

Choosing Virginity

A New Attitude: Fewer teenagers are having sex. As parents and politicians debate the merits of abstinence programs, here's what the kids have to say.

BY LORRAINE ALI AND JULIE SCelfO

THERE'S A SEXUAL REVOLUTION GOING ON in America, and believe it or not, it has nothing to do with Christina Aguilera's bare-it-all video "Dirrty." The uprising is taking place in the real world, not on "The Real World." Visit any American high school and you'll likely find a growing number of students who watch scabrous TV shows like "Shipmates," listen to Eminem—and have decided to re-

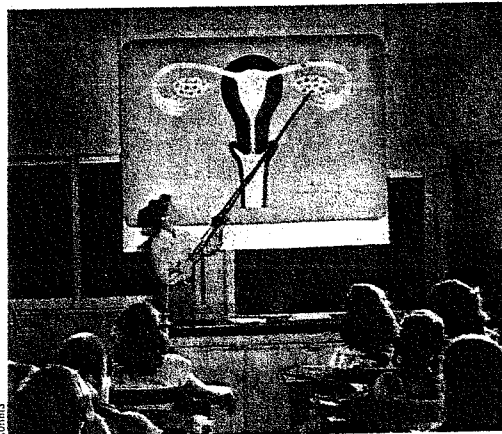
main chaste until marriage. Rejecting the get-down-make-love ethos of their parents' generation, this wave of young adults represents a new counterculture, one clearly at odds with the mainstream media and their routine use of sex to boost ratings and peddle product.

According to a recent study from the Centers for Disease Control, the number of high-school students who say they've never had sexual intercourse rose by almost 10 percent between 1991 and 2001. Parents, public-health officials and sexually beleaguered teens themselves may be relieved by this "let's not" trend. But the new abstinence movement, largely

fostered by cultural conservatives and evangelical Christians, has also become hotly controversial.

As the Bush administration plans to increase federal funding for abstinence programs by nearly a third, to \$135 million, the Advocates for Youth and other proponents of a more comprehensive approach to sex ed argue that teaching abstinence isn't enough. Teens also need to know how to protect themselves if they do have sex, these groups say, and they need to understand the emotional intensity inherent in sexual relationships.

The debate concerns public policy (page 67), but the real issue is personal choice. At the center of it all are the young people themselves, whose voices are often drowned out by the political cacophony. Some of them opened up and talked candidly to NEWSWEEK about their reasons for abstaining from sex until marriage. It's clear that religion plays a critical role in this extraordinarily private decision. But there are other factors as well: caring parents, a sense of their own unreadiness, the desire to gain some semblance of control over their own destinies. Here are their stories.



SO MUCH TO LEARN: Some 1940s teens study the basics; Nicoletti and Wing (left) intend to wait

The Wellesley Girl

ALICE KUNCE SAYS she's a feminist, but not the "army-boot-wearing, shaved-head, I-hate-all-men kind." The curly-haired 18-year-old Wellesley College sophomore—she skipped a grade in elementary school—looks and talks like what she is: one of the many bright, outspoken students at the liberal Massachusetts women's college. She's also a virgin. "One of the empowering things about the feminist movement," she says, "is that we're able to assert ourselves, to say no to sex and not feel pressured about it. And I think guys are kind of getting it. Like, 'Oh, *not* everyone's doing it.'"

But judging by MTV's "Undressed," UPN's "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and just about every other TV program or movie targeted at teens, everyone *is* doing it. Alice grew up with these images, but as a small-town girl in Jefferson City, Mo., most teen shows felt alien and alienating. "You're either a prudish person who can't handle talking about sex or you're out every Saturday night getting some," she says. "But if you're not sexually active and you're willing to discuss the subject, you can't be called a prude. How do they market to that?" The friend from back home she's been dating since August asked not to be identified in this story, but Alice doesn't mind talking candidly about what they do—or don't do. "Which is acceptable? Oral, vaginal or anal sex?" she asks. "For me, they're all sex. In high school, you could have oral sex and still call yourself a virgin. Now I'm like, 'Well, what makes one less intimate than the other?'"

