



## HEALTH

### Sexual Health

# Girls' film on teen pregnancy makes it big

Students hope movie sends message to young women across U.S.



Joel Martinez / AP

Local residents, students and actors watch the movie "Toothpaste" at Mission City Hall, in Mission, Texas, on April 19. The film addresses teen pregnancy issues and was written by Mission High School students.

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MISSION, Texas - With at least six classmates pregnant, including the valedictorian with her second child, it was clear to a few girls at Mission High School that more information was needed on safe sex.

So the four students at this school along the Mexican border — where the teen pregnancy rate is among the highest in the nation — decided they could help send the message by making their own movie.

Two years later, their 16-minute educational film promoting condom use, named “Toothpaste” after a teen code word for condoms, has been ordered by schools around the country. It also will be shown at film festivals and on the Showtime cable channel, according to the organization that produced the film.

“Hopefully, people will get something out of it,” said Amanda Ramirez, one of the teens.

### **Focus on making decisions**

The script by Kristal Villarreal, Laura Coria, Gladys Sanchez and Amanda Ramirez won an annual contest by Scenarios USA, an organization that educates teens about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Professional directors, producers and camera operators helped polish the film.

“Toothpaste” features two teen girls’ decisions on whether to have sex with their boyfriends. Jennifer and her boyfriend, who have been dating a year, decide to wait. Cristina decides to have unprotected sex with her boyfriend of three weeks after he says he loves her.

“I guess it had a good message to it,” said Robert Cerda, who plays one of the boys in the movie and has a real-life friend who got his girlfriend pregnant. “Be careful about the decisions you make, all the time, mentally, sexually.”

With its soundtrack of Spanish hip-hop and rolling background of the South Texas region known as the Valley, the film is a frank discussion about sexuality from a region where 37 of 1,000 girls get pregnant by age 17, according to state statistics.

### **Information about contraceptives**

That’s the highest teen pregnancy rate in Texas and among the highest in the nation. Experts attribute the high rate to lack of knowledge about contraception and a cultural acceptance of young parents in a region that’s 90 percent Hispanic.

The film is unusual because sex-education curriculum in Texas focuses on abstinence. Districts can discuss contraception in class, but the state advises against it. Most South Texas school districts do not.

The girls, all of whom are now attending college, said they would like to see Texas add information on contraceptives to its sex education policy.

“Hopefully the state will also realize the law they have — it’s not working,” said Ramirez, now 19 and attending South Texas College.

David Champion, the Texas Education Agency education specialist for the region, said he saw value in the movie.

“If you talk to these teenagers, it’s information that they need to know and they want to know,” Champion said.

The geographic isolation of South Texas has kept many Mexican family traditions intact, including taboos about talking to teens about sex.

“We’re more conservative, I guess,” said Coria, 19, who is attending Southwestern University. “Our parents, I don’t know why, just want us to be abstinent, period.”

### **Girls receive mixed messages**

But Hilda Flores, who works with Valley school districts on health policies, said many Mexican-American women send their daughters mixed messages.

“It’s shameful when they’re pregnant, but as soon as the baby is born the grandmother changes,” she said. “I don’t know why we as Hispanic mothers are like that — we’ll take over, we’ll be the baby’s mom.”

Coria’s mother, Ana Laura, spoke at the Mission City Hall premiere about her pride for her daughter’s film.

“What parents have to understand is how we can help our children and our community and how things have changed,” she said in Spanish.

The girls began work on the script in 2003, when they were juniors.

The contest by Scenarios USA challenged teens in Miami, New York City and the Texas border — all areas with high rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases — to film their lives.

When they conducted their research, the girls were shocked to learn that the Valley’s teen pregnancy rate was higher than in Miami and New York City. They were more shocked to learn that students in other states learned about contraception in the schools.

Martha Castaneda, their English teacher who worked with them on the project, said she hopes a message to teens from their peers will be a powerful tool.

“How many of us adults can actually vividly remember our own dilemmas?” she said. “Teens listen to other teens. Whether for better or for worse.”

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