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## The editor's note

Joan Richardson

# OK with discomfort

**The assigned book was *The Scarlet Letter*. My seat was right behind the girl who got pregnant.**

Sandra was one of those sassy, striking, raven-haired girls you couldn't fail to notice in high school. In the 1960s, she wore a black leather jacket and hung out with all the wrong boys. When she was a sophomore, one of them "got her pregnant." She disappeared from school to, as we used to say euphemistically, go live with an aunt in another state.



I knew none of this on Nov. 7, 1968, when Sandra returned to school, ironically the same day that I attended my first class in this new high school.

When the teacher began asking questions about Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale, kids tittered and glanced not very subtly in Sandra's direction. After listening to enough giggles, she raised her hand and began answering the teacher's questions about communities, their morals, and their hypocrisies. I can still see in my mind's eye how straight she sat at her desk. She looked only at the teacher, never once turning to glance at another student.

Sandra understood this old novel in a way that none of the rest of us did.

And we all knew it. She shut down the titters as she talked about how a woman's *sin* would be so obvious while a man could be spared the public shame of his mistake.

I don't know what that American Lit class was like before that day. But it quickly became my favorite class because Sandra shattered the conversational barriers. Nothing was off-limits. We talked about everything in that class, which means we talked a lot about sex and war and morals and religion.

We got very uncomfortable in that class but, boy, did we learn.

... which brings me to this issue of *Kappan*. We're focusing on sex and schools in the pages that follow, and that's likely to make some readers uncomfortable — and I'm OK with that.

We have articles about topics that may very well make you feel squeamish — educator sexual misconduct, students who exhibit sexualized behavior in class, gender nonconforming students. Some of you may feel uncomfortable confronting any issues related to teenage sexuality, whether involving straight or gay students.

I told you the story of Sandra because I remember our discomfort at her presence as we talked about a classic that involved sex and community standards. But our discomfort was momentary. What has lasted for me was her courage at opening up the conversation. Just 16 years old, she stepped up and took it upon herself to break through that barrier of silence and embarrassment. Many students show that same bravery today. The decade may be different but the issues are much the same. These days, those who speak up tend to be gay teens emerging from their closets, daring to be who they are and asking, sometimes demanding, that we just let them be.

By their willful presence, they are crushing barriers and, because of their personal courage, they're allowing all of us to confront issues that may confound us.

As I said, I'm OK if you're a bit uncomfortable reading about some of those topics. Discomfort is the first step on the way toward being comfortable, then tolerant, and maybe even accepting.

None of these topics benefit from being shielded from the light. I hope the shameful behavior of the adults at Penn State has shown us that silence does nothing except protect the guilty. Silence can be a powerful tool for good and bad. We all are ultimately better off by bringing topics related to sex into the open.

We can't teach children about healthy sexual activity by remaining silent. We can't prepare them for dealing with inappropriate adults by being quiet. We can't make schools safe places for all children without speaking up for all of them.

So, let's get uncomfortable together. Let's stumble our way through and around these difficult topics and have dialogues in our schools because we believe that will benefit all children. — JR