense of community they provided was more important than the financial support offered by the group. Ann explains to me that though RR does get money from UFN each semester, UFN's contribution goes beyond the financial. For Ann, the ability for RR to join the network of students and organizations created by UFN and their annual conference, was what made the platform change such a good decision for the group, "it provides us with that network of other people who are doing this, which is really important when it gets tough. So that's been helpful."

Ann describes the confidence boost she felt when she saw how many people attended the conference. The importance of feeling connected to a larger network of people, "when it gets tough" is real. RR members were often juggling challenging coursework along with a full spectrum of campus activities. Getting members to attend meetings and events was always a challenge because members were so busy. In addition, Old Ivy could feel isolating and hostile to conservative students. And RR was an organization that was not always positively perceived by fellow students. So it was useful for RR members to see their organization as part of a larger group of people engaged in a similar struggle.

During a meeting in spring of 2011, Esther and Ann encouraged Maria, a freshman member who was clearly being groomed to take over the leadership of RR once Esther graduated, to attend the UFN conference. Their discussion reveals the pleasure that Ann and Esther took in the conference. They assure Maria she would have fun at the conference, but also recognize the ability of these events to re-energize members who might feel overwhelmed and isolated on Old Ivy campus. They clearly hope that by attending the conference Maria will be inspired to take a more active role in RR.

Esther and Ann encourage Maria to attend the UFN conference, and to potentially bring a friend. They present Maria with the benefits of attending: the food and accommodations are nice and the conference is a great place to meet people. “You’ll meet tons of people, there will be like 200 kids there.” Ann says, “It really boosts your confidence to go!” Esther agrees, “It makes you really inspired.” She encourages Maria to get her friend to come because it will make her want to get involved. They also encourage Maria to attend specific events that they think will be both inspiring and fun. These events include the keynote, which they agree has been awesome in the past, and the brunch on the Sunday after the conference. They end their pitch by assuring Maria that she and her friend will have a lot of fun at the conference.

UFN provided many different forms of support for RR. As a mediator organization they provided financial support, mentoring, and connections to speakers to invite to campus. But by hosting an annual conference UFN also served an important function in building a sense of community for students involved in pro-abstinence groups

on their individual campuses. Additionally, RR used UFN as a way to inspire current members to continue or boost their involvement in their organization. The “confidence” members found at the conference transferred back to RR and helped members feel connected to something beyond the Old Ivy campus, encouraging them to continue to devote time and energy to the group.

RR did not work closely with other campus groups-and as I will show later in this chapter their relationship with UFN was sometimes a source of tension- nonetheless, the feeling of shared purpose and community is clearly important to group members. The conference helped the group feel part of this community while also exposing them to arguments that enforce and expand their understanding of the connections between abstinence and other pro-family issues.

Importantly, connection to the social movement community brought important resources to RR, but it also carried a pressure to conform ideologically. Some of this ideological pressure happened organically, through conferences and speakers RR members were exposed to pro-abstinence and pro-family arguments that were carefully crafted to be persuasive in the public square. Often this ideology was not experienced as invasive, rather it fit well with members' existing beliefs. As Ann mentioned in her interview, “I think we’re all up against the same kind opposition and against the same support, too. Like it’s definitely not unique to RR the way people view all of this.” But sometimes the pressure was more overt. To get support from UFN, RR needed to adopt their mission statement. And after they partnered with UFN, RR was often given suggestions about speakers to invite or activities to participate in. Even after their

platform change, RR found themselves negotiating their relationship with the wider community in an attempt to remain connected to the pro-abstinence movement, while not further alienating their liberal Old Ivy peers.

### Inviting Speakers to Campus

As detailed in the previous chapter, choosing speakers to invite to campus was often a fraught activity for Revolutionary Romance. Pro-abstinence speakers often held other conservative views--on abortion, same-sex marriage, or gender-- that the majority of Old Ivy students found unacceptably bigoted. Speakers like Jason Evert and Dr. John Biggs were criticized by LGBT and feminist campus groups for their anti-gay views. Even within RR, Tiffany criticized Scott Phelps less academic and intellectual approach to abstinence and marriage for not matching RR's approach to the topics.

Even after their platform change, the ideal speaker for RR was someone who approached the topic of abstinence, or related topics, from a scholarly perspective: someone who was not overly religious in their arguments and able to avoid appearing bigoted or "crazy" in their wider views. RR also attempted to choose speakers who would appeal to a wider group of students, rather than simply those who shared RR's "traditional" position on marriage, sex, and gender.

As the two events I chronicle in this section demonstrate finding this ideal speaker remained a challenge for the group. Even a speaker like Dr. Hilton, who seemed to match most of RR's criteria, provoked some anxiety among group members during his talk. And as the group discussed future speakers they reveal the complex negotiations, as well as tensions with UFN, that affected their decision making. As this section demonstrates,

changing platforms and forging an alliance with UFN did not alleviate the tensions RR faced on Old Ivy campus. In some ways their new associations added new pressures since UFN, and the pro-abstinence movement more widely, did not fully understand the unique environment of Old Ivy but consistently attempted to create closer ties between Revolutionary Romance and the wider social movement community.

#### Dr. Hilton and WRAP

In honor of White Ribbon Against Pornography (WRAP) week, Revolutionary Romance invited Dr. Donald L. Hilton to speak on campus. Hilton examines pornography and sexual addiction from a neuroscience perspective. His stance against pornography was seen as a less controversial conservative position than anti-abortion, or anti-same sex marriage among many Old Ivy students. And his intellectual credentials (he has a medical degree from the University of Texas, and is an associate professor of neurosurgery at the University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio<sup>28</sup>) made him appear to be an ideal speaker choice. Yet, Hilton clearly prepared his talk with a hostile audience in mind, making consistent disclaimers about his arguments and attempting to make references to popular culture. And Esther's comments after his talk reveal the anxiety by many group members that his talk would stray into controversial territory for Old Ivy students.

Hilton's talk attempted to make connections between the sexual revolution, a rising use of pornography, and link these trends to changes in masculinity, fertility, and violence against women. After his talk Esther commented to me that Hilton's talk was

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<sup>28</sup> From <http://ldshopeandrecovery.com/donald-l-hilton-jr-md/> accessed April 19, 2016.

“very popcorn.” And I had to agree, the talk didn’t seem to have a coherent argument or theme and jumped from discussions of cultural issues such as the definition of masculinity, to issues of “demographic winter,” to critiques of the objectification of women.

