

# Suburban Life

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## Women undertake second half of their lives

By Louise Okrutsky  
staff writer

**L**EARNING TO grow with change instead of only grieving for its losses could be the theme of Oakland Community College's Women-center's seminar planned for next week.

"Transitions, Opportunities for Growth," on Saturday, Nov. 1, explores such topics as child custody in divorce, career changes, mid-life issues and teenage sexuality. Carol Kling, administrative assistant to Maryann Mahaffey, member of Detroit's Common Council, will be the keynote speaker.

In each situation leading to change, organizers say, women need to be able to rely on their own inner resources to cope with upheaval. In many cases, they argue, popular culture and social attitudes generally lend men more support in those times.

"These are issues the Women-center deals with all the time," said Mary White, its director. "Transition is a real opportunity for growth."

"Middle age is prime time. The transition into middle age is an in-

ternal experience," said Natalie Rice, a psychologist who'll lead the workshop on mid-life issues.

"It's the realization that a woman is moving toward the end of her life rather than toward the beginning. A woman no longer wants to get older. She's lived X amount of years and has only Y amount left. She's becoming more self-oriented."

**SUCH CHANGES** in attitude used to appear after a family had grown older. With women delaying having children to a later time than their mothers began their own families, "it doesn't correlate to when the children leave. Many women are going through this with younger children in the home," Rice said.

Even though she may have young children, the woman recognizes that she no longer considers herself young. "The feeling is that some have that they are imposters in an adult world dissipates. 'She begins to see, I am as old as the other people out there who always have been telling me what to do.'"

**MIDDLE LIFE** can trigger new feelings of purposefulness and autonomy. It's also a period of mourning

for the past. "It's a painful transition from the realization of what can never be again. It's a grieving over the loss of the past," Rice said.

In a society that places a premium on women's appearance, the loss of youth can frighten a woman more than the prospect of dying. Women in middle age, perhaps more than men, grieve over the loss of their body tone. Their mental image of their bodies may not match the reflection in the mirror.

Stories are written idealizing middle-aged male film stars as maturing and experienced. Middle-aged women don't often receive that kind of treatment in the media, organizers say.

"The media does a terrible job on this," White said.

"No one works through their grief over the past," Rice said. "They may feel good about themselves for a day, a month, a year. But no one really works through their grief over the loss of their youth."

Middle-aged women sever many of the friendships begun in their youth. "They're giving up historical relationships. Many of these relationships were begun when they were all young and involved in build-

ing their lives together. Now women feel they're getting into the meat of their lives. They've lost touch with these people and chose to terminate the friendship they may see as superficial," Rice said.

Throughout these and other changes they may encounter, women need to cultivate a sense of their own position in their business and personal lives. The conference refers to this aspect of a woman's life as her spirituality.

"It's sometimes confused with religion," said Diann Dincolo, one of the workshop's presenters. According to the presenters, a woman's spirituality and her religious beliefs don't necessarily go hand in hand.

"We need to trust ourselves, to listen to what's right to us," Dincolo said. "You have to trust yourself and go with what you feel is right."

It is also a chance for women to assess for themselves how they fit into a patriarchal religious tradition, according to the organizers.

Women should be confident in their own beliefs about what direction their lives ought to take to be able to pursue their own goals in spite of pressure from their peers or society. "You have to trust yourself

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— Natalie Rice  
psychologist

enough to not be scared to go for it," Dincolo said.

Since the number of working women has increased, it'd be easy to assume that women can take care of themselves. However, White sees a distinction.

"If you've gotten into the kind of two-income family, where you need the second income not to get ahead but to keep all above water — it's not the same as being on your own and taking care of yourself."

Arriving to the point where a woman feels confident and secure in the life she's chosen is a large part of adjusting to transition. "Once you're

calm you can handle almost anything," Dincolo said.

"Transitions, Opportunities for Growth" is set for 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the Women-center, building J, Oakland Community College, Orchard Ridge campus, on Orchard Lake Road, south of 12 Mile, Farmington Hills. There is a \$5 fee for students, staff and seniors; \$7 for the general public. Bring a bag lunch. Child care is provided but reservations must be made by calling 471-7602. Bring a bag lunch for the child, too.

## Self-esteem delaying teen pregnancies

By Joanne Whittaker  
staff writer

**A** HUNDRED years ago, many young people today's society would label children and adolescents were already fathers and mothers.

Helene Mills, principal of Derby Middle School, pondered the thought for a moment. A century ago, she explains, times were less complex, the morals and values more clear-cut.

By comparison, it takes a minimum of 18 years to get the bare essentials of knowledge and skills that are necessary for today's Information Age. To become a professional of any type, that time requirement increases to 25 years.

"What do we do with the sexual urge before then?" asks the educator and mother, who calls herself the oldest sex educator in Michigan.

Mills will be discussing aspects of her belief that education is the forward powerful tool in the prevention of teen pregnancy during a 7:30 public panel discussion tonight (Thursday) sponsored by the Birmingham Bloomfield League of Women Voters at Birmingham's Baldwin Public Library.

For the discussion titled "Approaches to the Prevention of Teen Pregnancy," Mills will be joined by panelists Loretta Davis of the Planned Parenthood League, Fern Hampel, director of Project Choice or Chance, and Delores Wehr of the March of Dimes, who conducts seminars promoting parent-teen communication skills.

**MILLS SPEAKS**, pride evident in her voice, of Birmingham's low incidence of teenage pregnancy. She claims the community's forward planning as early as 1971 has helped parents, educators and young people deal with "hormonal juices that are flowing" by the time virtually all teens return from the Christmas holidays of their eighth grade year.

