**Winner Commment & Opinion**

**Aisling Eaton, Our Lady’s College, Drogheda**

**"At it like rabbits"**

*Inadequate sexual education in Ireland*

On a gloomy Friday afternoon, the students of sixth class sat with anticipation, awaiting their first experience with sexual education in the chipped wooden chairs. I sat, bewildered and confused, as the middle-aged woman introduced a diagram of the female reproduction system. Tensions were high. The main event was to come, the 20-year-old television set was approaching on a wheeled table, with a broken leg. I had the pleasure of watching rabbits mate for fifteen minutes, how enlightening.

As I entered my second year of secondary school, the only thing I could show for myself was the anatomy of the male and female body. I developed physically at a young age, so the rambling of acne and pubescent characteristics was useless to me. At fourteen years old, I was branded as 'innocent' because I didn't know anything bar what a condom was used for, but that was all I had ever been told. Sitting in my SPHE class, it seemed that youth were familiar with all the latest sexual terms and slang, but education had yet to speak of it.

Young, and genuinely embarrassed, I thought of a horrific moment throughout the duration of an over-due lecture on menstruation. In the melting Autumn of 2010, I stood from my seat, approaching lunchtime, while the teacher yelled of broken arms and running lunatics on the yard. Unbeknownst to me, I had received my very first visit from Mother Nature. As I strolled towards the hall, two girls pointed at my blood-stained P.E trousers as my classmates roared in laughter. "Aisling got her period! Aisling got her period!", was all I could bring myself to listen to as I rushed through the students and into a locked bathroom. I was ashamed of something I couldn't control as a woman. I refused to come out until an hour passed and my mother coaxed me with a chocolate bar. I can't help but think, if I had known what to do, such a traumatic event would never have to happen. But then again, education was not exactly on my side.

In a Catholic school, sexual education isn’t a top priority, but it should be. I am now sixteen, in a year, I will legally be able to have sex, yet, I am given the same amount of information as a twelve-year-old. I have never been taught how to use or buy contraception, how to know if you are ready to become sexually active, what consent actually means, the emotions you'll most likely feel during and after a sexual act and how much it might hurt for a woman, both physically and emotionally. I have become aware of this though the 'bad' friends that your mother doesn't want hanging around and the unrealistic portrayals of sex in the media. Recently, there was a television show on RTE highlighting teenage pregnancy as an issue. The fact is, whether or not some parents, guardians or members of public would like to hear this, teenagers have sex regardless of the law. With society glorifying sex in the way it is, can you blame them? According to UNICEF Ireland, in a recent survey, 45% of the sexually active teenagers questioned lost their virginity under the legal age.

I'm not advocating under-age sex, it's against the law. But teenagers are sexually active, much to the disapproval of parents, teachers, members of the public and religious orders. To ignore it would be a terrible mistake. Not all young people have the confidence or opportunity to speak to a parent or guardian about sex, some rely on education to tell them all the important things and trust them to give them the information they need. In the same survey carried out by UNICEF Ireland, only 59% of young people reported school as a source of sexual information. I'd say that will rattle a few rabbit cages.

So, if it really is such an issue, I suggest you give teenagers more than a diagram and a free packet of tampons and give them the important information they need to make a decision that quite possibly change the way they think about sex and relationships, or even the course of their life, instead of sheltering them like rabbits in a cage.

***Judges’ Citation***

*The category winner caused huge debate among the judges. Some liked her piece, some didn’t. And that’s exactly what a good opinion piece should do – cause debate.*

*It’s ok if people don’t like your comment piece, it’s ok if they disagree with it. The very fact that they are talking about it means that you have achieved you goal. We write these pieces so that somebody reads them and engages with them.*

*Aisling Eaton’s piece, entitled ‘At it like rabbits’, was incredibly personal. She placed herself at the heart of the story, something that can be a huge risk in journalism.*

*However, in this case it made for a powerful example of why Ireland needs better sexual education in schools.*

*Having read the piece it would be incredibly difficult to argue against Aisling’s contention  that’s schools do not adequately educate young people about sex and relationships.*

*The judges each had to read dozens of articles as part of this competition the one  all of us remembered was ‘At it like rabbits’ and for that reason our winner is Aisling Eaton.*