Alice, a regular churchgoer who also teaches Sunday school, says religion is not the reason she's chosen abstinence. She fears STDs and pregnancy, of course, but above all, she says, she's not mature enough emotionally to handle the deep intimacy sex can bring. Though most people in her college, or even back in her Bible-belt high school, haven't made the same choice, Alice says she has never felt ostracized. If anything, she feels a need to speak up for those being coerced by aggressive abstinence groups. "Religious pressure was and is a lot greater than peer pressure," says Alice, who has never taken part in an

abstinence program. "I don't think there are as many teens saying 'Oh come on, everybody's having sex' as there are church leaders saying 'No, it's bad, don't do it. It'll ruin your life.' The choices many religious groups leave you with are either no sex at all or uneducated sex. What happened to educating young people about how they can protect themselves?"

The Dream Team

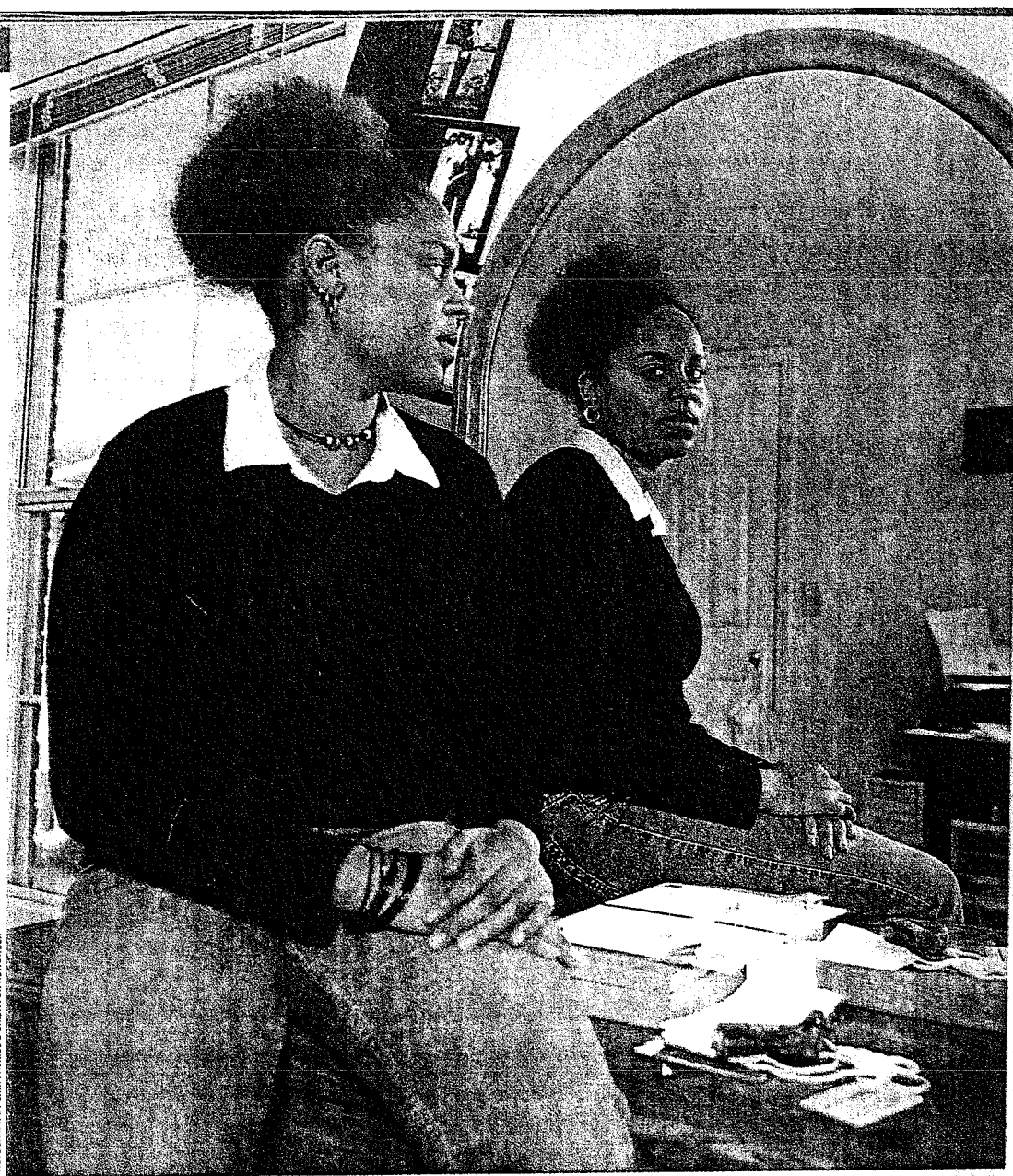
KARL NICOLETTI WASTED NO time when it came to having "the talk" with his son, Chris. It happened five years ago, when Chris was in sixth grade. Nicoletti was driving him home from school and the subject of girls came up. "I know many parents who are wishy-washy when talking to their kids about sex. I just said, 'No, you're not going to have sex. Keep your pecker in your pants until you graduate from high school'"