"You see it earlier in a very precocious fifth grader," she explains, "a few in the sixth grade, more in the seventh, and every one of them in the eighth grade. You're talking 15 when it's very strong. The more prevention you have the better it is."

Mills has been focusing on preventive measures since 1971 when, as a Family Life educator at Seaholm High School, she was asked to develop a Health Education program for the Birmingham schools. Since then, she explains, the schools have followed a comprehensive in-school sex education curriculum that follows children from kindergarten through grade 12.

It is not strictly a course in basics, she says. All aspects of human sex-

uality are presented to schoolchildren by the time they reach an age where they are making important decisions about sexual activity.

"Subject matter is not limited to plumbing," she explains, "although the physiology is clearly defined. Topics include in-depth understanding of the self-concept, values, decision making, problem solving, coping mechanisms, and skill building in communication and relationships."

**THE MILLS plan** for Birmingham introduces the reproductive process to children at the kindergarten level, using the concept of an egg.

By the sixth grade science classes include a six-week segment devoted to the reproductive system, and in the eighth grade year a semester is devoted to a comprehensive study of teen health needs, including discussions of all aspects of sexuality.

Finally, in the 11th grade, sometimes their senior year, students are exposed to another required course

in health education, which she describes as more discussion than factual information.

"This is the time that most of our students have reported that they are making the decision about sexual activity."

Today's teen, according to Mills, is so knowledgeable of the how, why and prevention of pregnancy that girls who become pregnant are aware they are getting pregnant. They are either acting out rebellion, or they are looking for someone to love them, she explains.

As a result of this comprehensive educational program plan, Mills says very few pregnancies have been reported in Birmingham during the past decade; and those that have been reported were for the most part among students who have not grown up in Birmingham.

Mills acknowledges that the frank openness of the program does not meet with 100 percent approval

among parents. When a parent objects, she says, the child is excused. However, she cautions, "my argument has been that kids have to have the education, whether it's in the home, church or school."

Recalling the times when she served on two State Sex Education Task Forces that were convened to make recommendations to the State Board of Education on sex education bills, she says "we pushed for an opt-out rather than an opt-in" type of educational program to insure its availability to all.

Mills stresses that emphasis beginning in the earliest years must be placed on each child's self-esteem, which she explains leads to a better outcome when decision making becomes a necessity.

"Pressures for drugs are almost all from peers or for escape purposes," she says. The demand for instant gratification also presents pressure. But, she says, "pressures

for sex are no more different than they were in our day."

The single most harmful contemporary outside influence she sees comes from movies and television, which she says "are so much more sensual. They are a real problem when the sex drive is so extreme."

Mills advises parents to monitor what their children watch on television, explaining that television interdicts important socialization from the teenage experience. TV, she adds, fails to give an adequate or accurate picture of what love is about.

"I do a program on love, which has been very successful. Kids want to know what love's all about." Among the points she draws their attention to is the difference between infatuation and commitment, and understanding how their relationships with parents, siblings, peers, teachers, religion and the community affect their moral development.

A successful outcome to the inevitable experience with decision mak-

***'If the child feels secure at home, feels good about himself, the decision will be better. We have too many conflicts in our world today. We come back to education again. We have to help kids learn how to make critical decisions.'***

— Helene Mills, Ph.D.  
principal  
Derby Middle School

ing depends a good deal on how secure a teen feels with the family, she explains. "If the child feels secure at home, feels good about himself, the decision will be better. We have too many conflicts in our world today. We come back to education again. We have to help kids learn how to make critical decisions."

**PART OF** that educational process, she adds, is helping parents understand the important role they play in that process. Peers, mass media and the church all have input, but since a child's sex role identity is said to be formulated by age 3, the parent's role is critical.

To help parents undertake this difficult task, Mills also teaches a course for parents. Key to the format is imparting to them the importance and the skill of listening to their teenagers.

"Parents are the primary sex education for their child, plan for it or not." If they choose to become their children's resource and counselor for questions and problems about sex, Mills says, they have to think of sex as a natural subject to be openly and easily answered at any time.

And, she adds, the parent must actively avoid discussion blocks that come under such headings as dominating the conversation, probing, confronting, interrupting, interpreting, putting them down, giving solutions or judging the teen.

Which again brings us back to education, says Mills with a smile. "Kids will listen if you say 'I believe

**DEVELOPING THE SKILL** to listen empathetically, she says, opens an avenue for decision making in which parents and their teenager can define the problem, evaluate possible solutions, and select the best response, together.

The goal of her adult course, she says, is adults who should be able to help their children develop healthy attitudes, toward their sexuality, toward pleasure in giving and receiving love, toward communicating better on all levels with their parents, and toward expressing their attitudes and values about their sex expression and sexuality.

The goal of a good sex education program in the school, she says, is equipping teens with an ability to make a healthy decision to delay sexual activity and possibly an unwanted pregnancy before they experience pressure.

"I tell them," says Helene Mills, "if you don't make a decision by the light over your head now, you're not going to make it in the dark."

"I'm a big, big home-school partnership person," concludes Mills.



ROB REED/staff photographer

Mother, educator, and self-proclaimed oldest sex educator in the state, Helene Mills, Ph.D., believes a comprehensive parent and child sex education program has to begin in kindergarten if

it is to succeed in helping prepare teenagers for decision making that is sure to come at a time when the sex urge is extremely strong.