

# Urban Trends

A quarterly newsletter published by



## Black Youth Sexuality and the Media Dialogue...Discussion...Debate



### Who's Teaching Sex? The Media or the Home



**Maisha Hamilton-Bennett, Ph.D.**, is founder and executive director of Hamilton Life Ins-titute, Inc. and founder and CEO of Hamilton Wholistic Healthcare. Dr. Hamilton-Bennett is a licensed clinical

psychologist and motivational speaker whose topics include "African Cultural Influences on the Psychology of African Americans" and "Men and Women in Relationships." She has written several essays, including *Black Children, Handle With Care* and *Afro-American Women, Poverty and Mental Health*. Her expertise has made her a sought-after personality on the talk show circuit and in magazines such as *Essence*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *Ebony*.

**MEE:** What is the overall landscape of sexuality among Black urban youth?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** The majority are probably sexually active. There seems to be a hard-core, but very small group, that is trying to hold off for marriage or for permanent or ongoing relationships. But I think they're in the very definite minority. If a young lady declines sex, she's considered odd and the young man will say, "If you don't want to have sex with me, I'll go to somebody else who will." A lot of young ladies are feeling reluctant to say no, because they think that it may jeopardize their opportunity to have a boyfriend. Young men are also encouraged or expected by

other young men to have sex with the young ladies that they go out with. If they don't "score," they're teased.

**MEE:** Is the environment driving more young people to be sexually active or is it just personal choice?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** The environment probably has a lot to do with it. In television and in music videos, which are extremely popular among young people, sexuality is definitely the norm. In music videos, the lyrics and songs promote sex — not love, but sex, primarily. Magazines, newspapers, even the soap operas, are very sexual now and kids are influenced by that. Hormones haven't changed; the hormones that young people had in the '60's, '70's '80's or '90's — it's all the same. But what people do with the hormones is different. People now feel like they have permission to be sexual because society says that's how everyone is.

A lot of films, for example, show boy meets girl, man meets woman, fall in love, or at least there's a sexual attraction, and they go straight to bed. There's not much about birth control, there's not much about protected sex. It's either left to the imagination or there's absolutely none being used. There's rarely a film where anybody gets the sex history of the person to see if they have been exposed to HIV or any other STDs. Or to see if there's any compatibility, or any thoughts about becoming a parent. It's just, people's eyes meet, there's a spark and then

there's sex.

**MEE:** Media seems to exert a powerful influence...

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** Yes. Media definitely reinforces this kind of spontaneous sexuality. No need for commitment, no need even for love. There's just people living in the moment. There's a lot of in and out of the bed and a lot of casual relationships. Messages to young people [say] sex has a certain value that's independent of anything

...Continued on page 2

## What's Inside

**WHO'S TEACHING SEX? THE MEDIA OR THE HOME:** Maisha Hamilton-Bennett, Ph.D.

...PAGE 1

**THE VILLAGE IS NO LONGER RAISING OUR CHILDREN:** Asa G. Hilliard III, Ph.D.

...PAGE 3

**TAKING RISKS: A HEALTHY PART OF GROWING UP:** Beth Richie, Ph.D.

...PAGE 4

**PARENTS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SHAPING THE SEXUAL ATTITUDES OF THEIR CHILDREN:** Jawanza Kunjufu, Ph.D.

...PAGE 5

**SEX: CAN WE TALK?:** Gail E. Wyatt, Ph.D.

...PAGE 7

# From The Editor

When you're trying to influence people's behavior, whether you're trying to get them to practice safe sex or to buy the latest fashion gear, it makes sense to use every means available to reach them "where they are." The first step, of course, is understanding where that is. Then you figure out what it will take to get them where you want them to be. One of the keys to that is relating to the audience on its own terms. Many times that calls for non-traditional approaches that require you to "think outside the box."

Over the years, MEE has led the way in helping social and commercial marketers understand this sometimes complex process, especially when it comes to ethnic or urban audiences. We've also made a commitment to share what we've learned with you, our readers. To help in that process, we've brought together some of the most distinguished experts in their fields, who have their own ideas about improving sexual and reproductive health outcomes in urban communities, even if it means shaking up "the system." We think you'll find their takes on youth, sexuality and the media insightful and challenging to the status quo.

Feedback to the first set of interviews with these brilliant minds (UT 11, Vol. 3) indicates that they caused a lot of people to look at our most pressing urban issues in new and different ways. We think you'll find that this group has the same impact.

Enjoy!



Pamela Weddington  
Editor

## Hamilton-Bennett (continued)

else, a sort of stand-alone activity that has a value of its own, unrelated to relationships or reproduction.

And we can't leave out the music videos; those messages are very strong. Because they're associated with music, that kind of gets into a person's spirit. [Youth are] vibrating to the music, and those messages become much more ingrained in them because of the way the message is delivered.

