



Emily Donahue | Wednesday, 23 April 2008

## Harvard's true love revolution

Choosing not to join the hook-up culture proves surprisingly controversial at a top American university.



Recently the *New York Times* devoted a long article to the sexual abstinence movement at Harvard University -- the Times' second article on this subject in a year. Harvard students who founded [True Love Revolution](#) two years ago took their cue from Princeton and the idea is spreading to other top schools. In this email interview with *MercatorNet*, TLR's **Emily Donahue** explains that the group is not "evangelising" for chastity but simply offering support for students who want to make that choice.

**MercatorNet:** *What is the message your group is trying to get across to students?*

**Donahue:** True Love Revolution aims to present another option to our peers regarding sex-related issues, endorsing ideas of abstinence and chastity as a positive alternative for ethical and health reasons. Basically, we are trying to get the message across that some people do not want to have random hookups or engage in premarital sex, and that no one should feel the need to do this if it's not what they want. We provide a support group for students who are often labelled as "prudes," because it is becoming increasingly expected that "normal" college students have sex.

*True Love Revolution advances the message that many feminist groups do: that women make their own decisions regarding sexuality, and should never be forced or coerced into doing anything they don't want to because of social pressure.*

**MercatorNet:** *What sort of sexual environment are you operating in at Harvard? Do you think it's more difficult than at other universities? Is the administration any help?*

**Donahue:** From what I can gather, Harvard is comparable to most other universities in terms of its sexual environment. There are students in long-term relationships, students who avoid dating entirely, students who engage in anonymous hookups, and everything in between. I think one thing that is more difficult here than in some other environments is that there is a very limited dating scene; students are often extremely busy, and there isn't much time for actually going out on planned dates. Thus, a lot of people find that uncommitted hookups are easier to find and to work into a very tight schedule than dates and relationships.

The administration is very good at providing information about safer sex and free condoms. This is certainly a positive thing, but it has the unfortunate side effect of giving off the impression that the "normal" thing to do in college is to experiment sexually.

**MercatorNet:** *Where do you think the values and sympathies of the silent majority lie?*

**Donahue:** There are very few individuals who would say that people do not have a right to abstain openly from sex (at least, I would certainly hope). However, the issue has become so controversial and politicized that it is often difficult to break the question of abstinence down to something so simple. We're not too far removed from

a time when young people were told not to have sex, so students and media personnel sometimes get hung up with the idea that TLR is trying to tell them what to do, and are thus opposed to it. It is my optimistic hope that, outside of the evangelism that many people mistakenly attribute to True Love Revolution and to the abstinence movement in general, people are sympathetic to the basic idea of chastity as a personal choice.

**MercatorNet:** *The New York Times and other media seem very interested in campus groups like yours. Has this been helpful? How well do the media portray this movement?*

**Donahue:** The media has given groups like ours a lot of publicity, which has helped in terms of networking with similar organizations and in terms of getting in touch with supportive and interested people. I think the best thing about it is that the media has allowed students at other campuses where TLR-like organizations do not exist to get ideas and inspiration, and to begin their own organizations. We have been contacted by many students across the country who were excited about the idea and wished to begin similar organizations at their schools.

Of course, there has also been a lot of negative attention. Several earlier articles have ridiculed the group and even personally attacked its founders. So in addition to the relatively balanced representations there have been in the media, there have been some that do little but distort the group's meaning and goals. In general, it's great that people are so interested, but frustrating to see inaccurate portrayals.

**MercatorNet:** *From a personal point of view, is it tough being the public face of abstinence on campus? How do you cope with mockery and opposition?*

**Donahue:** It is decidedly strange to have people you've never met know all about your sex life, even if what they know is that it doesn't exist. It has been awkward having people randomly ask how far I've gone sexually, tell me I need to get laid, or mockingly ask me to sleep with them. I have definitely had to adjust to the fact that being publicly abstinent makes people much more comfortable asking questions and dishing out advice and insults that they otherwise would not offer to a stranger. I haven't had to deal with too much of this; I'm sure it's worse for the co-presidents.

I generally deal with opposition by telling people my reasons for getting involved in TLR and reframing the group's message in terms that are hopefully less threatening to people who don't personally embrace its message. It certainly doesn't bother me if people don't choose to be abstinent, but I think they should be tolerant of other people's choices. Most of the people I have talked to who are opposed to True Love Revolution are otherwise fairly liberal and tolerant; so once I frame it in those terms, they are generally pretty accepting. They still make fun of me for being a prude, but I'm proud of my prudery, so it doesn't bother me.

