



**Rachel Thompson and Sadie Lloyd**

Mt. View High School, Thorndike

*Students Rachel Thompson and Sadie Lloyd led a controversial campaign to lower the rate of teenage pregnancy in their community.*



**W**hile Maine's teen pregnancy rate has been cut roughly in half over the past 20 years, the numbers have stayed disturbingly high in certain places. One such place is Thorndike in Waldo County (SAD 3) where one out of five senior girls became pregnant in 2000. Rachel Thompson and Sadie Lloyd, both juniors at Mount View High School, used this and other alarming statistics as the backbone in their campaign to make condoms available at school.

As part of a school leadership group called The Natural Helpers, Rachel and Sadie took the lead in promoting "The Condom Project." They started the Project by gathering data with the help of their supervisor, school nurse Heidie Piersiak. They found that Liberty, one of the 11 towns of SAD 3, showed the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the state and that Waldo County's numbers were the third highest of all Maine counties. A 1998 State survey showed that 4.35% of girls aged 15 through 19 became pregnant and an internal survey found that 60% of Mt. View High School students were sexually active and, among those, 70% used no birth control. Despite these statistics, fewer than a dozen of Maine's 117 secondary schools distributed condoms at that time.



In addition to searching for data, the students went right to the source. “We surveyed members of the student body and staff to find out if they thought having condoms available was a good idea,” says Sadie. “More than half of teachers responding supported the project and at least 80% of students did.”

After clearing it with the principal, the students made a multimedia presentation to the school board. They stressed that the incidence of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as teenage pregnancies, could be reduced significantly through condom use. They cited health officials and educators who attribute the decline in Maine’s teenage pregnancy rate to better education and the availability of contraception. The school board was attentive to the students’ message, but felt it was important to open the discussion to the community at large.

“There was a lot of tension leading up to the next meeting,” reports Rachel. “Many people were concerned that access to condoms would promote sexual activity and some felt that teen sex was a family issue that shouldn’t be addressed at school, while others spoke in favor of giving students the means to exercise sexual responsibility. Fortunately, almost all the students there spoke up in defense of condoms at school and that impressed the board.”

After weighing the issues, the school board voted 8–2 to allow distribution of condoms. However, they decided to have the Maine Family Planning Association oversee the project instead of the school nurse, as originally proposed.

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The hope is that students will feel safer discussing intensely personal issues with someone not involved in other parts of their lives. At the same time, it frees the nursing staff to devote full time and energy to their regular duties. “Students make an appointment to see the Family Planning representative during one of her weekly school visits,” explains Sadie. “In addition to providing free condoms, she offers counseling on STDs, pregnancy, depression or any other topic of interest to teens. Education is always a component.” The representative is also available to talk with parents and other members of the community.



While the Project is just months old, it seems earmarked for success. “The first day the family planning representative came, she saw more than 20 kids and gave out over 100 condoms,” says Rachel. Sadie and Rachel are being credited with making a big difference in the community and there’s every reason to believe the project will go on long after they’ve graduated.

“It was a lot of work, but we couldn’t turn our backs on such an important cause,” says Sadie. “Interestingly enough, the project took nine months from beginning to end.”