**Hormones haven't changed ...but what people do with the hormones is different. People now feel like they have permission to be sexual because society says that's how everyone is.**

*-Maisha Hamilton-Bennett*

**MEE:** What other social contexts impact risky sexual behavior?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** A lot of the kids who are less economically advantaged come from homes that are totally shattered, so they're not consistently getting the love and support from parents that they crave and that they need. Many of them are coming from homes where the budget is very, very tight, so they're not getting money to buy the things that the media pumps into their brain that they "need" to have — the shoes, the clothes, the designer jeans. They're using sexual intimacy to replace some of the other sources of love that may be prevalent in more affluent communities. Probably what the kids crave even more than sexual intimacy is love from somebody who really cares genuinely about them as a person. A lot of times people look to their sex partner for love and caring and they don't really find that. They only find the physical closeness where skin touches skin, but the heart doesn't touch the heart and the mind doesn't touch the mind.

Many young ladies who don't have a father in their household, for example,

have an older boyfriend. That man is not only like a father, but he's also the lover. Then [he] may or may not choose to have protected sex and [may] expose the young lady to pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Because he's older, she may not know how to say "no" or how to assert herself in the relationship.

**MEE:** Are there other ways that poverty impacts the development of Black youth sexuality?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** There are a lot of children, too many, who are growing up in homes with a single female as head of the household. In some cases, certainly not the majority, this mother is drug-addicted, or is very poor and may be using her own sexuality as a way to help pay the bills. [She] may be a prostitute, [or] even less formally, just having boyfriends who come around who buy groceries and who help out around the house.

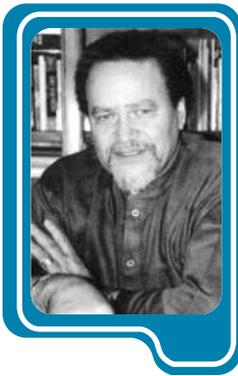
Because poor people tend to live in smaller houses, there's less privacy, and children are exposed to their mother's lifestyles. Middle class mothers would keep it more private, because there are corridors and doors. However, a lot of times the proximity of a [low income] mother's sexuality to the young person is very close. There are sounds that are carried; there are people who are coming in and out who are called "Uncle."

**MEE:** What about access to healthcare or sex education as variables in the equation?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** I don't think that [health clinics are] the main route that young people would prefer to go in order to get information about sexuality. It seems too foreign, too far away, too formal, too old school. Because [to them], the people who are teaching [in schools] and who are working in the clinics are old, usually [from] their parent's generation. Maybe if the sex educators in the clinics could hire the peers of these young people, it would be a lot easier for [them] to go to these places to get information.

*...Continued on page 9*

# The Village is No Longer Raising Our Children



**Asa G. Hilliard III, Ph.D.**, is a professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University. He is a founding member of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations. He is also the co-developer of a popular educational

television series, *Free Your Mind, Return to the Source: African Origins*. He has produced videotapes and educational materials on African history through his production company, *Waset Education Productions*.

**MEE:** What are some of the things you notice about Black youth today when it comes to sexuality?

**HILLIARD:** Young people have made a radical change in their sexual behavior — it occurs earlier and it occurs more often. It occurs in light of the AIDS epidemic, without reference to the dangers. It is more dispassionate, in the sense that it's very casual. No really necessary intimate relationship is there. It's what you might predict from a community that has begun a kind of disintegration, because young people are fundamentally on their own and without meaningful adult guidance.

**MEE:** How do myths and stereotypes about Black sexuality influence our youth?

**HILLIARD:** In the Western world, particularly in the United States, there's so much media, [and] the adult values, norms, expectations are transmitted through it. Advertisements directed towards adults are heavily dependent on sexuality. If you want to smoke a cigarette or sell a car, you've got to have a beautiful woman — anything has to be associated with sexuality.

I think the first thing we have to acknowledge is that we have this pattern among adults — of leadership, if you will — that may be unintended leadership, by our behavior. More what we do than what we say. Few adults are saying anything, but their behavior says everything.

Adults in the communities that I see are

detached from the children. When I was a child, all my Saturdays were supervised by Mr. Moseley at the YMCA and my Sundays were under the supervision of Sister Ruby. My Tuesdays were all under the supervision of Mr. Porter, my Boy Scout master. I see much less of that now. So, if the adults are not there to pass the messages on, then you have to ask — what messages are young people getting, from whom are they getting those messages, and how do they value and respond to the messages that they get?

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-Asa Hilliard

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**MEE:** Do those kinds of changes in our lives have a direct correlation to the loss of traditional African values?

**HILLIARD:** Yes. I've said on many occasions that the highest priority that I have for the rest of my life is the issue of socialization. A community has to obligate itself to intergenerational cultural transmission — to pass on our values, beliefs and behaviors to our children. That is probably the most serious task that we perform. This tradition almost anywhere on the [African] continent has a formal structure as well as an informal structure. Communities were organized so that anybody older than you was a teacher, including young children. Aunts, uncles and families felt free — and obligated — to say things to children. I think the turning point for us in a dismantling, disintegration process was with integration. It supposedly was the integra-

tion of African people into American and European society, but it was the *disintegration* of the African community.

**MEE:** Can reclaiming traditional African values and beliefs affect the choices our youth make about sex?

**HILLIARD:** Social institutions can shape character in any direction that you choose. You just have to put energy in. It would mean not just changing what we think children get, but it would be changing the communities within which those young people reside. The adults' own behavior is the real community, so unless we surround children with the behavior that we want them to exhibit, there's almost no intervention that I can think of that a young person will take seriously. They'll say, "Well, that's a case of do as I say and not as I do," and they're not going to do that.