Esther noted Hilton’s nervousness and her feeling that it negatively affected his talk. She says the talk Hilton had given at UFN was really different than the one he gave at Old Ivy. We both agree that this was probably because UFN was a more supportive audience. She and I both noted Hilton's tendency to provide disclaimers for some of his statements, such as the way he would preface certain statements by saying he was not talking about the issue morally, he was talking about it biologically. Esther says she understands that he probably felt like the Old Ivy audience would disagree with his statements. But by continuously using these disclaimers Esther felt he ended up making his arguments sound “more crazy.”

In addition, Esther also admitted that she was anxious about Hilton’s focus on cultural issues as opposed to a discussion that was focused more fully on neuroscience. “Isn’t he going to talk about science at all?” she says she worried as the talk began. Hilton's expertise as a neuroscientist was the reason he was invited to speak by RR, his discussions of cultural issues were much less sophisticated. Esther worried his cultural commentary would provoke criticism, and also potentially make him seem “crazy.” As she describes this portion of the talk she rolls her eyes in mock horror, “Someone shoot me right now.” But, she continues, the talk improved once he got to the scientific discussion.

At the talk, Ann introduced Dr. Hilton who was going to speak on “Masculinity and the Real Man: The Clash of Biology and Culture.” In addition to his affiliation and credentials she mentioned he is the parent of 5 and grandparent of 3. Hilton begins his talk by asking the audience to think about pornography as a social issue, a human issue, rather than an issue of morality or religion. Hilton then begins with a humorous anecdote about his third grade crush, using it to prove that he is not an expert on gender difference because “Sometimes I still feel like that 3rd grader on the sidewalk when it comes to understanding women.” Hilton then begins a discussion of masculinity, starting with his own experiences as a teenager in Southeast Texas. Being a “real man” in Southeast Texas meant playing football. Hilton referred to the film *Friday Night Lights*, which chronicles the sacrifices made by a coach and high school football team to make the playoffs. He tells the audience proudly, “We beat those guys,” as a way to emphasize how serious his high school was about football. “I still remember it to this day,” he continues. But, he explains to the audience, being a “real man” could be dangerous from an evolutionary standpoint. For instance, while at practice the players would be bitten by mosquitoes, but if you were a “real man” you didn’t swat them. The potential to get West Nile or other diseases was encouraged by the pressure to be a “real man.”

Hilton’s presentation goes on to cover different eras of masculinity. He gives a general overview of how masculinity is defined in different cultures and different eras. His final era is “New Macho Man 2000-Present” and features a photo of Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, and their multiple kids. He explains the photo is very touching, and demonstrates that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a “real man” can be macho *and* a good father.

After his discussion of masculinity, Hilton moves into a discussion of falling birth-rates in developed nations. He says that when the birth-rate falls to 1.3 births per woman it is hard to replace the population.<sup>29</sup> If individuals do not replicate their biological material through birth, their DNA lines are destined to evaporate. He mentions Germany and Japan are near this fertility rate and one German minister said they would be “turning the lights out” due to the shrinking working-age population in the European Union<sup>30</sup>. Hilton says that many people explain this trend in terms of urbanization, birth control, abortion, etc. but he sees these factors as secondary. “What is primary?” he asks the audience. “We have to go back to the primordial: food and sex.” He says that the distortion of sexuality has been underestimated as a cause for demographic changes. For example, Kinsey argued in 1948 that “unbonded” sexuality was a human right, leading away from sexuality within marriage. Hilton says he thinks Kinsey’s research was crucial to the emasculation of men.

Hilton’s talk went on to examine different aspects of biology linked to sexuality and bonding including testosterone, oxytocin, dopamine, and the brain changes caused by addiction. Hilton argued that “people can become ‘addicted’ to anything.” Again he gives the disclaimer that he is examining pornography addiction from a biological standpoint, rather than moral or religious. He says that while some scientists argue there is no definitive study that shows pornography causes addiction, his response is that it would be

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<sup>29</sup> 2 births per woman is necessary to sustain the population on its own. For developed nations sub-replacement fertility rate, which will lead to a decrease in population, is anything below 2.1 Espenshade TJ, Guzman JC, Westoff CF (2003). "The surprising global variation in replacement fertility". *Population Research and Policy Review*. 22 (5/6): 575.

<sup>30</sup> The EU’s Baby Blues,” BBC, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4768644.stm September 9, 2016.



hard to get a good control, someone who hasn't seen any pornography. He thinks that politically it can't happen. He argues that there is proof of neuro modulation, changes in the brain. Neuro modulation is found in "natural addictions" to things like food, sex, gambling. He shows a diagram of the brain: mid brain, pleasure center, frontal lobe which controls logic, reasoning, etc. The brain causes us to feel pleasure from eating but also causes pain if we don't eat. The pleasure is a reward and then we feel sated. But addictive behavior is such that you feel 'I need it or I'll die.' This feeling can happen with drugs or with eating. But also sexuality, behaviors like child pornography, sadomasochistic behaviors. Again he provides the disclaimer to the audience that "we can all agree that some behaviors are negative" such as child pornography and S&M. He explains a "natural addiction" is a compulsive behavior, like eating or sex, that an individual can't stop. He admits there are only correlative studies looking at cocaine, pedophilia, meth, and obesity, but they all show similarities. The dopamine cells shrink—there are fewer receptors so the individuals need more dopamine to feel satisfied. This leads to the feeling "I need more X or I'll die."

Hilton's disclaimers—that he was addressing the topic as a social issues, from the standpoint of biology, or in this final example as a "demographic" issue-- were clearly meant to preemptively address potential critiques of his argument. Claims that he was focusing on the issues of sexuality and pornography from a biological or demographic standpoint were clearly meant to undermine counterarguments that might come from the progressive students at Old Ivy who supported pornography or "promiscuous" sex from a moral or political position.

For example his discussion of same-sex relationships was prefaced by his disclaimer that, “I am speaking demographically. This is a free country, you can choose your lifestyle.” He goes on to further remove himself from potential criticisms by claiming he has many friends living “the same-sex lifestyle,” attempting to challenge potential critiques that his statements were homophobic.

Esther and I both noticed these disclaimers during the talk. As I noted in my fieldnotes, Hilton seemed nervous about the potential critical response from his Old Ivy audience. Unlike Scott Phelps, who seemed completely unprepared for the critical responses of many audience members, Hilton seemed to be attempting to stop these critiques before they started. Unlike UFN, where the audience was widely in agreement about the dangers of pornography and the negative distortions of sexuality, Old Ivy was full of students who might not see pornography as a problem or see anything wrong with the promotion of “unbonded” sexuality. They may also have come to Hilton's talk specifically to argue with him about his values, as students had done for both Phelps and Diggs. But as Esther argues, Hilton's disclaimers undermined his status as an expert and actually served to draw increased attention to the controversial aspects of his talk.