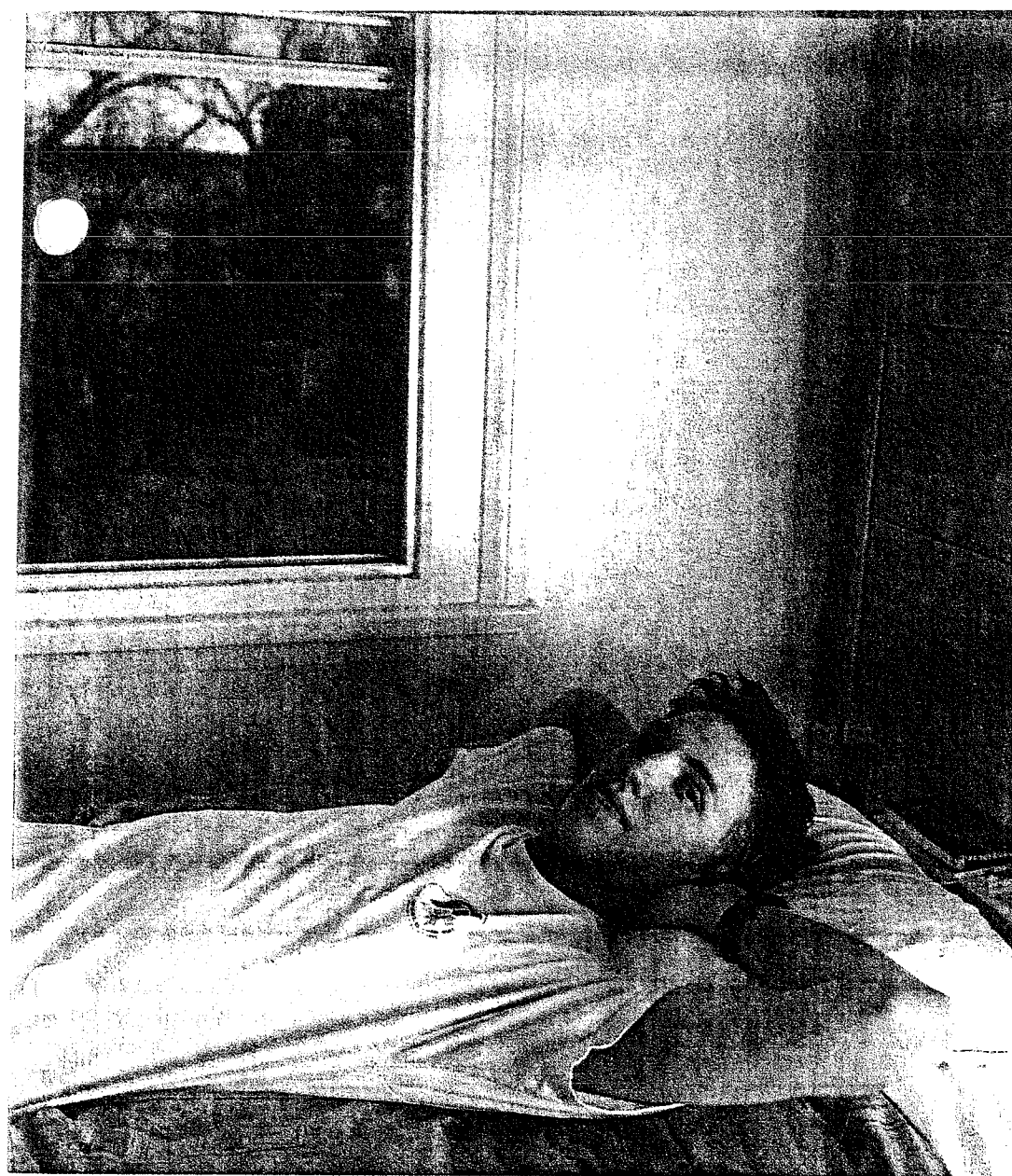
Today, the 16-year-old from Longmont, Colo., vows he'll remain abstinent until marriage. So does his girlfriend, 17-year-old Amanda Wing, whose parents set similarly strict rules for her and her two older brothers. "It's amazing, but they did listen," says her mother, Lynn Wing. Amanda has been dating Chris for only two months, but they've known each other for eight years. On a Tuesday-night dinner date at Portabello's (just across from the Twin Peaks Mall), Amanda asks, "You gonna get the chicken parmesan again?" Chris nods. "Yep. You know me well." They seem like a long-married couple—except that they listen to the Dave Matthews Band, have a 10:30 weeknight curfew and never go beyond kissing and hugging. (The guidelines set by Chris's dad: no touching anywhere that a soccer uniform covers.)