**MEE:** Our research has shown that urban Black youth are major media consumers. What impact does this have on their attitudes?

**HILLIARD:** They're not only major media consumers; the culture that they create is a major profit center for our economic system. [And] it's both of those things together that have us in trouble. For example, media consumption is dictated by people who don't have anything to do with our community. Time Warner is fundamentally in charge of the media that we see, and BET, for example, is under Viacom. The fact is that, in the end, the decisions about the content of the media are not in our hands.

Let's take rappers; you have all kinds of rappers. Hip-hop culture has people who have very high values and some who have very low values. But what sells are the people with the low values, the ones that will dishonor women. You can't go for decades doing that and not have that show up in some way.

No self-respecting community would raise its children on most of the fare we see on MTV if they had a choice. My community wouldn't make those

...Continued on page 10

# Taking Risks: A Healthy Part of Growing Up



**Beth Richie, Ph.D.**, is an associate professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She has been engaged in several research projects designed to explore violence against women in low-income African American commu-

nities. Currently, she is leading a multi-million dollar research project, sponsored by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, on women and youth issues at Rikers Island Correctional Facility. Richie is the recipient of several national awards recognizing her outstanding work.

**MEE:** How are media images affecting the sexuality of our youth?

**RICHIE:** Young people in low-income Black communities are facing a whole set of stereotypical, media-driven, negative images of themselves today—[as] hypersexual, sexually irresponsible, not concerned with ongoing intimate relationships, [participating in] high risk-taking kinds of behavior. Low-income African American youth are up against this whole wall of images about them that they don't want to accept. [Yet] young people who I talk with can't help but be influenced by those images.

Young women deny that they're involved in sexual relationships, even when they are. They deny that they need reproductive healthcare, even when they do. They tend to minimize intimate relationships, even when they're deep in them and sometimes need help getting out of them. So, there's a way that their ability to deflect social reactions to them actually puts them in vulnerable positions. There's a parallel set of images — hypersexuality, irresponsibility, being a player — that young men face that has them equally not accessing services or reaching out to adults for support.

How do young people negotiate that struggle, deflecting these social images, while they're trying to take care of themselves? Adults who work with young people need to know that

they're struggling about "Am I that person [that the media portrays]" or "Am I myself?" They are thinking, "How do I get what I need in a way that doesn't contribute to the image that folks have of me?" and "What's expected of me around sexuality and reproductive health?"

**MEE:** So, how do youth navigate the stages of sexual and reproductive health?

**RICHIE:** There are set, standard opportunities that adolescents need [in order] to successfully negotiate those troubled waters. You need adults around you who care about you, who hold you accountable, but also give you slack. You need peer relationships that are tight, but that you also know how to let go of when they don't work. You need opportunities to take risks in a safe environment. You need chances to experiment; and when you fail, you

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*-Beth Richie*

need a chance to recover safely from it. You need to learn from the consequences of that and pick up and go on. I think most adolescents need those things — around work, school, spirituality — but they also need them around sexuality and relationships.

If you've got class privilege, race privilege, or if you live in a safe environment, then you recover. You learn your lessons from when things don't work. You become a different kind of adult when you learn those things as an adolescent. White kids and middle class kids have more opportunities than kids of color or in low-income urban communities. There, everything becomes much, much more complicated. Those same things that sometimes are healthy stumbles [instead] become falls that have serious impact

for young people for the rest of their lives.

**MEE:** How are young females currently defining their intimate relationships with males?

**RICHIE:** Well, there are a couple of pieces to that. One is that we've made a mistake to assume that intimacy is connected with sexuality. I don't know that it always isn't, but I'm [also] not convinced that it always is. So, in the search for intimacy and connectedness, I'm not convinced that low-income kids necessarily get it through dating relationships.

The young girls that I talk to often talk about this deep connection with their homeboys, with their [male] friends. It sounds almost like an intimate [sexual] relationship, but it's not. These are people who they turn to for support, for recognition, for affirmation, but not necessarily people they're sexual with. [But] I think a lot of our strategies have assumed that the person that you're in a sexual relationship with is the person that you're having a deep emotional relationship with. I'm not sure they're the same people.

**MEE:** Why do young girls seem to be having these two types of relationships with males?

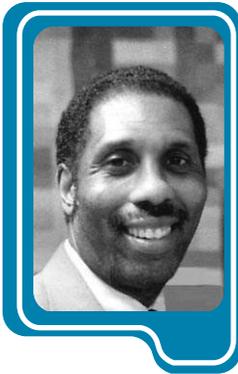
**RICHIE:** I just don't know. It seems so different from either what I remember or what I read about or have seen. But I think the good news is that these are places where girls feel gender parity — and that's a really good thing. Whether she has real or perceived power with a male peer, it almost doesn't matter, because it gives her a place. So part of what we need to do is [have her] capture that, work with that and take it with her to school and to sex and to health and to her job. There aren't a lot of places where young Black women feel real power.

