PRESENTING

The Sex Talk

AAOP'S DIGITAL ZINE ON SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES
Anna Chu is a senior at Macalester College, majoring in English and minoring in math. She has written stories all of her life, but now had the opportunity to expand her understanding around sexual health and reproductive justice in the Asian American community as the Gender Justice Fellow this summer for AAOP, working on developing this sexual/reproductive health campaign.

"The Sex Talk" Campaign tackles and rebels against the idea that addressing sex and reproduction aloud is shameful from the standpoint of Asian American culture. People, of all ages, should have the ability to make decisions for themselves with the right education and knowledge.

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**VISUAL SUBMISSIONS FROM SUE AND CARNATION**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANNA</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELODY</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JONATHAN</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUEEN OF THE NIGHT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HYDRANGEA</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHUE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHILLIPE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DARCY</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SARAH</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARNATION</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHUONG ANH</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAISY</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEEB</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUE</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIANA</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I've been told how to feel and act my entire life. One of the ten commandments from Catholicism is to obey your parents. Vietnamese culture calls for younger people to respect and listen to their elders. For the longest time, being a good listener was all I knew.

I've been told my entire life that sex is unsatisfying for girls, that I have to wait for marriage, that I have to dress this way or that to help boys control themselves, and that if something bad happens to me, it’ll be my fault. If I was good, if I listened, if I obeyed, they said, nothing bad would happen.

Yet everything I was taught infuriated me, and everything I was told to feel confused me. I would try to put everything about sex, relationships, reproduction together through research, as if I could figure it all out from second-hand accounts, reading a book, or hearing a lecture.

But this project has been difficult and strange, yet enlightening and interesting. Every conversation and interview has oscillated between being professional, giggly, informative, gossipy, heartbreaking, and inspiring. Taking about sex and reproduction without fear and from a position of understanding people, and I mean really understanding, has been amazing.

My understanding changes everyday. The only thing that stays consistent is that everybody should have the ability to decide for themselves what they want and what they need when it comes to sex and reproduction, and nobody should be ashamed of expressing what they want.

I would like to continue advocating for sex and reproductive health education. There’s still so much people don’t know, there’s still so much I don’t know, and especially within my direct communities, I want to create safer environments for people to explore themselves and their world.

xoxo Anna
Anna
she/her
embracing sexuality

*images are of a model
Melody remembers a time when conversations around sex and reproduction were hushed, whispered gossip sessions. Even after her family found out she was on birth control, there was a period of time nobody really mentioned it beyond light teasing.

One day, she ran into trouble, and needed someone to pick her up and get emergency contraception. She called her aunt, who is 7-years-older than her and someone she trusts. At first, Melody resisted telling her aunt about what happened. But after some pestering and the aunt calling up another friend to just ask questions and gossip about their own lives, Melody began to open up.

The dynamic slowly began to change between the women in Melody’s family. Melody talks about the power of “making sex casual”. Sex talks carry such a heavy connotation, and feel like lectures. Over time in Melody’s case, it evolved to be light, fun, curious, and teasing. This new baseline of comfort discussing previously taboo topics like sex has opened doors to more in depth conversations about gender and sexuality.
How do you teach about pornography when many communities can’t even teach about sex itself?

Pornography is often taboo, and conversations around pornography feel old and new. There is no space to address it in sex education, yet it is a source of information for curious teenagers. Jonathan recalls how teenage boys explore, use, and even exchange porn out of curiosity and in an effort to understand their own sexuality.

Now that he’s older, Jonathan notes the dangers of porn. It’s not based in reality, and instead shows men and women with seemingly perfect bodies performing perfectly for the audience, giving teenagers (and even adults) a warped perception of sex. Sex education does not address the violence, possible sex-trafficking and pedophilia, and porn addiction that may result. Sex is a part of all cultures, and porn is a subset and constant within our culture.