"Society is so run by sex," says Chris, who looks like Madison Avenue's concep-

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIN PATRICE O'BRIEN FOR NEWSWEEK

A PERSONAL DECISION: Young is comfortable with her choice, but sometimes finds campus life shocking





WAITING GAME: Schulte says remaining abstinent isn't always so easy, but he's determined to do it

tion of an All-American boy in his Abercrombie sweat shirt and faded baggy jeans. "Just look at everything—TV, movies. The culture today makes it seem OK to have sex whenever, however or with whoever you want. I just disagree with that." Amanda, who looks tomboy comfy in baggy brown cords, a white T shirt and chunky-soled shoes, feels the same way. "Sex should be a special thing that doesn't need to be public," she says. "But if you're abstinent, it's like *you're* the one set aside from society because you're not 'doing it'."

The peer pressure in this town of 71,000 people in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains is substantially less than in cosmopolitan Denver, 45 minutes away. ("It figures you had to come all the way out here to find a virgin," one local said.) Chris

led a Christian abstinence group called Teen Advisors this year. "We watched their slide show in eighth grade and it just has

pictures of all these STDs," he says. "It's one of the grossest things you've ever seen. I didn't want to touch a girl, like, forever." He now goes out once a month and talks to middle schoolers about abstinence. Amanda saw the same presentation. "It's horrible," she says. "If that doesn't scare kids out of sex, nothing will." Could these gruesome images put them off sex for life? Chris and Amanda say no. They're sure that whoever they marry will be disease-free.

To most abstaining teens, marriage is the golden light at the end of the perilous tunnel of dating—despite what their parents' experience may have been. Though Amanda's mother and father have had a long and stable union, Karl Nicoletti separated from Chris's mother when Chris was in fifth grade. His fiancée moved in with Chris and Karl two years ago; Chris's mother now has a year-and-a-half-old son out of wedlock. Chris and Amanda talk about marriage in the abstract, but

they want to go to college first, and they're looking at schools on opposite sides of the country. "I think we could stay together," Chris says. Amanda agrees. "Like we have complete trust in each other," she says. "It's just not hard for us." Whether the bond between them is strong enough to withstand a long-distance relationship is yet to be seen. For now, Chris and Amanda mostly look ahead to their next weekly ritual: the Tuesday pancake lunch.

The Survivor

REMAINING A VIRGIN until marriage is neither an easy nor a common choice in Latoya Huggins's part of Paterson, N.J. At least three of her friends became single mothers while they were still in high school, one by an older man who now wants nothing to do with the child. "It's hard for her to finish school," Latoya says, "because she has to take the baby to get shots and stuff."

Latoya lives in a chaotic world: so far this year, more than a dozen people have been murdered in her neighborhood. It's a life that makes her sexuality seem like one of the few things she can actually control. "I don't even want a boyfriend until after college," says Latoya, who's studying to be a beauti-

cian at a technical high school. "Basically I want a lot out of life. My career choices are going to need a lot of time and effort."