**MEE:** What social context explains so much risky sexual behavior among Black urban youth?

**RICHIE:** I think families are really stretched — now, even more than

*...Continued on page 11*

# Parents Have an Important Role in Shaping the Sexual Attitudes of Their Children



**Jwanza Kunjufu, Ph.D.**, is president of African American Images Publishing Company. He is an educational consultant with the company and an author who is continuously on the lecture circuit. Dr. Kunjufu offers more than 30 different workshops

to varied audiences on issues such as African American male/female solutions and raising the Black male child. He has written more than 20 books including *To Be Popular* or *Smart The Black Peer Group* and *Restoring the Village, Values and Commitment: Solutions for the Black Family*.

**MEE:** According to a survey conducted in the Los Angeles County School District, 72% of African American high school students reported that they were not virgins, compared to 57% of Latinos, half of Whites, and 27% of Asian students. Any thoughts on that?

**KUNJUFU:** My first concern would be how this group is defining “sex.” We need to learn from the Asian community, where only 27% of their teens are sexually active. The [numbers for the] White community could be higher from the perspective of oral sex and anal sex. But you can do a lot of things with numbers because, for example, in the White community, while the figures are almost the same between Blacks and Whites in terms of being sexually active, they outnumber us with regards to abortions. So, let’s not think everything is whistle-clean in the White community. They just have abortions and we don’t. On the other hand, though, youth [of all races] still believe that you can’t get pregnant the first time you have sex. Yet the research is showing that about one in 20 youth will become pregnant the very first time that they have sex.

But just looking at our figures, 72% is unacceptable. [And] there are some other issues here that are more significant for us. For example, AIDS is now the number one killer for African American males. It’s now exceeded

homicide. One of every 50 African American males are HIV infected and one of every 160 African American females are HIV infected, so it’s very serious.

**MEE:** Why do you think myths, like the one about not getting pregnant the first time you have sex, are still being perpetuated?

**KUNJUFU:** And that’s just one of many. There are some others — the withdrawal concept, that, “I promise you, baby, when I feel myself coming, I’ll withdraw.” Wrong. Bad idea. That does not work. There’s research out there that’s saying 50% of teen-agers

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**What we need is for men to stay at home with their children. Fatherlessness is a demon greater than racism or poverty.**

*-Jwanza Kunjufu*

do not use contraceptives, and you know that’s primarily the males, in terms of condoms, even though there are now female contraceptives out there. What we’re talking about is that most sisters listen to the brother who does not want to use condoms.

My major concern here is the definition of “sex.” And we’re not [just] talking about teen-agers, we’re talking about the [former] President — “I did not have sex with that person.” When we talk about words like “oral,” can you just use the one word by itself? Oral what? The same thing with anal, they’re connected to something. So our youth believe Clinton. As long as there is no penetration, then we did not have sex. So, oral sex is not sex. Anal sex is not sex, because there is no penetration; there is no pregnancy. Can you have an STD from oral sex? Can you get AIDS from anal sex? Yes, you can.

**MEE:** What is the role of the parents? How do they influence their children’s sexuality?

**KUNJUFU:** We talk a lot about why

boys need fathers. [But] little girls need them, too. [In many teen pregnancies], there’s a five-year gap between her age and his. She’s between 11 and 16; he’s between 17 and 25. When girls have not been hugged and nurtured by a man, a father, then they begin to look to young males to give them some direction.

And what’s really unfortunate is that many mothers, while they’re much tougher on their girls, some mothers raise their daughters and love their sons. It’s one thing for a mother to teach her daughter to be sexually responsible. [But] then all they do with their sons is give them a box of condoms, that’s it. Then he comes back, [and she asks] “You mean you went through the box that fast?” — and all she does then is give him another box of condoms. We need much more from mothers than that.

**MEE:** Do you have any suggestions?

**KUNJUFU:** What we need is for men to stay at home with their children. Fatherlessness is a demon greater than racism or poverty. We’ve looked at three factors: the race of the child, the income of the child and whether the daddy stayed. And the one that has the greatest impact on children, including this issue of teen-age pregnancy and sexuality, is whether the daddy stayed.

My research shows that when young girls lack goals, they make foolish mistakes. We need to give our children something that they value so much they would not want to lose it. When little girls know they’re going to Temple, Spelman or Howard, they have less chance of becoming pregnant early. I don’t believe you’re at risk because you’re low-income or from a single parent home. I believe you’re at risk when you don’t have any goals.

**MEE:** How important are religion and spirituality to reclaiming morals and values around sexuality?

**KUNJUFU:** The first dilemma is that we have to get the youth into the church.

*...Continued on page 10*

# From the President

We've said for years that Black urban youth are among the biggest consumers of entertainment media. They buy more CDs than most other populations, watch the most television, and are often the make-or-break factor for urban movies. When you talk to young people on a consistent basis like we do, you find out that they often closely identify with the most popular rappers or with the characters in their favorite movies or TV shows.

At the same time, however, these entertainers, depending on their individual life stories, may or may not have street-level credibility when it comes to behavior change. For example, how can a rapper whose videos often show him glorifying weed give a believable, "don't do drugs" message? More often than not, our research shows, young people truly look up to the folks in their own backyard, who have walked a mile in their shoes and who have dealt with the negative consequences of their choices.