After the talk Hilton's family, including his wife, adult daughter, and son-in-law, came up to chat with Hilton and the RR members about the talk. His son-in-law joked about the small number of conservative students at Old Ivy, further revealing the potential hostility Hilton perceived from his audience. Someone makes a joke that all the conservative students at Old Ivy must have attended the talk, to get such a good attendance (I estimate there were about 100 students in attendance.) Hilton's son-in-law

jokes, “All the conservative students at Old Ivy University, what are there like 10 of them?” Esther responds that actually the Republicans are quite a big presence on campus, but they are the socially acceptable group. The Right to Life group and RR are less socially acceptable and thus smaller.

While RR members and Dr. Hilton himself were prepared for a “fallout” after Dr. Hilton’s talk, the response was largely positive. There was even an interview with Dr. Hilton published in the student newspaper that Esther describes as “really positive.” Yet, Hilton’s discussion of “cultural stuff” provoked anxiety, as well as his tendency to preface many of his arguments with disclaimers meant to protect himself from criticism. Hilton himself had clearly predicted some hostility to his arguments and presented a different talk than he would have to the more sympathetic audience of UFN.

Even though RR was able to dodge any extended or damaging controversy, there were clearly still tensions encountered when inviting an outside speaker to campus. The anticipation of controversy, which made sense given RR's experience with speakers like Scott Phelps or Dr. Diggs, mattered as much as actual controversy. This explains why the group spent so much time discussing their potential speakers. At an earlier meeting the group held an extended discussion about the pros and cons of inviting various speakers, demonstrating the various pressures: limited time, limited funds, ideological issues, input from UFN, that informed their decisions:

Esther says “We need to have an event. Discuss.” Patrick suggests Jennifer Roback Morse, she worked at a college, she saw all these depressed girls...basically she’s seen people who have messed up lives because of sex, she’s seen why the free for all doesn’t work. Ann says that Esther has heard Morse speak and didn’t think she was that good.

“I was unimpressed,” Esther clarifies. The other people want to know what she talked about. Esther says she was very passionate but very conservative. (Her tone implies that this is not a positive thing.) Patrick asks, “Conservative in what sense? Politics?”

Esther says, “Yes, politically. I heard her speak at the Heritage Foundations, so...”

The group continues to throw out ideas for potential speakers, debating both the feasibility of different speakers in terms of funding, as well as the topics they want the speakers to cover. The discussion returns to Morse, because of the potential to get funding from UFN to bring her to campus. The resulting discussion exposes the tensions that RR continued to face when working with other pro-abstinence organizations. Even though UFN was a potential resource, RR, especially those in leadership roles, viewed it critically.

Esther thinks for a moment, “UFN would probably pay if we brought in Morse or someone super conservative...who they like.” She opens her laptop and begins looking at the internet to get ideas for other potential speakers. “The guy is at Providence...” she says, “It looks like he’s really academic.” Neither Esther or Ann seem particularly excited about the speaker from Providence, though Ann admits, “It’s really tempting because it’d be cheap to bring him here.”

Esther continues to surf the web. She and Ann discuss whether they want to do an event related to marriage, but Ann vetoes the idea. “Okay, we’re over marriage.” Esther says. When Esther explains that she has already been contacted by Morse about coming to campus Patrick reacts with surprise and excitement. Esther explains that Morse likes RR and Patrick argues, “We should definitely get her!” He adds that, “She won’t like us

if we keep ignoring her emails.”

While Patrick seems enthusiastic, Esther continues to be hesitant. The barriers to bringing Morse to Old Ivy include both time and money. While the members joke about finding a time machine, the discussion turns back to the topic of funding, clearly the largest barrier to bringing a speaker to campus.

Esther then says more loudly, looking at Ann, “UFN might fund Morse coming.”

Ann replies, “They haven’t given us any money all semester, they shouldn’t begrudge us bringing this speaker to campus.”

Esther says, “They don’t like us.” Maria wants to know why. “We’re too liberal.” says Esther.

“Too liberal?!” Maria is shocked. “Have they met Esther?” she says with a laugh.

Esther replies with something about how even she is too liberal for them or they’re more conservative than her.

Ann jumps in explaining that one of the women who runs UFN went to a Catholic school.

“They infuse everything with religion.” Esther adds.

“And we just can’t do that at Old Ivy,” says Ann, “We have to maintain some boundaries. And they just don’t understand that.”

“They live in a little box...in Kingsford.” Esther adds with a snarky tone.

Ann nods and makes noises of agreement.

The discussion was never resolved Revolutionary Romance did not end up inviting further speakers to campus this semester. Precisely because of this resolution the discussion illustrates the tensions RR was dealing with. In addition to limitations of time and funding, the group had to consider which speakers were “too conservative” to bring to campus. While RR’s association with UFN clearly provided many important resources for the group, it also provided an additional source of tension. Many of the speakers recommended by UFN were vetoed as “too conservative” or too controversial for Old Ivy campus. RR’s lack of ability to get funding from UFN was also attributed to their

resistance to these suggestions. While Ann could comment that, “Like it’s definitely not unique to RR the way people view all of this” it was clear that RR members still viewed themselves as facing a unique situation at Old Ivy. Unlike students at Catholic schools, RR has to maintain their secular status and avoid appearing “too conservative” in a way that would make them even more socially unacceptable in the progressive environment of Old Ivy.

It is important to note that RR’s change to a more conservative platform did not alleviate their need to strike a balance between their conservative position and the more progressive atmosphere of Old Ivy. Additionally, while RR members were quick to recognize the important resources provided by UFN, they were not completely willing to give up their independence. While they were willing to shift their platform in a more conservative direction, they still worked to maintain their boundaries and unique identity.

#### Name Change

Looking back through my fieldnotes it became clear that one topic dominating RR meetings in spring of 2011 was a potential name change for the group. Three of the four RR meetings I attended that semester included some discussion of a name change. These discussions further highlight the uncertainty group members were feeling about RR’s place at Old Ivy, among the wider pro-abstinence community, and their new identity as a result of their platform change. Members wanted to find a name that reflected the group’s current identity. They wanted a name that was professional, academic, and communicated their values. There was some disagreement about whether a name change would help the group escape some of their negative publicity and help them attract a wider audience.

The name change was yet another indication that RR had moved away from its original identity. The founders of Revolutionary Romance chose the name in 2006 to make abstinence look fun, and interesting to Old Ivy students. The name was meant to be a bit tongue in cheek to demonstrate that the group did not take itself too seriously. But by 2010 the name was seen as *too* lighthearted. It made the group seem like “hippies” and rather than wanting to seem like the group didn't take itself too seriously, RR members wanted a name that made them seem more serious and intellectual than tongue-in-cheek and fun.