Latoya, 18, could pass for a street-smart 28. She started thinking seriously about abstinence five years ago, when a national outreach program called Free Teens began teaching classes at her church. The classes reinforced what she already knew from growing up in Paterson—that discipline is the key to getting through your teen years alive. Earlier this year she dated a 21-year-old appliance salesman from her neighborhood, until Latoya heard that he was hoping she'd have sex with him. "We decided that we should just be friends," she explains, "before he cheated on me or we split up in a worse way."

So most days Latoya comes home from school alone. While she waits for her parents to return from work, she watches the Disney Channel or chills in her basement bedroom, which she's decorated with construction-

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIN PATRICK © BRIEN FOR NEWSWEEK



PHOTOGRAPH BY BARBEL SCHMIDT FOR NEWSWEEK

LATER FOR THAT: Kunce chose abstinence but doesn't feel ostracized by those who haven't

“I feel there's a part of me that hasn't been triggered. Sex is one of those things you can't miss until you have it.”

uper cutouts of the names of her favorite pop stars, such as Nelly and Aaliyah. She feels safe there, she says, because “too many bad things are happening” outside. But bad things happen inside, too: last year she opened the door to a neighbor who forced his way inside and attempted to rape her. “He started trying to take my clothes off. I was screaming and yelling to the top of my lungs and nobody heard.” Luckily, the phone rang. Latoya told the intruder it was her father, and that if she didn't answer he would come home right away. The man fled. Latoya tries not to think about what happened, although she feels “like dying” when she sees her attacker on the street. (Her parents decided not to press charges so she wouldn't have to testify in court.) Her goal is to graduate and get a job; she wants to stay focused and independent. “Boys make you feel like you're special and you're the only one they care about,” she says. “A lot of girls feel like they need that. But my mother loves me and my father loves me, so there's no gap to fill.”

The Beauty Queen

EVEN THOUGH SHE LIVES 700 miles from the nearest ocean, Daniela Aranda was recently voted Miss Hawaiian Tropic El Paso, Texas, and her parents couldn't be prouder. They've displayed a picture of their bikini-

clad daughter smack-dab in the middle of the living room. “People always say to me ‘You don't look like a virgin,’” says Daniela, 20, who wears supersparkly eye shadow, heavy lip liner and a low-cut black shirt. “But what does a virgin look like? Someone who wears white and likes to look at flowers?”

Daniela models at Harley-Davidson fashion shows, is a cheerleader for a local soccer team called the Patriots and hangs out with friends who work at Hooters. She's also an evangelical Christian who made a vow at 13 to remain a virgin, and she's kept that promise. “It can be done,” she says. “I'm living proof.” Daniela has never joined an abstinence program; her decision came from strong family values and deep spiritual convictions.

Daniela's arid East El Paso neighborhood, just a mile or so from the Mexican border, was built atop desert dunes, and the sand seems to be reclaiming its own by swallowing up back patios and sidewalks. The city, predominantly Hispanic, is home to the Fort Bliss Army base, breathtaking mesa views—and some of the highest teen-pregnancy rates in the nation. “There's a lot of girls that just want to get pregnant so they can get married and get out of here,” Daniela says.

But she seems content to stay in El Paso. She studies business at El Paso Community

College, dates a UTEP football player named Mike and works as a sales associate at the A'gaci Too clothing store in the Cielo Vista Mall. She also tones at the gym and reads—especially books by the Christian author Joshua Harris. In “Boy Meets Girl,” she's marked such passages as “Lust is never satisfied” with a pink highlighter. She's also saved an article on A. C. Green, the former NBA player who's become a spokesman for abstinence. “My boyfriend's coach gave it to him because the other guys sometimes say, ‘Are you gay? What's wrong with you?’ It's proof that if a famous man like Green can do it, so can he.”

Daniela has been dating Mike for more than a year. He's had sex before, but has agreed to remain abstinent with her. “He's what you call a born-again virgin,” she says. “Or a secondary abstinent, or something like that. We just don't put ourselves in compromising situations. If we're together late at night, it's with my whole family.”