Still, it would be foolish not to take advantage of reaching youth "where they are," by imbedding pro-social messages into the entertainment media they so voraciously consume. That was our original intent when I founded MEE Productions over a decade ago. And we are just as committed to that goal today as we've ever been.

Interestingly, other social marketers are finally realizing, some for the first time, that there's merit in creatively sliding some positive messages into entertainment programming. Since entertainment is everywhere, why not use it to give good messages? Why not throw in a little uplift and education into the mix? We understand that people of color come from an oral culture tradition, where information is shared and passed down through storytelling. That makes imbedding messages in entertainment a natural fit.

Effectively bringing together culture and communication was the genesis of MEE's newest research on Black youth and the media.

The expert interviews we've shared with you in these last two issues are just part of a much bigger research project that has spanned nine cities and more than 2,000 young people. We've been looking at how media impacts youth sexuality and assessing how MEE and other communicators can successfully incorporate healthy sexuality messages into various forms of media.

This is a critically important project because, unfortunately, our youth are disproportionately affected by many public health issues that threaten their future—HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy and dating violence, among them. In order to derail these negative trends, we must creatively develop solutions—by any means necessary. The new information gained through this research has the power to revolutionize entertainment appealing to Black youth. We have enhanced the ability of directors, scriptwriters, producers, musicians and others involved in the entertainment industry to weave positive messages into entertainment that accurately reflects the lives of urban youth, and at the same time, educates and moves them to change behaviors that put them at risk.

Look for our exciting research report in the next few months. We hope that these youth-generated insights into not only "what to say" but "how to say it" will lead to the development of programming that relates to urban youth on their own terms and, at the same time, helps them develop and maintain a healthier and higher standard of living.

Peace!



Ivan Juzang  
Founder and President  
MEE

# Sex: Can We Talk?



**Gail E. Wyatt, Ph.D.**, is an author and professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Drew University and UCLA. She is a licensed clinical psychologist and a research scientist with the National Institute of Mental Health. She has conducted research

in the areas of women and AIDS, sexual socialization, behavior and decision-making and influences on adolescent sexuality, among others. Dr. Wyatt's numerous scientific publications and books involve ethnic and cultural considerations, methodological issues in research and the effects of sexual victimization on women. Her new book, *No More Clueless Sex: Ten Sexual Secrets that Work for Both of You*, is due out in Summer, 2003 and is co-authored by her husband.

**MEE:** How do you feel culture impacts sexuality and behavior?

**WYATT:** You have to understand culture. It's basic. African Americans have not really had the opportunity to take the time to define their sexuality; it's pretty much been defined for us. The template that's been set in America is for us to accept what other people think about us. So, I wrote *Stolen Women* to try to set the record straight. The book starts in Africa, identifying some of the common traits of sexual attitudes and practices, and explains why people got so many distorted perceptions of African-descended people when we came to America.

We're not what people think we are. We're not promiscuous people who are irresponsible and cavalier about our bodies. In fact, African-descended people are very conservative. Part of the rules for sex are based on what people think and believe. And those people get those attitudes from people who raised them. So it's passed along.

Given slavery and the whole epic [myth] of us being so promiscuous, Black families tended to counter that by telling their children absolutely nothing. Because the thinking was if

you knew something, you were probably doing something. Actually, that's not true; the more you know, the less you do.

**MEE:** Where do you think young people are now?

**WYATT:** What I've documented [about] women is that curiosity is the main reason that most teens have sex for the first time. Their friends are talking about it. Not that their friends are necessarily engaging in it, but they say they are. There's a hype around it. There is a pressure on our teens to engage in sexuality far too early and for the wrong reasons. To be curious about something that can kill you is contributing to why it is killing us today. And we, as a community, are not standing up to this. We're not saying anything about it.

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**Curiosity is the main reason that most teens have sex for the first time...There is a pressure on our teens to engage in sexuality far too early and for the wrong reasons.**

-Gail Wyatt

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Without making too many generalities, I can tell you that economics and poverty can very much set the template for a different kind of sexual experience. Kids today are very much targeted by the media, particularly poor kids, and they don't hear any other message than that they are irresponsible.

What I see is a very unfocused group of young people who don't have a dream. They don't have a vision as to what our agenda needs to be for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because I don't think we, as adults, have said it for them. It isn't something they set for themselves. It's something teens can't do. [Young people] are very much suspect to this whole notion that somehow their bodies are more important than their minds, and that the "booty call" really is what it's all about.

**MEE:** What can be done to remedy this?

**WYATT:** I think we need educational programs and documentaries to speak about our history, [and] about the images directed toward young teens. [We need to] talk to them on camera and let them tell us just how confused they are about who they are and where they're going.

**MEE:** What are some other issues affecting the sexual and reproductive health of urban youth?

**WYATT:** Somehow reproduction has gotten to be the ethos of adolescence. Sixteen is about the average age of intercourse in America and that's a sad commentary for a Western civilization. It should be quite late—in fact, college educated African Americans tend to have intercourse around the age of 18 and 19. So we definitely know that poverty and education have a big role in delaying some of these experiences.