While discussing potential names the leadership was quick to reject names that were viewed as too religious, too obscure, too silly, or too much like already existing groups (especially the G.E.M. Society at Kingsford University, named for Catholic philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe). These discussions exposed the isomorphic pressures acting on the group in terms of adopting an already established name, Kingsford University and Tech U both had pre-existing G.E.M. Society's, and the influence of UFN had led to the creation of several more both on Ivy League campuses and at smaller regional universities. The name change was also clearly a move to garner more legitimacy, both on and off campus, as current members did not see the appeal of the lighthearted approach to abstinence taken by the founders of Revolutionary Romance.

The first discussion took place at the meeting on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2011. It was clear that there were already strong feelings about the topic. Ann was adamant that they not name the group after a person. “Please!” she plead to the group. She argues that by using someone's name RR was implying that they agreed with everything the person said.

“How about a fruit?” Esther suggests, “everyone likes fruit.” Esther suggests kiwi, then Derek suggests kiwi and orange. He then jokes they should also be CSA, “Chaste Students Association.” Esther says no to the original suggestion of CSA (since it was already the acronym used by the Catholic Student Association) and after finding out what it stands for replies even more vehemently, “No! That’s worse than what it is now!”

What follows is a string of joke suggestions like CHIVES (a nonsense acronym) and PORN. This provokes laughter from group members, though Ann tells everyone, “Remember I’m going to have to explain this to Ashley Crouch (the president of UFN).” Some members think PORN will get the group more attention: “Can you imagine us at the pre-frosh table...” Derek says with a laugh. Ann thinks this might help the group attract more freshman, despite the fact that RR is always placed next to Xtasy, a campus sex magazine.

With the discussion breaking down Esther suggests they continue over email. Derek asks, “What do we wanna aim towards?” “Something professional, academic...” Ann responds. Esther wants a name that is cut off from negative publicity, though she admits the name change will not assure that all future publicity is positive. Despite Ann's protests another group member suggests choosing a person like G.E.M. Anscombe, the namesake of the G.E.M. Society. Esther thinks G.E.M. Anscombe is too Catholic. Chris responds that the G.E.M. Society doesn’t have a problem with that. “But religious freedom has always been one of our central tenets and I want to keep that.” Esther replies.

While Esther rejects a well known Catholic like Anscombe, she admits she would



be okay with using someone like Alasdair MacIntyre, because he's so weird most people don't identify him as Catholic. "Most people know him as a commie." Chris comments. MacIntyre's book "After Virtue" is one of Esther's favorites and the reason she would choose MacIntyre as a namesake for the group. Someone suggests using the book as the group's name but Esther thinks it is too obscure.

Group members discuss what they want the new name to focus on. "Something that doesn't label us as crazy." says Esther. Group members then discuss whether the current name, Revolutionary Romance labels them as crazy. "Not too crazy." someone responds. "But it sounds awkward." Esther responds. Esther wraps up the conversation admitting that she is on the fence about the name change, she is graduating at the end of the semester and feels that the current members should choose the name since they are the ones who will have to live with it.

While this initial discussion of the name change included a large measure of joking and humor, it was clear that many members were unhappy with the current name. Just like with their invited speakers, some group members were wary of accepting wholesale the ideology of conservative figures, such as G.E.M. Anscombe. At this point part of the impetus seems to be to avoid negative publicity, but also to gain legitimacy with a more "professional, academic" name. As Esther's final comment suggests the discussion of the name change was about more than just the name, it was also a way to signal the future identity of the group.

In this next excerpt, from a meeting later in the semester, the group members further articulate the reasoning behind a name change. Derek worries that Revolutionary

Romance is too ambiguous, “No one knows what we stand for. When they see RR on a resume they’re like “What’s that?” Other members like Ann and Esther think the name is too silly and turns off potential members. Unlike the founders of RR, who thought Old Ivy students would respond positively to humor, current group members wanted a name that was more serious, contemplative, and intellectual. After entertaining some of the same humorous suggestions from the prior meeting, Esther ends the discussion by saying a good reason *not* to change the name is because they don’t have any good ideas for a new name. (4-12-11)

In this discussion group members focus increasingly on the confusion and misconceptions prompted by the name Revolutionary Romance. Esther is skeptical that a name change would distance them from past negative publicity, and in fact might cost them the name recognition generated by past coverage. There is also a question about whether this name change would help them recruit a larger membership from Old Ivy students. As the group shifted from a more support group focus, a philosophical and intellectual name seemed more appropriate for the group’s new identity as an outreach organization that addressed controversial topics from a wider conservative platform.

In the final discussion of the name change the group members deepen their discussion, while still failing to come to a consensus about whether to change the name of the group:

Pete wants to know what’s wrong with the name they have now.

“People think we’re hippies!” says Maria.

Esther says “We want a name that’s more intellectually engaging, one that reflects our philosophical, discursive mission.”

“Not like ‘Revolutionary Romance’!” she says in an “airhead” voice, with mock enthusiasm.

She mentions the G.E.M. Society, “but G.E.M. was religious...”

“Catholic.” adds Caleb.

“Actually,” Esther says sarcastically, “the real reason is that we don’t want to be like Kingsford.”

As with the earlier discussions a core issue appears to be a conflict between the perceived silliness of the name Revolutionary Romance, which makes the group seem like “hippies” rather than as an intellectually engaged, discursive group. Yet, the members also struggle to find a philosophical name that reflects their values without being too religious. In addition while Revolutionary Romance did feel pressure to conform to the precedence set by other campus abstinence groups, it was clear that members also wished to maintain their unique identity. Some members, like Esther, especially seemed to balk at the idea of following an example set by Kingsford, a rival Ivy League school.

Revolutionary Romance was caught between a desire for conformity and differentiation, both in their name and their political stance.

Pete says, “Didn’t y’all revolutionize your platform last year? You went from just the sex thing to like everything?”

Yes, Esther says and that is something they also need to discuss.

“Are you gonna just change it back?” Pete asks with shock.

“No, no. We weathered that storm. We proved we need a group like this on campus. We’re the only group that talks about this stuff, no one else will touch these issues. We just want to change the wording. Be more winsome. It’s basically a marketing thing.”

“I’m not the right type of person to contribute to this discussion.” Caleb says after stopping himself a couple times from speaking. “My values don’t align.”

Even after “weathering the storm” that resulted from the platform change, Revolutionary Romance was still in the midst of a transition. The extended discussions of a name change were a way to reflect to the outside world what this transition meant, what the new identity of the group was going to be. As Caleb’s comments demonstrate, members

were not all in agreement over what the group's new identity should be. Caleb's statement that "My values don't align" was referring to Caleb's inability to separate abstinence from his own Christian values. He respected that RR wanted to remain a secular group, but as he stated in later in the discussion it was hard for him to articulate a pro-abstinence position without referring back to religious justifications.