Daniela knows about temptation: every time she walks out onstage in a bathing suit, men take notice. But she

**—LENEE YOUNG, 19,
who has never had a boyfriend**

doesn't see a contradiction in her double life as virgin and beauty queen; rather, it's a personal challenge. “I did Hawaiian Tropic because I wanted to see if I could get into a bikini in front of all these people,” she says. “I wasn't thinking, ‘Oh, I'm going to win.’ But I did, and I got a free trip to Houston's state finals. I met the owner of Hawaiian Tropic. It's like, wow, this is as good as it gets.”

The Ring Bearer

LENEYOUNG IS TRYING TO write a paper for her Spanish class at Atlanta's Spelman College, but as usual she and her roommates can't help getting onto the subject of guys. “I love Ludacris,” Lenee gushes. “I love everything about him. Morris Chestnut, too. He has a really pretty smile. Just gorgeous.” But Lenee, 19, has never had a boyfriend, and has never even been kissed. “A lot of the guys in high school had already had sex,” she says. “I knew that would come up, so I'd end all my relationships at the very beginning.” Lenee decided back then to remain a virgin until marriage, and even now she feels little temptation to do what many of her peers are doing behind closed dormitory doors. “I feel

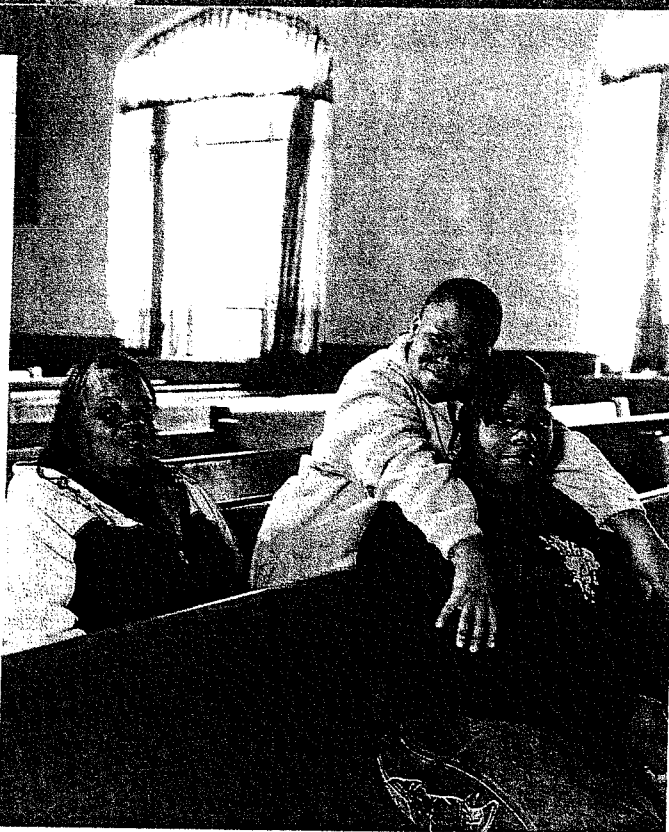
Society

that part of me hasn't been triggered yet," she says. "Sex is one of those things you can't miss until you have it."

Last summer she went with a friend from her hometown of Pittsburgh to a Silver Ring Thing. These popular free events meld music videos, pyrotechnics and live teen comedy sketches with dire warnings about STDs. Attendees can buy a silver ring—and a Bible—for \$12. Then, at the conclusion of the program, as techno music blares, they recite a pledge of abstinence and don their rings. "My friend, who's also a virgin, said I needed to go so I could get a ring," Leneé says. "It was fun, like the music and everything. And afterwards they had a dance and a bonfire."

The idea of abstinence was not new to Leneé. In high school she participated in a program sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center called Postponing Sexual Involvement. Her mother had discussed it with her—once—the week before she left for college. Two of her closest friends are also virgins; the trio jokingly call themselves The Good Girls Club. But student life can sometimes be a shock to her sensibilities. "Another friend of mine and this guy were talking about how they didn't use a condom. He said, 'I like it raw.' I was like, 'Oh, my goodness!'"

