

**Opinion**

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## PREVENTABLE TRAGEDIES IN CHAUTAUQUA

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There is no name more redolent of old-time American values than Chautauqua. It was in this upstate New York town that the Chautauqua movement for adult education was founded in 1874 and it was where, for many years afterward, the nation's orators would come in the summer to lecture, often on religious values and Americanism. Now, however, the name Chautauqua is probably better associated with AIDS and the calamity that has befallen a number of the area's young women.

How many is not yet clear. Investigators say, though, that one man, Nushawn Williams, 20, is directly responsible for infecting nine girls and women ranging in age from 13 to 20 -- and maybe as many as 28 total. In addition, health and police officials assert that Williams may have infected even more women in his native New York City. Since Sept. 6, 1996, he has known he is HIV positive.

A tragedy such as this was bound to attract the attention of the national press. After all, it evokes the fear that every parent of a teenager has: what is he or she doing and with whom? On a given night, to be a parent is to be an insomniac.

So it was not surprising to read an account of the Chautauqua tragedy in several newspapers. Yet not one of them told me whether Chautauqua County's 18 schools had a condom distribution program. This is sort of stunning. After all, if there had been an outbreak of some other communicable disease -- even, say, the flu -- we would have wanted to know whether the schools had provided flu shots.

So I called one of the schools mentioned in the newspapers -- Chautauqua Lake Central High School. The answer to my question was, "no." The county does, however, have an award-winning sex education program that has significantly lowered its teenage pregnancy rate -- once the third highest in the state. But none of its schools distributes condoms.

Time has passed Chautauqua by. It's a summer resort area still, but the old industries -- furniture and tools -- have gone the way of the long-winded speeches and oratorical grandiloquence. The area has the troubles and social problems of everywhere else. Its kids are lonely in a crowd, misunderstood, beyond understanding and seeking love, as the song says, in all the wrong places. Chautauqua is, as it always was, deeply American.

On television the other night, I heard a health official say that such tragedies could be prevented if teenagers practiced abstinence. Who can argue with that? No sex is the safest sex of all. But it is not realistic -- not now and not even back when Warren Harding was a Chautauqua speaker. Once, intact families, tightly knit neighborhoods and stay-at-home mothers enforced community norms. Now the world is the mall, mothers are at work and an alternative community exists in the muck of daytime television and online chat rooms.

You can, as Dan Quayle and others have done, decry these trends and prescribe 500 mg tablets of pure nostalgia. But that will not change economic and social reality -- working moms, single-parent families, greater affluence, fewer social constraints, cars, drugs and the temporary insanity we call adolescence. Under these circumstances, celibacy is not a remedy. It is to sex what flossing is to dental hygiene. Yeah, sure, maybe tomorrow night.

Williams might have had the exotic appeal of an outsider, a worldly guy from New York City. Whatever the case, it is stunning to think that an AIDS preventative was available to all his sexual partners -- if only they had one. Maybe if the school had dispensed condoms, some of the girls might have insisted on safe sex. We already know from at least two studies that condom distribution does not lead, as some have warned, to an increase in sexual activity.

In truth, the antidote for mindless teenage behavior goes under the generic term "growing up." Anyone who suggests that something else -- chastity, condom distribution -- can by itself cool the combustible combination of youth and sex forgets what it's like to be a teenager.

But condom distribution probably would have made a difference in Chautauqua -- maybe not to all those who may now be infected but to some. It sends a message that sex is not some furtive, secret act -- as shameful as it is erotic -- but a commonplace event whose consequences can be dire and, needless to say, preventable.

Ultimately, the demystification of sex -- the empowerment of young people to demand that their sex be both consensual and safe -- will save even more lives. It may be best to just say no -- but not to information and protection to those who choose to say otherwise.

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