It became clear during the course of the meeting that Caleb was a potential candidate for co-president, but he, and some other members, had reservations because of the religious direction he would inevitably take the group:

Esther says she would prefer it if there was someone willing to run for president.

Caleb says he would run, "but I would change too much."

Derek wants to know what he would change. Esther says Caleb would make the group all about "biblical values."

"And you don't want that, right?" Caleb asks. The group agrees. "It would be too different from the group's mission," he says.

Discussions about a name change were tied to these larger negotiations about RR's mission and identity. These discussions further highlight the ways that the group's members had in many ways moved away from the original vision and mission of Revolutionary Romance's founders. RR was no longer a lighthearted abstinence group, this tactic had not been successful in deflecting negative reactions or in encouraging membership among Old Ivy students. The group's shift to a focus on outreach also necessitated a greater emphasis on intellectual and philosophical arguments that was not reflected in the current name.

In this decision, as with the decisions about inviting speakers, RR members face isomorphic pressures to gain legitimacy through imitation. The G.E.M. Society

represented a well-established, successful name that would more strongly link the group to Kingsford and UFN. Yet these links seemed to be one of the very reasons that some members rejected this option for a name change. Even as RR became more similar to other pro-abstinence campus groups, members still sought to preserve their independent identity as well as some aspects of their mission, including the identity as a secular organization.

Part of this was clearly also in part due to the pressures RR felt to make their name palatable to the progressive context of Old Ivy. The joking suggestions of naming the group for a “non controversial” fruit or nonsense acronym like CHIVES represented an alternate strategy the group could take to their identity—downplaying their conservative identity and avoiding controversy. But, like many jokes, the humor betrayed an underlying concern. The discussions of options reflected a frustration with the tremendous amount of thought and energy that had to be applied to all decisions made by group leaders. Esther and Ann were clearly suffering from burnout as a result in their heavy involvement in the group, and their joking suggestions demonstrate their desire to avoid a further controversy that would result from any name the group eventually chose.

The name change was not resolved during this semester, but in later years the group did eventually adopt the G.E.M. Society as their new name. Thus while the group rejected the pressures toward isomorphism in several instances during this transition period, in the end their platform change signals a gradual shift toward increasing isomorphism. During spring of 2011, RR was still negotiating their new identity. In the end the choice to adopt a more conservative position put the group on an eventual path to

becoming a completely different organization.

### Agency, Choice, and Isomorphism

While changing their platform meant they could receive funding from groups like the University Fidelity Network, this logistical reason was viewed as less important than changes in the conception of the group's true goals and the fact that group members themselves conceived of abstinence in the larger context of "traditional" values. As Esther argued in her interview with me in 2010, "We really couldn't explain abstinence without this wider framework." This issue was perhaps the biggest factor driving the platform change and was raised frequently at group meetings and in interviews. During an RR meeting in the fall of 2010 Esther explains "All these things are connected. Marriage, gender roles, and parenthood are so interrelated that they just kept coming up again and again. RR as abstinence promotion wasn't enough." Esther expands on this explanation during her interview with me:

So I think it was founded as an abstinence organization but as more people came in people had different ideas about why they were joining. And to the people who were in the club last fall they really saw abstinence in this context of traditionalism, so it wasn't that we just really cared about abstinence or really just wanted everyone to be abstinent. It was that we wanted people to understand the thought processes and the concepts behind a traditional view towards sexuality, and a traditional view towards feminism, and a traditional view towards, even like personhood, and community. So, like, this goal of just purely abstinence promotion was just not where any of us were coming from and it really didn't represent who we were, or what we were trying to do, or represent our goals.

When Mary Catherine and Jacob founded Revolutionary Romance in 2006, they were interested in promoting abstinence as a legitimate life-style and value on Old Ivy campus. By isolating abstinence from other conservative positions, they hoped the group could

challenge preconceptions about what abstinence could look like. But the students who joined RR after the founders had graduated were less interested in abstinence on its own. For the majority of members who joined RR after their initial turbulent years, abstinence was part of a larger context of “traditional” values, including the defense of marriage, the family, and gender roles. For these students, abstinence promotion came to seem like a limited goal. Relatedly, group members felt they couldn’t fully argue in support of abstinence without also engaging with these other issues. As Ann, another group member, explains in her interview, arguments in support of abstinence are often based on other beliefs and values that are shared by RR members but not necessarily by other people:

One [reason] was logistical, to be able to get funding from certain groups we had to adopt certain platforms. But that fit into a larger philosophy of what we were trying to advocate. So, I mean, yeah, you can say premarital abstinence is good but people will ask “Why?” and that leads into this whole debate... or discussion.... of what marriage is and why it’s important and how sex relates to that. And so when you isolate just the one factor from the rest of the causes it is harder to discuss it with other people because you are assuming we share a philosophical background that might not necessarily be true. So by adopting the background we’re at least putting ourselves out there that like “this is where we’re coming from.”

Jacob and Mary Catherine's strategy of creating a more progressive form of abstinence was never truly successful at Old Ivy. In part because of progressive suspicion, but also because the majority of students who joined the group *did* understand abstinence in relation to other conservative values. The platform change was thus both a recognition of the members' ideological stance, as well as a more deliberate decision to give in to isomorphic pressures as an alternate strategy to secure legitimation from their social movement community. The platform itself was a negotiation of mimetic and coercive

isomorphism with the Kingsford G.E.M. Society's statement. But as Esther points out, even in this case RR worked to preserve their independence while still adopting the parts of the platform necessary to get funding and support from UFN:

Esther says the platform statement is really more of a manifesto.

"Abstainers of the world unite..." jokes Chris.

Chris suggests they write a Conservative Manifesto, "the conscience of the nation speaks...nah..."

"Have any of you even read it?" Esther wants to know. "It is very much derived from the G.E.M. Society's statement. But their's is even more intense, ours is much nicer."

"We shouldn't use theirs." Derek says decisively.

"Why not?" Caleb responds.

"They don't mention God either." Esther says. (4-21-11)

One of the main points of tension RR continued to negotiate after their platform change was their position on religion. Most group members, though they were personally religious, remained committed to the group's identity as a secular organization. As Ann and Esther both voiced complaints that UFN, in addition to be conservative tended to "infuse everything with religion." Esther's Protestant background also made her especially vocal in challenging larger pressures to accept the dominant Catholic underpinnings of many of the UFN affiliated groups and speakers (like Jennifer Roback Morse and the G.E.M. Society).

Yet there were clearly some members of RR that did not hold this boundary as particularly important, or indeed who saw secular arguments as "dishonest."