Jonathan thinks that if teenagers are going to find, use, and explore porn, then there should also be education on the effects of porn on perception of sex and on the psyche of people. If we want to foster healthy relationships to sex and porn, teenagers need help in parsing the good, the bad, and the neutral.
“I understand where my mom is coming from,” Queen of the Night reflected upon his mother’s sadness, doubt, and confusion about his sexual orientation. “But it doesn’t excuse the toxicity.”

The learned shame and need to hide his identity used to cause him to drop his partner’s hand in public. Holding hands is simple act of care that many cis heterosexual couples take for granted, but isn’t accessible as a queer person. Queerness and being gay was not normalized in his life or his parent’s lives. His mother even said to him “if you’re gay, your dad will be so mad” while they were arguing about gay rights. Hearing that sentiment hit Queen of the Night hard, especially hearing it from the person who was supposed to support and love him. So he found it easier to distract people from his identity by pretending to have crushes on girls, obsessing over anime, or burying himself in school work and saying he was too busy to date. Anything but the truth was easier for his friends and family to accept.

While his parents have become more tolerant due to time, patience, and exposure, Queen of the Night still hopes for more acceptance from them. However, as he learns to accept himself despite initial family struggles, he’s learning to hold onto his partner’s hand in public.
“It made me feel like I did not belong to myself.”

The human body was a prop that people could move or do whatever they pleased with. Hydrangea came to understand that their body was not their own, but an object that had to obey the whims of filial piety. That stricter sense of respect left little room for conversations around consent, sex, and bodily autonomy between them and their parents. The lack of these conversations left Hydrangea lost and confused. Pictures and rumors spread around about girls at their school, and all they heard was “what did they think was going to happen?”, further teaching them that anything that happened would simply be their own fault.

It wasn’t until after taking coursework on consent and boundaries did they begin to understand that their own boundaries had been crossed, and that they had more autonomy than they were previously taught. “It’s my body, I get to say no,” they reflected, and they even practice it now in their current relationship. Hydrangea wishes that consent around the body and boundaries were taught at a younger age, regardless of sexual relationships.
Family planning. Unmemorable high school sex education. Pregnancy prevention. All Chue learned in the teenage years of their life about sex and reproduction were centered around straight and cis couples. Only in college did Chue have sex talks that covered consent, safe sex, queer sex, and kinks. And by meeting more people who were unabashedly themselves, Chue learned to embrace his own queer identity more.

"Sex can be amazing or sex can be harmful".

Sex can be an act that brings pleasure and brings two people together. However, when teenagers don’t have the words to express their boundaries, the lines of consent become blurred. Teenagers trying to understand their own emotions and bodies for the first time feel pressured to give into sexual acts to keep the person they like close, and this happened to Chue. With no one to turn to about his queer identity, and nobody to talk to about his experimentation, he did not have support to help him realize their own personal boundaries had been crossed. Now, Chue tries to be a support for his younger siblings as they navigate their lives.
There is power in learning by doing, and while Phillipe experienced support in coming out to his family, he also recognized that stepping away from his home and family made it possible for him to explore and experiment with his sexuality. As an 18-year-old in Chicago with what seemed like the world at his fingertips, he went out to discover a place for himself.

However, Phillipe realized that there was still so much he didn’t know. His family followed trends and never spoke about sex and reproduction beyond “don’t get anyone pregnant”. And the religiously affiliated college he attended skipped over any kind of sexual education discussion. From his first and now ex-boyfriend, he found a friend and a mentor who taught him about PrEP to prevent HIV. He found community in the queer-friendly clinic he visited for health check-ups and STI screenings. He also found a group of friends to confide in, and they even formed an underground clinic on campus that delivered condoms and other forms of protection to people’s dorm doors.

Phillipe learned a lot from doing, but there was so much he didn’t know. He wishes that he was taught more about queer sex, how to protect himself from STI’s and unhealthy relationships, understanding consent better.
Darcy
she/her
Away from home for the first time and away from her parent’s prying questions, Darcy discovered her independence. As she began to explore her first relationship, the question of sex before marriage came up. Due to her religious upbringing, she learned “to wait until marriage”.