Pregnancies need to be planned and anticipated or [else] what we do is cycle ourselves back into poverty, where we're not any better able to manage with our grandchildren than we were our children. Children are having children and grandmothers are so young that they can't even grandparent. Our people are really suffering because we're not doing our job.

**MEE:** How are young people defining their intimate relationships?

**WYATT:** I think intimate relationships are defined today by what we used to call "dating." If you're dating, that means that you are intimate. And if you're intimate, that means you're having sex. There used to be a time when dating meant you went out together and you were getting to know each other. Now it means [there is a] fast forward to sexual intimacy and that sometimes kids are having sex [in order] to get to know their partners.

**MEE:** Hip-hop culture is very male-driven. How does that impact gender roles in intimate relationships?

...Continued on page 8

**WYATT:** Hip-hop culture is always being portrayed as male oriented, very chauvinistic, and very women-negative because a lot of women in the hip-hop culture dress like boys. They're very rough women. They curse, they're very hard and they could kick your behind in a heartbeat. They're pretty much like warriors.

But you [also] see the other side of that image — almost-naked women who are celebrated in all the magazines, including Black magazines. We go from one extreme to another. Well, where's a teen supposed to fit into that? Either you dress like a guy or you go to school with your cleavage and navel showing and you get your body piercings.

Girls are being mistaken as whores, prostitutes, sex workers. And boys are being mistaken as gang members when they don't want to be, but they want to look that part so they're not singled out. Kids are just lost. We really need to take control of what's happening to kids in the way that they are defining who they are.

**MEE:** What do you think those dynamics bring to intimate relationships?

**WYATT:** Well, either the girl is going to kick your butt if she doesn't like what you're doing or she's going to be a very passive vestibule for your semen or any other disease that you have to offer her. Where that leads a negotiated relationship is nowhere.

**MEE:** What about communication in relationships?

**WYATT:** There is no communication. Kids are not talking to [their] partners and coming up with some sort of plan. If you come up with a plan, [it could be that] "we're going to go to school, we're going to get our education and we're going to kiss and touch each other, but there is not going to be any sex until we're this age or we're at a point where we can afford the consequences. And when we do [have sex], we're going to use condoms and contraceptives, so we can plan whatever activities may result from our sexual activity."

**MEE:** How important is religion or spirituality to reclaiming or recovering some of the traditional values around sexuality?

**WYATT:** Spirituality is an extremely basic part of our survival. We have used that kind of future orientation as a way of enduring the hardship that we've had introduced to us in this country. But religion and spirituality also need to be stretched a bit. Spirituality and religious beliefs need to incorporate self-acceptance and acceptance of all

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Warnings and threats are not successful in helping kids to know what to do. It's like saying, "Honey, I want you to go to Cleveland today." Well, how do you get there? That's what we need to be teaching kids.

-Gail Wyatt

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people. We really need to push our churches and ministers — if they're not moving fast enough — to attend the Black Religious Summit at Howard University every July to hear the messages about planned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and sex education. But I [also] think that we as individuals have to take our own beliefs and our spirituality to task and sit down with God and get right. I don't think anybody can do that for us.

**MEE:** What do you think about Black parents who tell their teen daughters absolutely not to have sex, without fully providing information to help them make an informed decision?

**WYATT:** Warnings and threats are not successful in helping kids to know what to do. It's like saying, "Honey, I want you to go to Cleveland today." Well, how do you get there? That's what we need to be teaching kids. Many parents feel that you shouldn't touch your body. You should not masturbate. You should not experience any kind of pleasure because

that's an adult kind of entity.

Well, children are going to experience sexual pleasure. What parents need to acknowledge is that touching your body feels good. It's one of those special perks that we have to aim towards. There's nothing that parents are going to be able to do except drive their children underground so that [the parents] have absolutely no part in their sexual experience. And that's not going to help [young people] "get to Cleveland."

It's like having something very special, a temple. Now, how do you keep this temple up until you get ready to open the doors of the temple and let someone come in? That's the maintenance that parents need to acknowledge. They need to know how the body works.

Many parents don't have a clue as to how they got the children that they're now trying to explain sex to. Sex education is as important for children as it is for parents. It needs to be a family endeavor. You don't have to know it all. I can just say, "Hey, let's go to the bookstore or the library. Let's get a whole bunch of books and let's sit down on Sunday evening, family time. You take a chapter, I'll take a chapter, [or] I'll read to you until you [are old enough to] read. And literally make this a part of the family dialogue.



**MEE:** Do you think that African Americans differ in the way that we address sexuality versus the way mainstream does?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** I think so. Many Black parents have a tendency to say, "Don't do this because I said so" and that's the end of the dialogue. White parents have more of a tendency to dialogue with their kids about the reasons and maybe share their own stories more with their kids. There's more of a give and take.

Whites were probably much more sexually active, at least in the school that I went to, than the African Americans. They started earlier and were much more open about it. In fact, many of their parents gave them birth control and said, "Here's birth control. Do it. Just be safe with it." Black parents, on the other hand, were saying, "Don't do it" and refused to give birth control. We can't just tell children "this is it," because there's no room for questions, there's no room for dialogue.