Caleb says he would run but he doesn't agree with the mission. Patrick asks why.

"It's not Biblical centered, you want to use scientific, secular arguments. For me it would be being dishonest."

Maria says, "Sometimes it's hard to convince people who aren't religious with religious arguments."



“Right, but I think religion needs to come first....Unless the purpose is to inspire discourse...” Caleb muses.

Esther says, “I am religious, in fact everyone in RR is religious. So I get where you’re coming from. You need to get everyone to engage with these issues. Then you can speak the truth to them, invite them to church.” She ends with a laugh.

While I can only speculate about what happened within Revolutionary Romance after I ended my fieldwork, one thing is clear from the following exchange, the tensions within the group itself had shifted in a more conservative direction. In the beginning Revolutionary Romance was an abstinence group that could accommodate Esther’s Protestant conservatism along with Liz’s gay rights support and atheism<sup>31</sup>. The shift in the platform may have reflected a conservative shift in the membership, but it also prevented more progressive students from continuing to join the organization. Rather than being accountable to more liberal and more conservative members, RR was increasingly accountable to less conservative and more conservative members. This shift, along with continuing pressures from the wider pro-abstinence community may explain the eventual adoption of a more isomorphic identity.

### Conclusion

I initially included Revolutionary Romance in this project to explore the varied meanings of abstinence promoted by different abstinence-until-marriage groups. But the case of Revolutionary Romance demonstrates the way that abstinence, particularly premarital abstinence, has already been defined in ways that are hard to challenge. While

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<sup>31</sup> Liz had graduated the spring before the platform change took place. Though Liz had always been an outlier among group members in terms of her beliefs, it also seems clear that the absence of her voice helped make the shift to the new platform possible.

groups that promote premarital sexual abstinence may tailor their message to their different environments, they are also constrained by the history of the abstinence-until-marriage movement and the pre-existing conception of abstinence promoted by conservative organizations. This conception defines abstinence-until-marriage as another strategy to defend against the “new sexual morality” and the assault on the “traditional” family.

In addition, the people joining organizations that promote premarital sexual abstinence are often already connected, either formally or informally, to a social movement community that defines premarital abstinence as an aspect of a “traditional” value system. In Revolutionary Romance the pre-existing beliefs of group members, along with their growing ties to the abstinence-until-marriage and pro-family movements, worked together to make a platform change necessary. The group’s decision to change their platform thus represents the individual commitments of group members as well as the processes at work within the broader social movement community.

While Revolutionary Romance underwent a process of isomorphic change, due in part to informal and formal pressures from UFN, they did not wholesale adopt the positions of these other pro-abstinence organizations. As the three cases I examine demonstrate, adopting a more conservative platform gave RR access to a wider range of intellectual, community, and financial resources, but did not resolve the tensions they faced as a conservative group on a liberal campus. In fact, in many ways RR’s growing connections to the pro-abstinence social movement community led to a greater sense of

tension within the group, as they faced increasing pressures to give up their unique identity and replace it with a more isomorphic one.

Yet, RR's process of negotiation also reveals that isomorphism is not only the result of pressures from organizations like UFN. Isomorphism also represented a strategic decision to garner legitimacy for the group by mimicking other successful organizations. And as RR participated in a wider range of networking with the larger pro-abstinence and pro-family social movement communities, they were also exposed to normative isomorphism. As one of the original campus abstinence organizations, RR lacked alternative models outside of UFN and the G.E.M. Society. The choice to adopt these models was a strategic decision to help resolve both uncertainty and tensions experienced by the group, even if it was only partially successful. Isomorphism was an ongoing negotiation within the group, as members were aware of both the perils and resources provided by their growing similarities to other pro-abstinence groups.

## CONCLUSION

There are so many causes relating to the family that need our support: divorce, the sexual revolution, rugged individualism, parenting...but most people still want strong families. They want to be connected to something. The family has ramifications for the nation, civilization. It has religious, cultural, political ramifications. We have a moral duty to stand strong for family. It's one of the things that matter most. The world needs your voice!

Lloyd Newell, a professor of Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and an associate faculty member in the School of Family Life, was one of the opening speakers at the Family Symposium organized by the organization Stand 4 Family. Stand 4 Family, an organization composed of students and young professionals, was founded by the former members of Stand Up! the BYU group focused on defending the family. The symposium in 2011 was organized without support from BYU, but relied heavily on student volunteers and faculty speakers. Many of the keynote speakers were familiar to me from my past attendance at UFN conferences and Revolutionary Romance events.

As I looked over my fieldnotes, I was struck by the familiarity of not only the people, but also the arguments, the themes, and the narratives of the young people I spoke with. I had started my research in 2008 looking to find variations in the abstinence-until-marriage movement, but by 2011 I had to admit that what I was finding instead was a lot of similarities. As each of my cases demonstrates, efforts to preserve each group's distinctive approach to abstinence coexist with equally or more powerful forces pushing toward “isomorphism.”

Isomorphism as suggested by DiMaggio and Powell in their classic article is rooted in inter-organizational processes (1983). Isomorphism, the process by which organizations come to resemble each other, is driven by many factors including imitation in the face of uncertainty (as in mass media), by something approaching coercion (as with government regulations), by a shared audience or by shared personnel (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). To be sure, isomorphism is not inevitable. Organizations may grow apart, in both form and content. In the case of the abstinence movement, however, the evidence is overwhelming that very different organizations have grown more similar.

Revolutionary Romance began as a highly intellectualized organization founded by a group of students at an elite, predominantly liberal university. Most importantly, Revolutionary Romance advocated for a version of abstinence that was independent of any particular version of the family, that was (in their view) compatible with feminism, and stood apart from any particular religious position. Stand Up, in contrast, emerged out of a distinctive religious position (Mormonism) and, from its very beginning, saw its advocacy for abstinence as a broader defense of what has come to be known as “traditional” families and conventional understandings of gender. Purity Ring Posse also emerged out of religious sources, but more from a generic Christianity than any particular church. Moreover, unlike Stand Up!, PRP labored long and hard to make abstinence “cool,” something that did not require references to traditional families, and that challenged some conservative beliefs about gender. I do not mean to argue that by the end of my research the three organizations had become interchangeable. They were not. But I do mean to argue that they had become more similar, even over the course of a few

years, than they had been before.

One way of understanding the isomorphic processes at work in the abstinence movement is by comparing it to the “pro-life” movement. Munson has argued that the pro-life flows in three different “streams” that rarely meet (2008). Members of different streams often see themselves and their fellow members as engaged in the “real” struggle against abortion. While the presence of discrete streams makes it harder for the movement to coordinate itself as a whole, the different streams also allow the movement to adapt more fluidly to a changing political landscape (Munson 2008, 2010).