In her first relationship, she could see herself getting married. But after the relationship ended, she was tricked by pretty words, and hurt by boys who would retract their affection after they got what they wanted from her, and it made her feel used. Hook-up culture is prevalent, but not what she wanted. She realized she needed commitment and a relationship before any intimacy. Health concerns and unexpected pregnancies were not worth a hook-up. She began to set boundaries and define what she wanted in a relationship in order to protect and value herself.

To Darcy, there is a responsibility to having sex. Sex is a meaningful way build deeper and stronger connections with her partner. She learned to set boundaries that respected herself and what she wanted, and that was key in her understanding of sexuality.
Sarah’s curiosity with people, relationships, and sexuality began and was shut down by her parents in 5th grade. She came home after a “Family Life and Sexual Health” lesson brimming with questions only to be handed a book on puberty, teaching her that sex wasn’t to be talked about. When her moms finally sat her down for a sex talk at 16, they simply told her “don’t have sex, you’re not ready”, with no further discussion.

Sarah was already having sex at that point, with no guidance from her parents. Their inability to create a safe learning environment about sex furthered her self doubt and decisions around her body and relationship with sex. She wondered if her parents were right. Unable to confide in her moms, Sarah looked to friends and online resources to help her understand herself.

"How do I know when I am ready? How do I know I can trust my partner? How will sexual intimacy impact my mental health and emotionality?"

Sarah reflected on these questions and confided in a high school friend who had a formal sex-talk with her parents. Her friend’s parent’s openness allowed her questions to be answered as she sorted through what she wanted for herself.
“Experiencing that pleasure is key in my understanding and relationship with sex. I held onto that. If I’m not experiencing pleasure-- then it doesn’t serve me!”

For Carnation, sex is about power-- historically and physically. His understanding of sexuality is tied in his understanding of femininity, queerness, and what it means to be Asian in white-dominated spaces. Understanding how his identities intersect with one another helped him understand how Asian bodies are viewed now: submissive, damsels, feminine. He wants to rewrite that narrative.

In recentering his own pleasure, Carnation looks to reclaim his identities from being an object of possession, desire, or domination to being the one who is pursuing pleasure and power. Femininity is not all about weakness and masculinity is not all about strength. He can be both, he is both, and he embraces the fluidity of femininity and masculinity to create his identity. He is not an object. He is reclaiming his sexuality.
“Damn, you’re a hoe.”
“I wish you were a virgin.”
“You’re addicted to flesh.”

She was almost perfect.

Body count, virginity, and hot girl summer all have connotations about what makes someone a good girl or a hoe, what makes someone respectable or not. Phuong Anh’s authentic embracement of her sexuality caused her to endure judgement from her religious community, family, and even friends. It doesn’t matter that boys and men are doing the same thing, it matters that she’s a girl.

“Why should I be ashamed that I like sex?”

Showing skin, exploring a boy’s body the way he explores hers, understanding her own sexuality by acting on her desire—she knows what she wants and what she likes and that should be celebrated. Not scrutinized. How she chooses to explore her sexuality is her choice, and is not something for others to judge her for.
"Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it.”
“All men want is sex.”
"Your relationship won’t last if you have sex."
"Your boyfriend will get bored of you."

After getting into her first relationship, DAISY’s parents repeated these mantras to her like a prayer. As if telling her not to have sex would stop her from doing it, as if filling her with fear would deter her curiosity. They told her not to have sex out of respect for herself and her relationship. They tied her worth and value to sex and purity.

DAISY’s parent’s traditional views from Vietnamese culture and Christianity shaped her understanding of sex and relationships. Even though now she views sex as an important and healthy part of a relationship and acknowledges that sex might not always be about relationships for some people, her parent’s words and shaming make their way into her decisions about her relationships and how she thinks about other women and men. By talking about it more openly, she is learning to challenge what her parents have taught her.
Teeb

he/him
The conversations I grew up hearing are often of men boasting about how many womxn they have dated or slept with. The men would dehumanize the womxn by calling them harmful words. Hearing those types of conversations made me uncomfortable because using those hurtful words perpetuates violence against womxn. I wish there were more masculine identifying spaces that challenged harmful practices in the Hmong community.

