

EILEEN

Kelly



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CENSORSHIP. SPECTRUMS. CONSENT. THE NEXT SEXUAL REVOLUTION IS UPON US, AND “THE TALK” NEEDS TO BE REVISITED. WHO CAN WE TRUST TO LEAD THE CONVERSATION? MEET AMERICA’S NEXT SEX (ED) SYMBOL

BY
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It began with a kiss, as so many sexual awakenings do. Eileen Kelly, who attended Catholic schools in Seattle and comes from a devoutly religious family, still remembers how she felt when a teacher humiliated her for kissing a boy. “I was in third grade, I think, and it was just a peck on the cheek, but it had a lasting effect,” she says. “Shame was just so deeply rooted in how I grew up.”

Now 23, Kelly straddles the millennial generation and the coming-of-age Generation Z, a position that makes her one of the freshest faces in the movement to guarantee every person in this country access to a sex education that’s inclusive, gratifying and medically accurate. She wants her generation to participate in more honest conversations about sexuality, enter relationships with more realistic expectations and help demystify the stigmas that burden so many sexual curiosities and subcultures.

“The sex ed we wish we had” is the simple but purposeful mantra of Kelly’s brand, Killer and a Sweet Thang, which has exploded on Instagram and, since 2016, as a lifestyle website that publishes such pieces as “What Does Consent Look Like?” “Intro to BDSM Toys,” “PrEP 101” and “How Porn Has Affected Millennial Sex Lives.” Killer and a Sweet Thang launched as a Tumblr blog focusing on Kelly’s own sexual misadventures, but she soon realized first-person sexcapades weren’t enough.

“The defining moment,” she says, “was when I realized I was sharing only one perspective, which was a narrow one—that of a white woman who lives in a big, liberal city. I’ve always had access to health care, for example. If I wanted people to come to my website and be able to learn and connect, it needed to be intersectional. I needed stories across the board.”

Today, more than 100 people contribute stories to Killer and a Sweet Thang, which has spun off into another, more editorial-focused Instagram account, @birds.bees—the inspiration for Kelly’s PLAYBOY shoot. Accompanied by GIFs, erotic photography and an unrelenting directness, Killer and a Sweet Thang’s articles, columns and social posts target young people who may find technical writing or government-provided information about sex too polarizing, out of touch or impersonal.

Killer and a Sweet Thang’s popularity couldn’t be rising at a better time. “Sexual expression feels under fire,” attests Kelly, who currently lives in New York. In December, Tumblr initiated a ban on all adult content in response to allegations that the platform had unwittingly hosted child pornography. Two months prior, sex-ed site o.School published an open letter calling out Apple’s new iPhone iOS 12, alleging the software’s parental controls blocked searches related to sex education, safe sex and masturbation. YouTube has similarly





been accused of blocking LGBTQ content. With no consensus among tech companies and social media platforms over how to host educational portrayals of and discussions about sex, openness around the topic is becoming harder to accomplish even as the world becomes more connected.

Not that learning about sex in America has ever been easy. When most Americans think of sex education, they often picture a gym teacher listlessly pointing to parts of the reproductive system on a whiteboard. (*Mean Girls*'s oft-quoted "Don't have sex, 'cause you will get pregnant and die!" scene comes to mind.) And with sex education not required in 26 states, many people recall nothing at all.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, 27 states and the District of Columbia mandate that public school sex-ed programs, when provided, fulfill "certain general requirements"; of these states, only 13 require that the content be medically accurate. Overall, only nine require that discussions of sexual orientation be inclusive. Since sex education falls under states' rights, policies vary widely. While California mandates that syllabi cover contraception, Texas stresses abstinence, despite research that proves abstinence-only teachings are ineffective.

Kelly, who remembers first learning about STIs from an uncertified health teacher, says she has been fighting to reverse this culture her whole life. "It wasn't even the lack of education for me," she says. "It was the lack of conversation happening in family units, in the community, amongst peers. It was a very hush-hush bubble I grew up in."

Kelly lost her mother before reaching her teens. Lacking the person most young girls turn to with questions ranging from how to use a tampon to how to tell if you're in love, she was raised by a single father in a household of boys. Having to navigate the rough waters of puberty without a maternal figure sparked Kelly's precocious curiosity about sexuality and her resolve to embrace the awkward questions whispered at sleepovers and in locker rooms.

"Pleasure, safety, consent—these are conversations that should happen really young, way before a sexual-health class," she says. "Even in most comprehensive sex-education courses in the United States, pleasure is left out of the equation."

Combine the dearth of reliable information from schools, the ease of accessing X-rated content online and parents' enduring discomfort with having "the talk," and you're left with a generation learning about sex from peers, porn or pop culture. It shows: Among industrialized nations, the United States has some of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancies. Compared with countries like the Netherlands, where sex education begins as early as kindergarten, America is behind the times. Kelly knows we can do better.

"Your brain is the most powerful sex organ. That's why the internet—this safe, anonymous place where people go to figure out their desires—is such an important part of learning about sex," she says.

That may be why we've also entered the age of the so-called

"sexpert," a time when you can barely go online without scrolling past a sex shaman who promises to coach you to a more perfect orgasm. The problem: Many of these "sexperts"—including porn stars, YouTube personalities and podcasters—have no formal backgrounds in sexology. This has caused a schism in the world of sex education, with trained educators voicing skepticism of self-described experts who may be more eager for followers and sponsorships than for bringing the next revolution. Until she recently completed coursework in sex education from the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality, Kelly had no sex-ed certification, and she notes it was a point of criticism for her detractors.

"When I was studying and not certified yet, I felt that friction. And that credibility is absolutely needed. You wouldn't take your car to get serviced by someone who wasn't a mechanic," she says.

In person, she appears every bit the embodiment of her online self. With her wide green eyes, cherubic face and soft voice, she may be easy to underestimate. But after a few minutes of talking with her, it becomes clear how she has built a legion of young followers who see her as a reassuring voice amid a confusing, hormone-laden minefield. Indeed, with more than 400,000 followers, Kelly's personal Instagram feed remains the draw, and it would be foolish to ignore its genius. Part sex-ed course, part personal diary, with plenty of pouty, lingerie-clad selfies in between, the @killerandasweetthang account is the visual analogue of the sexually curious and expressive 20-something. Of course, none of it exists without hardship—Kelly has been targeted by trolls and criticized by family members, and when she goes home, "people still don't understand what I do"—but she nevertheless hopes her work can change how all people approach sex.

For now, with the culture wars droning on, there will be no shortage of those who want sex to remain an inscrutable mystery, reminding us of America's puritanical origins. For the rest of us, there's Eileen Kelly, ready to drop some carnal knowledge on anyone willing to learn. ■



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