Munson chronicles the growth of the Crisis Pregnancy Center (CPC) from a small adjunct to the anti-abortion movement to an increasingly large portion of activism, and one that is most successful in recruiting new members. CPC's have been able to mobilize both the moral choice framework pioneered by the pro-choice movement, as well as drawing on medicalized discourse to present themselves as outside, and therefore above, the two sides of the contentious moral debate surrounding abortion (Munson 2010). Its success has depended, in significant part, on its ability to distinguish itself from the Politics Stream and the Direct-Action Stream. The abstinence-until-marriage movement has not been able to mobilize an equivalent stream. Revolutionary Romance attempted to portray itself as outside the political debates surrounding abstinence, to position itself as a rough equivalent of the Individual Outreach stream (the stream to which Crisis Pregnancy Centers belong), but was ultimately unsuccessful.

Reviewing my three cases, I found myself wondering why the abstinence-until-marriage movement had not been able to diversify as successfully as the anti-abortion

movement. Rather than unique streams which were allowed to go in their own directions and target different audiences or focus on different styles of activism, the three groups I studied were pressured to move closer together, constantly negotiating competing pressures from the different networker organizations or their wider social movement communities.

At first glance, the abstinence-until-marriage movement seems as if it should have been able to diversify. The abstinence-until-marriage movement is still fairly new. The real growth of the movement started only in 1996 and lacked a core national organization. Even groups like the National Abstinence Education Association (a policy-focused organization founded in 2006), now calling itself Ascend, or the Abstinence Clearinghouse, focuses mostly on the education stream of the abstinence-until-marriage movement and their materials are widely ignored by most of the other streams. But the absence of a powerful core national organization cuts two ways. While no single organization is itself a significant source of isomorphism, the very emptiness of a center creates a power vacuum which, as I suggest below, has been filled by conservative organizations that have broader agendas. Since abstinence-until-marriage does not truly have its own movement, it is widely used as a tool by other conservative social movements. Abstinence groups, regardless of their particular context, operate in a society in which abstinence has been highly politicized. Thus individualized understandings of abstinence created by particular organizations are difficult to maintain once the group engages in any sort of outreach or engagement with the public square.

## Stand Up!

In many ways, Stand Up! is the most “mainstream” of the three groups in this study. Stand Up! is not primarily an abstinence organization, abstinence is simply one of the issues they address in their defense of “the family.” With their dual focus on academic arguments, along with practical advice for young people about strengthening their own families, the group mirrors many of the more national pro-family organizations such as the Ruth Institute. Their commitment to a civil dialogue about controversial issues, and attempts to network across denominational difference, in many ways makes them an ideal case from the perspective of their larger social movement community.

At the same time, the qualities that make Stand Up! ideal for a pro-family movement perspective were viewed as liabilities by the BYU administration. The students in Stand Up! engaged with controversial issues and encouraged their fellow students to join them in outreach and activism. Their desire for outreach and their networking with national and international organizations threatened to introduce elements to the BYU environment that the administration could not control.

The BYU students who founded Stand Up! conceived of themselves as living inside the “BYU bubble.” That bubble is a protective environment, consciously maintained by the BYU administration, fostering and supporting LDS beliefs and values.. Unlike their fellow students, who they saw as content to remain in the bubble, Stand Up! members wanted to “burst the bubble” and make connections to other individuals and organizations working to defend “the family.” The Stand Up! students imagined themselves bursting the bubble to take their values to the world outside BYU. But when a



bubble bursts, it not only lets the inside out. It also lets the outside in. The activism of the Stand Up! students gave them legitimacy among power players in the pro-family movement. But it also let the wider pro-family movement in and made Stand Up! a potential threat to university values and a movement that the administration tried to control. Thus, Stand Up!'s engagement with the mainstream conflicted with their campus environment, even as it invigorated the BYU student audience.

### Revolutionary Romance

Like Stand Up! Revolutionary Romance members sometimes talked about living in a bubble. But while the bubble created by BYU was supportive of Stand Up!'s core values, RR members found themselves surrounded by the hostile, progressive bubble of Old Ivy. Revolutionary Romance initially attempted to forge a unique position on abstinence, one that would be more accepted by their progressive peers. Yet, they were never able to gain full acceptance on their campus.

In their early years Revolutionary Romance emphasized their uniqueness and was wary of aligning themselves too closely with other campus organizations, particularly other explicitly conservative groups. Their independent position was, however, hard to maintain. In the hostile environment of Old Ivy, the university provided them with resources in terms of space and publicity, but little else. As the University Fidelity Network began to offer both resources and moral support, RR was eventually willing to adapt their group to be more in line with other abstinence groups on other campuses. UFN's influence on campus organizations grew as they continued to sponsor their networking conference, provided resources for campus groups that adopted their mission

statement, and helped found multiple G.E.M. Societies (named for Catholic philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe) at campuses across the country. RR did attempt to preserve their distinctiveness, even in the face of the isomorphic pressure presented by UFN and their affiliated campus organizations. For a while, they were able to do so, in part because of the strong leadership provided by Tiffany or Esther and the strong opposition provided by Liz. But once RR's first generation of leaders left, RR eventually adopted the G.E.M. label and move closer to the mainstream fostered by UFN. UFN's mainstream organizations are explicitly conservative, heavily influenced by Catholic philosophy even if they are not explicitly religious, and networked with a wider pro-family agenda. By moving closer to this mainstream, RR (now Old Ivy G.E.M. Society) has more fully aligned with the conservative social movement community, as well as the majority of other campus abstinence groups.

#### Purity Ring Posse

Unlike Stand Up! or RR, Purity Ring Posse did not exist in a bubble, supportive or hostile. PRP traveled between the “bubbles” represented by the different congregations and communities that they visited. PRP's main goal was to convert “unchurched” teenagers to both Christianity and abstinence. Their “cool” and “edgy” version of abstinence was constructed to reach their target audience. Yet, their touring model depended on the support of other Christian organizations.

To be successful in evangelizing PRP crafts an image that challenges many conceptions of both Christianity and abstinence. But their very efforts to reach out often jeopardize their legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow Christians. PRP must walk a careful

line between alienating their Christian supporters and alienating their teenage audience by appearing too “cheesy” or “churchy.”

PRP's lack of a bubble--a unifying doctrine, sponsoring organization, or homogeneous community-- means that they are constantly shifting their position for their different audiences. PRP is able to adapt to these different audiences: shifting their music, taking down some of their more risqué t-shirts, or re-shooting videos for a Catholic audience, but it is always at the expense of their edginess. PRP's tactics and methods place them at the center of several debates about what it means to be a “good” Christian which they must navigate in addition to the controversial issues of gender and sexuality that are inevitably tied up with the promotion of abstinence.

