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Let's Talk About Sex

With Her Interview-Based Documentary *3 Girls I Know* . . . Towson Film Professor Paula Mozen Answers to the Troubled Teenager in All of Us

By [Chris Wood](#)

Remember sixth-period health class in high school? The dim lights, post-lunch sleepiness setting in as another teens-in-trouble flick starts rolling on the projector? Kids watch haphazardly, checking out their classmates, passing notes, and thinking about hooking up or partying on the weekend--just to be crazy, be wild, and feel alive in teenage skin. Meanwhile, the boilerplate health-class movie flickers on, supposedly enlightening 16- and 17-year-olds that being gay is just another choice, that safe sex through abstinence is the antidote to pregnancies and diseases, and that, basically, everything is all right as long as you stopped being a teenager. The ultimate contradiction: ignoring movies about peer pressure and cajoling each other in the darkness into getting laid, getting high, and pulling it over on the folks.

"As teenagers we always knew the facts [about sex and sexuality], but we rarely understood the emotions behind them," says Paula Mozen, a film professor at Towson University and director/producer/editor of *3 girls I know* . . . , a heartbreaking but ultimately self-affirming documentary recently purchased by the National Asian American Telecommunications Association, which plans to air the film on PBS. In the matter-of-fact teen-speak that colors Mozen's interviews with three young women confronting sexuality, pregnancy, and HIV/AIDS, the filmmaker expertly cracks through the dichotomy of the fantastic and chaotic teen years. "Sometimes life is not a made-for-TV show," Mozen says. "And it sucks."

While vamping a little on the



Not Your After-school Special: "Sometimes life is not a made-for-TV show," says filmmaker Paula Mozen, "and it sucks." The subjects of her new film--(below, from top) Ari, Tishaun, and Maggie--would probably agree.



format, *3 girls I know* . . . quickly leaves after-school-special fare in the dust as it deftly chronicles the lives of Maggie, Ari, and Tishaun--three girls from Montana, San Francisco, and Baltimore, respectively--whose teenage lives are abruptly altered by the impact of sexual decision. As the result of their decisions, at ages 16 and 17 they face the reality of some of the words that draw snickers among high-schoolers: pregnant, lesbian, AIDS.



While their classmates stay on to watch cartoon sperm with smiley faces racing each other down fallopian tubes and learn how to put rubbers on bananas, Mozen's three subjects go into labor, open up mail with positive HIV-test results, and come out to a parent in the midst of homophobic rants. Over the course of 52 minutes, Mozen invites us into their realities through intimate interview sessions--probing the causes behind their predicaments, including drunken sex, peer pressure, molestation, and abuse, but also universal desires to be loved, wanted, and accepted.

"If you're insecure about sex in any way, when you go to bed with the first guy you're going to sleep with or whatnot you're not going to ask him to use a condom," one of Mozen's three subjects says as a newborn cries behind her. "You're not going to ask him, you know, if he has any STDs because you're completely insecure with that aspect of your life, and you are doing it just to experience it."

Another subject bluntly describes the moments before sleeping with her needle-sharing, promiscuous boyfriend: "Being that he was old-fashioned or picky or whatever, he just didn't use [condoms]. And he couldn't be convinced to, and I guess I wasn't slick enough to just put it on or whatever. So that just didn't work."

Mozen says such matter-of-fact intimate comments from her subjects are partly a product of their age. "Teenagers want to be straightforward," she says. "They don't want to make a big deal out of things."

Indeed, Mozen traces the roots of *3 girls I know* . . . back to her own adolescence in the Berkeley, Calif., of the early '80s, when HIV/AIDS and sexuality were cementing themselves as political issues and her father worked in a lab at the University of California at Berkeley to eliminate the HIV virus from plasma supplies for hemophiliacs. "I was living in the Bay Area at a time when everyone was discovering everything, the gay population was politicized, there was AIDS, there was the shooting of Mayor [George] Moscone," Mozen recalls. "There was a lot in the air in terms of consciousness when I was growing up."

