

Testimony
The Ohio Prevention First Act (H.B. 293)
18 November 2009

My name is Daniel Sparks and I am a junior at Parma Senior High School in Parma, Ohio. I am here because a lack of sexual health education has and continues to plague to my friends, my school, and my community. Rather than teach age-appropriate and medically accurate information, my school district invites Operation Keepsake, an abstinence-only-until-marriage program provider, into our six high school and middle schools, reaching thousands of students per year.

In our health class, Operation Keepsake served as our “sex ed,” though it was more like a lesson based on a singular set of morals and values. The students in my class ranged from freshmen to seniors; for some, the thought of sex ed was comical, for they had already embarked on lessons in self-teaching. For the rest of us, we listened and participated, but were mainly there on attendance. It was hard for me to concentrate on marriage when I was only 14.

The ineffectiveness of the program haunts me today. For one, I later learned that the education my school had supposedly provided me with was useless. Of course I learned that premarital sex is damaging, but I failed to conceptualize that many STI's are, too. This was represented when our instructor had us pass around a piece of tape, stick it to our clothes, and pass it to our neighbors. As I look back, the sole purpose of this was to scare us into believing that we would contract infections, get pregnant, or simply carry with us, as they called it, “baggage.” Operation Keepsake made me question education as a whole, for while they scared us into understanding what could go wrong, they afforded us no information on how things could go right; on how we could prevent an STI; on the effectiveness of contraception; and empowering us with the knowledge to make the right choices before making the wrong ones. Secondly, only two years after going through Operation Keepsake, I remember little, yet I'm still expected to remain abstinent. There is a burden of responsibility placed wrongly on students and teenagers; how can we be responsible when we don't know how to be?

As a teenager, I've learned that marriage is not a good enough reason to stay abstinent. In my own pursuit, I've found that my health, body, mind, and emotions matter more to me than my future partner receiving me “pure,” and free from baggage. Luckily, I had the opportunity to learn comprehensive sexual health education through several community agencies, including The AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland. The knowledge that I gained has instilled in me not only the power to make the decision to be abstinent until I am ready for the responsibilities of sex, but it has also made me confident in my decisions. I have no thanks for Operation Keepsake, for, if anything, they hindered my abilities to make responsible decisions based on objective information. I am fortunate to stand out from the masses at Parma Senior High School who often leave Operation Keepsake in a state worse than that of when they entered, and who are vulnerable to the happenings of unsafe sex. But I should not be standing out. Access to information should not be a privilege—it is our right as the youth to know how to protect ourselves, and I therefore support and so desperately hope for the passage of The Ohio Prevention First Act. I'm counting on your decisions, and while some may not even know it, my peers' are counting on you too. Thank you so much.