**MercatorNet:** *With your peers insistent that you are missing out on all the fun, do you ever think you might indeed be missing out on something?*

**Donahue:** I'm sure I am, because any choice you makes means you "miss out" on something. But I'm also pretty sure that what I'm missing isn't something I would value or want. I think it's just different for different people, and while I admit that random hookups are something that many of my friends find fun, it's not appealing to me.

**MercatorNet:** *Your group has been accused of anti-feminism, which is a pretty serious sin among intellectuals. Are you guilty?*

**Donahue:** I'm probably biased, but I definitely don't think so. I think that in many ways, TLR's message is very compatible with feminism. It advances the message that many feminist groups do that women make their own decisions regarding sexuality, and should never be forced or coerced into doing anything they don't want to because of social pressure.

I think many of these accusations stem from the fact that, two years ago, the organization sent Valentines to the females in the freshman class that said "Why wait? Because you're worth it." I was not on the board of TLR at this time, and would not have supported this measure. However, I believe the "discrimination" -- of addressing only female students -- probably resulted from wanting to save printing costs rather than anti-feminism.

**MercatorNet:** *'Aren't you just a bunch of Catholic fundamentalists who want to force their religious beliefs down other people's throats?' Sound familiar? How do you answer this sort of jibe?*

**Donahue:** Yes, it sounds familiar, but it is certainly not true. I generally explain that the group is secular in nature, and that it is entirely lacking of any evangelistic mission. I stress the "support group" aspect of TLR-we're not trying to make

everyone abstinent, just to make it more acceptable for those who do make the decision to be chaste. I'm open about admitting that the group is disproportionately Catholic; it is a fact that there is a higher percentage of Catholics in TLR than in Harvard in general. But there is also a higher percentage of Asians in the pre-med program; this doesn't make going to medical school an Asian thing to do, or mean that everyone in pre-med classes wants to turn everyone else Asian.

TLR's message is entirely secular in nature, and I've met Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Mormons, Jews, and Muslims at its events. People often roll their eyes at this, and then I tell them I'm an atheist. The surprise factor usually works fairly well.

**MercatorNet:** *Where did you get your counter-cultural attitude to sex? Home? High school? Something else?*

**Donahue:** I don't really know. I was raised thinking that sex was something that just didn't happen until you were 35 and married, and I went through an abstinence-only education program. But lots of people were raised with the same ideas and don't have the same attitude now. I think it's probably just a personal choice; I didn't want to have sex outside of a permanent relationship, so I didn't.

**MercatorNet:** *What insights into freedom of speech have you gained through your work with True Love Revolution?*

**Donahue:** It has been really interesting to see how complicated the issue of freedom of speech is. Most of the people who object to the presence of TLR on campus are big proponents of free speech, but don't seem to see the group's right to exist as a free speech matter. I think freedom of speech is as much of a conservative issue as a liberal one, and it has been very eye-opening to see a "conservative" issue denied freedom of speech by "liberals."

**MercatorNet:** *Could you describe your scientific approach to promoting abstinence. How does it go down with students? Do you get any flak from scientists?*

**Donahue:** I haven't really been involved in promoting abstinence for scientific reasons, so I don't think I'm qualified to answer this question. I know that we mention on our website that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid pregnancy and/or STIs, and I don't think anyone disagrees with that. I'm sure there are some students and scientists who think we are manipulating statistics to prove a point, which may be correct, because just about everyone emphasizes the facts that support their cause and de-emphasizes the ones that detract from it. I haven't fielded many of those complaints, and I believe that people can be perfectly healthy while have non-marital sex. I just think that for some people, it's more healthy (physically, mentally, spiritually, and/or morally) to abstain.

**MercatorNet:** *What advice would you give young people who want to live chastity but do not have support at their university or other institution?*

**Donahue:** To do it! I suspect that, regardless of whether a university has an official organization, there are people who are supportive of chastity. And even if this weren't the case, there is no reason anyone should adopt a lifestyle they are not comfortable with. I would say to explain your reasons to anyone who challenges you, without acting like you're morally superior for the choices that you make, but asserting your right to make them. I think most people will be receptive, and that you won't regret your choice.

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