And then there was the recent party that began with truth-or-dare questions. The first one: have you ever kissed a boy? Young was the only woman who said no, and everybody in the room was stunned. "Are you serious? We gotta find you a boyfriend!" But Leneé wasn't embarrassed. "I don't feel like I've missed out," she says. "I just feel like my time will come." Until then, she sports that shiny silver ring.



A BETTER LIFE: Huggins with mother Sandra and brother Dondrae

lot more serious than it was before," he says. "It was like, 'Now, what is she going to expect from me?'" Lucian worried, too, about disease and pregnancy. He promised himself never again.

Lucian, now an engineering major at the University of Alberta in Canada, is a "renewed virgin." His parents are strong proponents of chastity, and he attended school-sponsored abstinence classes. But the messages didn't hit home until he'd actually had sex. "It's a pretty special thing, and it's also pretty serious," he says. "Abstinence has to do with 'Hey, are you going to respect this person?'" He has dated since his high-school affair, and is now hoping a particular cute coed from Edmonton will go out with him. "But I'll try to restrict myself to kissing," he says. "Not because I think everything else is bad. But the more you participate with some-

one, the harder it's going to be to stop."

It's not easy to practice such restraint, especially when those around him do not. Lucian lives in a single room, decorated with ski-lift tickets and a "Scooby-Doo" poster, in an all-male dorm, but he says most students "get hitched up, sleep around and never see each other again." Meanwhile he does his best to push his own sexual urges from his mind. "I try to forget about it, but I have to say it sucks. Homework is a good thing to do, and going out for a run usually works." He also goes to Sunday mass. Lucian figures he can hold out until he's married, which he hopes will be by the time he's 30. "I'm looking forward to an intimate experience with my wife, who I'll truly love and want to spend the rest of my life with," says Lucian. "It's kind of corny, but it's for real."

With SARAH DOWNEY and VANESSA JUAREZ

The Renewed Virgin

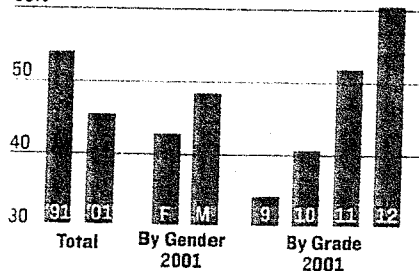
LUCIAN SCHULTE HAD ALWAYS planned to wait until he was married to have sex, but that was before a warm night a couple of years ago when the green-eyed, lanky six-footer found himself with an unexpected opportunity. "She was all for it," says Lucian, now 18. "It was like, 'Hey, let's give this a try.'" The big event was over in a hurry and lacked any sense of intimacy. "In movies, if people have sex, it's always romantic," he says. "Physically, it did feel good, but emotionally, it felt really awkward. It was not what I expected it to be."

While the fictional teens of "American Pie" would have been clumsily overjoyed, Lucian, raised Roman Catholic, was plagued by guilt. "I was worried that I'd given myself to someone and our relationship was now a

Teens & Sexuality

H.S. students who say they've had sex

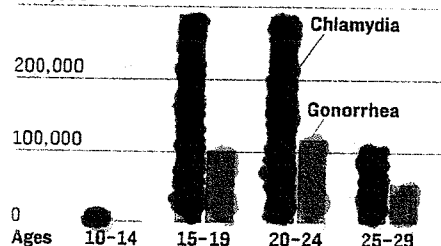
60%



Raised in the age of AIDS and better educated about sex and abstinence, more teens are saying "no." Condom use is up and teen pregnancy is down. A look at the trends:

Gonorrhea and chlamydia cases, 2001

300,000



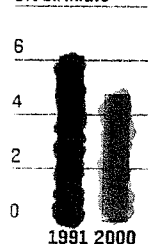
■ Safer Sex: Today, 25% more students say they used a condom during their last sexual encounter than those surveyed a decade ago.

■ Sex Ed: 89% have been educated about AIDS.

■ Race: Black students are 40% more likely to have had sex than whites.

Teen pregnancy

8% birthrate*



15 TO 19-YEAR-OLDS. SOURCES: CDC; TEXT BY JOSH ULICK; GRAPHIC BY JEFF FERDOCO-NEWSWEEK