The three groups were unable to fully create unique versions of abstinence within their founding environments. The Old Ivy G.E.M. Society and Stand 4 Family (the organizations that replaced Revolutionary Romance and Stand Up! Respectively) both fit easily into the wider pro-family movement, and look very similar in terms of the issues they focus on, and the speakers and organizations they engage with. Purity Ring Posse continues to rework its program in small ways, bringing in a discussion of pornography and sexting, including contemporary songs and references, but the fundamental strategy remains a balance between being too edgy for adults and Christians and too “cheesy” for “unchurched” teens. This careful negotiation means that PRP is always limited in how much they can challenge the accepted wisdom of the conservative Christian community when it comes to relationships, sexuality, or gender.

### Social Movement Communities

The concept of social movement communities is largely rooted in the turn towards more cultural explorations of social movements that took place in the 1980s and 90s. Building off the idea that social movements relied on common culture and collective identity to be successful, the study of social movement communities combined both an examination of social movement “spillover” as well as the ways that movements are able to endure and thrive even in decline (Buechler 1990, Melucci 1984, 1989, 1996, Meyer and Whittier 1994, Staggenborg 1998).

The concept of social movement communities (SMC) is useful for the study of the abstinence-until-marriage movement because it shifts the focus from social movement organizations to a wider configuration and broader definition of political participation and social movements (Staggenborg 1998, Taylor and Whittier 1995). Equally important to social movement communities are organizations that provide services, or educate and entertain the community. These alternate institutions foster the oppositional culture of the movement. For instance Taylor and Rupp argue “in the hostile climate of the 1980s, the culture of lesbian feminist communities not only served to comfort, protect, and console activists in retreat, but also nourished women involved in myriad protests, both within and outside the women's movement” (1993). This description bears striking similarities to the ways that young people discuss the support and nourishment they experienced when attending UFN conferences or working on the Stand Up! family symposium. But while these authors recognize that collective efforts for social change occur in diverse realms and include interactions among different types of actors and spaces, there

is less of a focus on how these different realms and actors might require different forms of communication, or require different types of rhetoric. Taylor theorizes the potential for transmovement spaces to foster connections between local movement communities and broader movement networks. And while she recognizes that the structure and culture of a movement community can inhibit or facilitate movement alliances and actions, there is a greater focus on social movement communities as structures of support with less attention paid to the work that may need to be done to reconcile local communities and broader movement organizations (Staggenborg 1998, Staggenborg 2013, Taylor 2013, Taylor and Whittier 1995).

Literature on social movements communities often focuses on local instances of community, focusing for example on the feminist community in Bloomington, Indiana (Staggenborg 1998). But scholars also recognize the presence of “general” social movement communities that exist on a more national, or even international, level. What my research indicates is that the relationships between these local communities and more general social movement communities may warrant further study. While *Revolutionary Romance* and *Stand Up!* both received resources and support from the more general conservative, pro-family social movement community, these ties also caused problems within their own local communities and local audiences. And *Purity Ring Posse*, which serves as a much wider social movement community, still found it necessary to amend their presentations and appearance in keeping with particular local community standards and norms.

Taylor recognizes that social movement communities may change over time.

They may become more oriented towards one community over another, may loosen their ties to the larger movement's ideology and goals, they may be absorbed into the mainstream movement or transform into subcultures (2013). As Munson's work demonstrates, these different subcultures, or streams, within a more general social movement community may also be vital in allowing movements to thrive during times of change or decline (2008). It remains to be seen how the different streams of the abstinence-until-marriage movement will develop and change based on the resulting political and policy changes currently shaping our country.

Finally, the SMC literature stresses the importance of movement community centers. In much of the literature these community centers are physical locations such as a local women's bookstore or leftist coffee shop. My research, however, points to the importance of conferences and other meeting points for fostering networks both within the abstinence-until-marriage movement and between that SMC and more general conservative and religious SMC. The meeting points foster the personal connections that help sustain SMCs, but are also important sites for promoting particular ideological and tactical messages. Much like the ties between more local movements and more general movements, these locations may be sites of support as well as sites of isomorphic pressure that erase local distinctions or unique approaches.

### Political Consequences

February 1, 2010, a study, published in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine, was widely publicized by proponents of abstinence.<sup>32</sup> These proponents

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<sup>32</sup> John B. Jemmott III, Loretta S. Jemmott, & Geoffrey T. Fong, "Efficacy of a Theory-Based Abstinence-Only Intervention over 24 Months," *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 164.2 (2010):

claimed that the study proved that abstinence-only sex education worked, because the authors found that after 24 months, 33.5 percent of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students that had participated in an abstinence-only intervention were sexually active, as compared to 48.5 percent of those students in the control group. Upon closer investigation, however, this program has little resemblance to the abstinence-until-marriage programs used in U.S. schools. In fact, the program would not have qualified for federal abstinence-only-until-marriage funding allocated during the Bush administration.<sup>33</sup> This is because the program did not promote abstinence until marriage, but “until a time later in life when the adolescent is more prepared to handle the consequences of sex,” because it did not portray sex as negative, because it challenged misinformation about condom use, and because it avoided using a moralistic tone.

More than anything, the study pointed to the fact that abstinence promotion could be successful when it was stripped of the ideological trappings of the pro-family movement. Revolutionary Romance and, to a lesser extent, PRP tried to do just that. But discussions about whether abstinence programs work misses the point of what the abstinence-until-marriage movement has become. Debates about abstinence, much like debates surrounding abortion, are about larger moral arguments and ideologies. Advocacy for abstinence is not just about abstinence, but also advocacy for a traditional view of families, evangelical Christianity, and a broader conservative agenda more generally.

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<sup>33</sup> New Abstinence-Only Program Demonstrates Success; Does Not Impact Overwhelming Evidence Proving Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Programs Ineffective.  
<http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Feature.showFeature&featureid=1868&pageid=483>.  
Retrieved November 26, 2017.

Abstinence-only programs found support during the Bush administration, but were challenged during Obama's presidency. With the election of Donald Trump the balance of power has once again shifted. Debates about sex education, and abstinence promotion more generally, have been assimilated into wider debates about the family, sexuality, and gender that are still being played out in the public square. But this politicized environment means that it is nearly impossible for other versions of abstinence to gain any traction in this arena. Networker organizations seek to control messages about abstinence because they hope to “win” these larger debates.

Isomorphism and the political context make it impossible to think about abstinence on its own terms. It is possible that sexual abstinence does have a potential to empower young people and lead to healthier and happier sexual lives for both young people and adults. But in the current political context, this version of abstinence will be nearly impossible to promote or sustain, and that is itself a pity.



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