Adults, maybe because we have to work, have turned a lot of responsibilities over to other people. Instead of the parents working with the kids, now we've said, "Let the schools do it; they have sex education. I don't have time, it's embarrassing. As a parent, I don't have to do that."

What we need, though, in terms of solutions, is for all of us to have more family meetings, more around the dinner table or coffee table [time where we] sit down and talk back and forth. Sharing stories is a really good way to educate.

**MEE:** How can some of our traditional African values and beliefs help our children make better decisions?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** Traditionally, African families talked about sex. It was not this deep, dark secret that you could only talk to your friends about. It was a normal and natural part of life. We're so schizophrenic in this country. On the one hand, everything [in the media] has sex messages on it. And yet, as parents, we're embarrassed to talk about sex with our children. The best sort of sex education is within the home, with parents being role models, saying, "Not only do as I say, but do as I did." But maybe that's part of the

embarrassment. We want our kids to do what we tell them to do and not what we have done ourselves.

A lot of times I think the parents have a hard time being the sex educators

**The best sort of sex education is within the home...but maybe that's part of the embarrassment. We want our kids to do what we tell them to do and not what we have done ourselves.**

*-Maisha Hamilton-Bennett*

because their own choices were not good. But we've got to find a way as parents to say, "I made some mistakes. But this is what I think I should have done and this is what I'm suggesting you think about doing."

[Our traditional values say that] positive sexuality associates sex with a committed relationship and to reproduction for the perpetuation of life. Sex is a way that two people become one, and should be sacred. [Positive sexuality] is two people committed to each other who are devoting their lives to each other, who are trying to build a family together. Sexuality has got to be put into a context of a loving, positive, respecting relationship. I think right now we see sex more as a recreation.

**MEE:** What can young people do to change the current statistics?

**HAMILTON-BENNETT:** Females need to ask themselves whether the purpose for their life is to be used by somebody as a sex object. Is the purpose of their life to be impregnated by somebody? To become infected with an STD? To be used by some man looking for some empty kind of intimacy that, when the morning comes, was meaningless to them? Or is the purpose of their life to be a singer, to dance, to write, to teach æ all of these different things that they've been gifted to do.

For males, ask yourself whether the purpose of your life is to go around and have as many women as you can find? To impregnate as many young girls as you can? To have babies and abandon them? If the young man is educated around valuing the gifts that he has, his purpose may be to be a carpenter, a teacher, a plumber, an athlete and maybe to sing or write, too. All young people need to be educated about the purpose for their life.

When people find out what their gifts and talents are and they start to do those things, their own currency in their own eyes goes up. They see value in themselves and they are not willing to throw away or waste who they are in some meaningless sexual encounter.

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It used to be, before we moved to the urban areas, that 60 to 70% of our children went to church. But now it's down to 30 and 40%. The group that's missing in action in the church are males — young males.

Isn't it ironic that the ones causing the greatest havoc in our communities, young Black males 12 to 19, are least represented in church?

We have three types of churches: 1) entertainment churches — they sing and dance, but don't attract young people; 2) containment churches — only open on Sunday from 11 o'clock to one, closed the rest of the week and took your money with them; and 3) liberation churches — open seven days a week, almost 24 hours a day; they not only attract elders and women, but young people and men. These churches have "night-overs" where teen-agers come in on Friday at 6 p.m. and don't leave until Sunday afternoon after church. We have to have churches that are willing to provide those kinds of programs for young people.

**MEE:** When is a good age to discuss sex with a child?

**KUNJUFU:** The research shows that our youth are active as early as 10, 11, 12 years of age. But the adults are not having "The Talk" until [youth are] 14 or 15. What children want is a strong message on abstinence, from a moral perspective. But they also want adults, primarily their parents, to have more than a talk, an ongoing conversation where there's a dialogue. It's not just the parents talking down to the child. In one of my books, I talk about the "terrible trick." What I mean by that is this trick between an over-developed body, and an overexposed mind.

The first point of this trick is that you have an over-developed body. Because of all the red meat in our diet, because we are the only mothers that give our children milk from another animal — you go into a high school now, [and] you can't tell the youth from the adults. We are growing faster than ever before. It used to be that the way you measured adulthood was that the

adults knew more than the children. Adulthood was based on information. But if children now are watching the same television shows that we watch, (and that's the way we acquire information — many of us don't read), young people think that they know what adults know. So, you have this over-developed body, this overexposed mind.

**MEE:** Media has certainly played a role in shaping our views and thoughts about the sexuality of Black people. What can television and radio, for example, do to promote healthy sexual values?

**KUNJUFU:** Radio really is the way to reach the Black community. I don't monitor Tom Joyner all the time, but I think with the kind of reach that he has nationwide, we need to have as many ads as possible that promote responsibility. Teen pregnancy's been declining, but it's still unacceptable. The figures are still too high.

Robert Johnson clearly says all the time that the "E" in BET was never for education; it was always for entertainment. It was never about liberation; it was always about making money. And they feel they make more money with entertainment than they do with education. For our youth to have the hormones kicking in the way they are and then watching those videos, if they aren't saved they do not have a chance.