As a graduate film student at San Francisco State University, Mozen completed "No Rewind," a precursor short to *3 girls I know* . . . that featured high-school students commenting on HIV/AIDS' impact as they navigated a demanding but exhilarating teenage sexual arena.

"It's the behaviors that are interesting to me," Mozen says of her subject matter and the decisions--under pressure or not--to have sex while still teenagers. "We all want to fit in, we all want to meet people, we all want to be loved and accepted, and of course sex ultimately comes along with that. But if you screwed up, it was an immediate problem."

Mozen says her subjects in *3 girls I know* . . . are not simply three girls she knows--though she does--but three girls that anybody could know. As their stories develop in the film, Mozen underlines this notion by holding back on which subject faces which dilemma. While viewers may experience sleuthing urges as the film unfolds--*Which one is gay? Which one got pregnant?*--Mozen's gambit lets us to first appreciate Ari, Maggie, and Tishaun's personable intelligence and humor without any labels.

"I wanted there to be a random quality and I did play with that," Mozen says. "But you don't want to be too random and have people lose interest and turn it off."

"I picked these girls because they were articulate. . . . Not everyone is good at telling stories or talking about themselves," she continues. "One of my rules that I learned early on is that

I really want everyone to talk about themselves, not what other people do and what other people think--that to me is not as powerful as when people tell you what is really going on and happening with them."

Mozen's approach pays off at the outset of the film when one of girls immediately answers the director's cue by describing the night of her own initiation into sex at 14 and, ultimately, motherhood. "It was a mixture of courage and hormone and lust," she says. "It was alcohol, and it's a mind-altering drug, and I don't know how much I drank."

Mozen achieved such an intimate level of trust with her subjects through multiple pre-film and pre-interview outings. "Whether we went out for coffee or just walked around, we would meet several times, and I would try to get a sense of where they lived, what their lives were like, who their friends were," she says. "What I was trying to bring out was the universal qualities that these girls had. I think that is what made them special and what made them good spokespeople for all youth, for all young people, or even for middle-aged people."

Indeed, Mozen's finished product speaks to anyone who's ever been a teenager wandering the uncertain and hormone-charged halls of a high school. After watching a rough cut of the film, Jack Heyrman immediately offered to provide in-kind services from Clean Cuts, his Baltimore-based music and sound design company.

"We have a million projects coming through here and we look for films like this--a work from a passionate filmmaker with vision and the direction to pull it off," Heyrman says. "The reveal of it, these girls with the world at their feet. . . . It's not cool in today's world to be emotional, but this piece is vital now and will have a long life to it."

In addition to work by firms like Clean Cuts, Mozen fueled the five-year filming of *3 girls I know* . . . with contributions from Gap, Sega, Towson University, the Pioneer Foundation, and Steamworks, a San Francisco-based gay men's bathhouse chain. Mozen is also enjoying broad-based support from film festivals across the country, including being named a University Film and Video Association finalist and a San Francisco Black Film Festival official selection.

Success and acclaim aside, Mozen hopes *3 girls I know* . . . offers viewers the opportunity to contemplate their own lives and choices, just as her three subjects come out of their nightmares with a newer, self-affirming optimism. "Since [coming to terms with HIV], I've conquered anything I have ever been afraid of," says one subject who has turned to advocacy and AIDS education outreach at high schools, despite a fear of public speaking. "I've just done it."

With *3 girls I know* . . . Mozen has provided an impressive alternative to both *Mean Girls* fluff and sixth-period health-class flickerings, plumbing both the euphoria and the catastrophe of adolescent decision-making and finding survival on the other side. "Whatever choices these three girls have made they have gone on with their lives," Mozen says. "The things that they have done and they way they reacted helped to propel them into adulthood . . . and in some ways made them more rich."

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