I’m a part of ManFoward, a local Twin Cities non-profit whose mission is mobilizing a national network of Southeast Asian men and masculine folks to transform patriarchal power systems through direct action organizing, education and collective healing.

ManForward invites their members in asking other men questions like, where is the boasting coming from, or is there a need to rush to have sex now? I believe this practice is one way to understand a person’s background and an attempt to challenge their way of thinking. In ManForward, I work on holding myself accountable and helping to hold other men in my life accountable for their actions.

After being involved with ManForward, I began to reflect on my own experiences. Sex can have a meaning or it doesn’t have to have a meaning. One should be transparent about what they want out of the relationship: whether that’s short term, long term or a one time thing. Manforward helped me learn how to respect people’s boundaries.
My introduction to the subject of sex was thankfully from my parents. It has been at least 40 years since that introduction, and it remains comically memorable.

I grew up in a Japanese immigrant household and that introduction was as awkward as I would imagine any introduction would be in any household of any culture. My father, who was my primary tutor for all things academic (my mom added her creative flair to most of my art projects), gave me a book he found from the library describing the reproductive anatomy of human men and women. He tried to be objective and approachable about the topic but was nonetheless stiff and awkward. His effort, though, was appreciated and it made it less awkward for me.

My mom welcomed my first period with sekihan, a rice dish with azuki beans - a celebratory meal. I was more uncomfortable with her joy at the first sign of adulthood, than I was with any conversation about sex with my dad, as I was not particularly excited about the transition. She, however, made it easy for me to complain openly about my periods, yet relationships remained taboo.
The one and only full-length conversation I had with my mother about sex was a conversation that wasn’t even about sex. I asked her about cultural acts of taboo, and premarital sex was one of them.

Traditional Hmong culture dictates that one cannot engage in premarital sex in any family’s home, especially those who practice the traditional religion of Shamanism. The resulting consequences are that the household’s guardian spirits and ancestors, who witness the “impure” act, become spiritually ill and unable to properly defend the household against misfortune. These can include illness, injury, poverty or lack of wealth and success among other possibilities. Furthermore, the act of taboo generally comes to light when either family seeks out a shaman to read their misfortunes. This may lead to yet another consequence of potential sour relations between both families involved, especially if or when one seeks compensation (any or all of the following: financial, labor, or other resources) from the other to perform the shaman ritual needed to negate the “impure” act and stop whatever misfortune either family may be experiencing.

With ten siblings, it has now become a rule in my household that none of us can have sex at home or they will have to provide the means for the ritual. Whether one engages in sex or not outside of the home is at their own discretion.
I would like to begin with thanking my Professors-- Professor Suzuki and Professor Geng, who introduced me to the Chuck Green Fellowship in the first place. I was lost at the beginning of my junior year, and the fellowship was a surprise to me, but they were there from the beginning to encourage me.

Next I would like to thank the Chuck Green Fellowship cohort and Professor Patrick Schmidt. Their support through the semester and the summer has been invaluable. Without them, I would have been even more lost and discouraged. But we were all going through it together, and hearing about everybody’s work and journey and summer adventures every week has made me appreciate even more how wonderful and inspirational the people at Macalester are. I’m so happy to have met you all.

Last of all, I would like to thank AAOP for hosting me this summer, and for connecting me to the community. This project has allowed me to do work that I am passionate about, with people who are just as passionate as me. Everybody I’ve met, every interview I’ve conducted taught me so much about the depth of sex and reproductive health within family dynamics and different Asian cultures and also US culture. Many of these stories emphasize the need for sexual and reproductive health education. I am so grateful to all of the interviewees’ openness in talking about these topics, and I want them to know I learned so much and I hope they learned too.