**MEE:** So, these videos fuel their sexual urges?

**KUNJUFU:** No question. But let me go further. Remember the commercial we used to have on drugs, in terms of the impact that drugs would have on your brain? It's the same impact here with regards to sex. Unfortunately, the TV shows and the videos, they show the beauty of sex. That's what Satan wants us to see — the beauty of sex. What about the consequences of sex? We need to show pictures of what it looks like having gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia and AIDS. Youth need to see that. Media can be used positively.

choices for exposure. We have to be looking at the big picture — what the kid is doing, what the parent is doing and what the economic structure is doing. We have to gain control of all of that in order to make something positive happen.

**MEE:** It's apparent that you believe that a lot of the answers to the issues involving urban Black youth lie in our heritage.

**HILLIARD:** Yes, I think it lies in our heritage, but I would say even more strongly that it lies in our taking charge of the processes that transmit [messages]. And of course, I would hope heritage would be what we transmit. I, without any apologies, would say that the African heritage is a better guide to what our children ought to be doing than anything that we've seen so far.

**MEE:** Then how could we use the media as a vehicle to promote African values and beliefs?

**HILLIARD:** Right now, the only media that we could have a modicum of control over is the Internet. At the moment, you can put anything out there that you want to put out there, where before you had to wait until Hollywood put your movie out. If we had a conscious community that was mobilized, [the Internet] is a tool that could be used to get our message across.

**MEE:** What advice do you have for us in defining sexuality in the Black community?

**HILLIARD:** A rear view mirror, where we would consider where we were before, both in the United States and also on the African continent, as the basis for trying to design something that we might have power over. Right now, it's hard for most folks to have a vision of an alternative to what kids are experiencing. I think that vision could come from what we've already done.

That's where Sankofa comes in. I have a Sankofa bird [figurine] that is reaching back to get an egg that it takes out of its behind. The egg is the symbol of

...Continued on page 11





three, four, five years ago. They feel so tapped out trying to provide basic material resources just to survive. One of the consequences is that they're not always able to do the other kinds of things, like spend time with their kids talking about sex or dealing with a kid who they think is involved in risky behavior.

I think they want to, I think they know how. I think they just can't. Another part of our work has to be to change that.

**MEE:** Could increased availability and accessibility of sexual and reproductive healthcare services make a difference?

**RICHIE:** Even though they can't take the place of family, they need to *feel* like family. They need to feel close; they need to feel open. [Service providers] need to have built in a number of chances for kids to fail and still be able to come back and get service. And they need to be consistent. Whoever is working with the person needs to work with them for a long time, if they can. They need to be comprehensive; they need to deal with "I need some clothes" or "I'm trying to figure out this other thing," as well as "I need some protection because I'm having this sexual relationship."

It's a tall order to do that, but I think that distant, institutionalized, bureaucratic service just won't work, because it doesn't tap into the developmental or socially-constructed needs of young African American urban kids.

If we can get youth providers to think

about a way to engage young people in their resistance [to the stereotypes mentioned earlier] as well as provide services to them, it can feel more real than a service that only looks at kids as if [the provider is saying], "Yeah, see, I knew you were going to come back pregnant." I try to give them chances to do things, including risky behavior. I really want to stress that. You [only] learn how to not take risks because you took risks and "look what happened."

[Even though] it's expensive and time-consuming to think about deep, long-term, one-on-one relationships, they work. [When] kids can say "there's this one person, it may not be some of my family, but there's this one person who part raises me, part respects me, holds me accountable, gives me slack" — it makes a tremendous difference. Sometimes that's what peers do, you know. But I think there also needs to be an adult influence in it.

**MEE:** Should we reframe how we look at risky behavior, then?

**RICHIE:** I think of it in the biggest sense. The best things that have happened in the world are because somebody took a risk. They took a risk and it worked. Probably for all the times it worked, there were fifteen times it didn't work. That's what social movements are about. That's what change is about. That's what brilliance is about. I really believe in risk-taking as something that will make things better.

On the smaller scale, I think that risk-

taking provides opportunities to learn how you want to do things. I don't think you learn how you want to do things because somebody says, "Here's how you do it."

That's how behavior change lasts over time — not because you're afraid of what the consequences might be (which is where a lot of risk reduction programs are). But instead because you took safe risks in a controlled enough environment, with people who were going to help you process the mistake and get over it, [people who] are going to give you slack but hold you accountable. That's how people become healthy adults.

[But] some risks are more dangerous than others. As adults, we also need to say, "You know what, that was over the line. Taking that gun to school? That was too risky." But even if you take that gun to school is there some way to recover from that besides getting kicked out of school?

You know that summer trip to Europe that middle class kids take, where there's often sexual experimentation and use of alcohol? But then the trip's over and they come back and they're still going to go to college. It doesn't mean that they're in some [emotional] place that they'll never come back from. There's no parallel thing that happens in low-income Black communities, where you get that chance to just "go wild" and then get back to the real life. You end up going to jail for those same kind of things.

UT

## Hilliard (continued)

potential and the bird is reaching back. They say, "Well, you're going backwards." No, I'm going backwards in order to go forward. I'm going back and pulling from the past something that has the potential to come out of that egg and become fully developed in the future. I think Sankofa is the fundamental principle that would get us out of the mess we're in.

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