

Crone Sexuality

by Pat Hanson



PIONEER OF SEX EDUCATION: DR. MARIAN HAMBURG

When I learned that one of my mentors in Human Sexuality was 90+ and thriving, I made arrangements to interview her. On the phone she noted, “It’s Cinco de Mayo; you’ll have to join me for cocktails and a 92nd birthday party.”

How could I possibly refuse?

As I approached Marian’s apartment at the retirement community in Rancho San Bernardo where she lives, I was struck by the framed cartoon on her door: a tiny buxom body wielding a tennis racket topped by a gigantic head. I remarked to myself that her intellect had always filled every room she entered, and now I also remembered the fact that she’d played tennis daily until an injury stopped her only a few months ago.

Before we went down to the party, she gave me the tour of her meticulous Victorian suite. Notable was an entire wall full of books, including twenty or so huge white binders. I asked about her notebooks. “They’re my therapy,” she told me, “I write daily, and include pictures of places I’ve traveled.”

The lines of character are more pronounced in Marian’s face than when I last met her during my doctoral days thirty years ago, but she still has the sparkle in her eye and effervescent spirit

“Oh you’ve got to see this,” she said, opening her walk-in closet, where on the mirror was a photo of her in a pink Victoria’s Secret teddy.

“The women’s group at the Unitarian Church has an annual pajama party, and the first year I went I decided to wear something I could do a strip tease in. I walked in sporting a trench coat over a red satin long-sleeved shirt, and eventually removed each layer. At the next year’s event a blown-up poster of me was on the door with a sign saying, “Come on in!”

The poster made me blush. I did the math: Marian was only a year older than my own mother! I had so many things wanted to ask her, and over coffee the next day we began. Over the course of our interview, I discovered many clues to her extraordinary personal and professional life.

You've been a leader in expanding roles for women from an early age. How did this begin?

I grew up in a small town in Missouri and knew as a kid that men had the power. I was told I could do one of three things: be a teacher, a nurse or a secretary — before or after being a homemaker, of course!

When I went to college — just before World War II — I pursued a degree in Physical Education and Health. During the interview for my first job the Superintendent of Schools asked me if I could play ping-pong. When I answered “yes,” he brought the best guy at his school to challenge me to a game. The superintendent was very happy (and, I think, surprised) when I beat his best player. I got the job, of course.

That was 1942, and just before my college boyfriend shipped out to the Pacific, he and I eloped. During the three years he was away my life was changing; I wanted to become part of the war effort, but an eye problem kept me from doing so. Then, I got a call to come to New York City to become the USO program director for the



Dr. Marian Hamburg — still going strong!

YWCA. This job changed my whole life; I learned that women can have a career! During the war I worked, traveling around the U.S., as well as getting a Masters degree at NYU. By the time my husband, now a

veteran, returned, we had both changed too much for the marriage to continue, and we got divorced six months later.

What was it like being a single career woman in the late forties?

It was a wonderful life. I didn't mind that I wasn't married, and I certainly didn't mind that I wasn't a homemaker. I worked in northeast Texas, setting up health councils to improve the health of communities, then while I was a director of The National Tuberculosis Association (what is now called The American Lung Association), I commuted from Long Island to Teachers College at Columbia and got my doctorate in 1950. I also worked in New York City for The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (now The March of Dimes) and traveled as a school health consultant for The American Heart Association. Then when I was thirty-two, I got an offer that would change my life again.

What happened?

I got a call from an acquaintance asking me to come out to Long Island and play bridge with a lonely widower. I was a bit nonplussed, but with some trepidation I went — and met Maury. A high school principal, Maury was fifteen years older than me and had two children, then ten and twelve years old. Maury and I were intellectual equals — and we both loved tennis, too. He was a very good player, and right away he challenged me, and won. Within six months he asked me to marry him; we had to transcend the challenges of our faith differences (he was Jewish and I was Christian) and in those days that was a big problem, but we prevailed, married, and had a great relationship (and continued to play tennis!) for another forty years.

For about six months I tried to be the perfect homemaker and wife for Maury and his (now my) family. I left my job, bought flannel nightgowns, learned to make perfect oatmeal, and was going to be the best PTA member ever. But after six months I realized that every morning when he and the children came down to breakfast and then went out into the world, that left me sitting at home with all the exciting things happening somewhere else.

I had to tell him, “you’re not going to be happy if I’m not happy,” so he hired a housekeeper and encouraged me to go back to work. I tried going back to work part time but that didn’t succeed: I work hard at what I do and couldn’t do well at trying to work and be a homemaker. So I

took a job teaching freshmen at Wagner College on Staten Island. What a commute! I had to take a train to Penn Station in New York City, then the subway to Battery Park, then the ferry and a bus to school. Can you imagine that? I’d have done anything to be doing something.

Then Roscoe Brown, a friend of mine and a pioneering black administrator, called and offered me a position teaching at NYU.

I ended up teaching the first course in Health Education in their new Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation.

Early in my tenure there, I asked Roscoe for the keys to success in academia. He told me to take two file folders and label them: “Visibility” and “Money.” In the first I was to put every thing I did, every speech, every committee I’d serve on, every article I wrote. That was easy as I was always writing and giving speeches.

The second file was to contain the work I did in bringing financial resources to the school, and it ended up being a double-edged sword. I took the directive to bring in grants very seriously, and I’d always felt that what was lacking in

the health education field was any mention of sexuality. Back in the early sixties they still separated girls to talk about menstruation, and took the boys off to talk — about who knows what! — just like when I was a kid. So in 1967, I wrote and received a three-year grant from the Federal Government to study Sex Education in the Elementary Schools. I was either courageous or crazy — maybe a little of both!

I was able to bring together a diverse group of teachers — from all religions, single and married, gay and straight, from all kinds of communities — and award them room, board, and tuition and enroll them in our new Masters Program in Human Sexuality. The second year of the program they went back to their school to teach, and the third year they came back to NYU for evalu-



I had always felt that what was seriously lacking in the health education field was sexuality. So in 1967, I wrote (and received) a grant to study Sex Education in the Elementary Schools. I was either courageous or crazy — maybe a bit of each!

ation. The program was working well, and we were getting ready for our evaluation when all hell broke loose.

We realized these teachers needed to talk about their experience in the program — this was when “sensitivity training” was just beginning — and we met in the basement, sat on the floor, and let our hair down, talking about our feelings, our first sexual experience, things that couldn’t be addressed in the classroom.

As director of this federally-funded program, I knew that I had to keep a low profile with the media. Things were heating up with conservatives in California who opposed sex education on any level, and I was always careful to politely decline

all journalists — even the *New York Times*’ reporter who called and wanted to sit in on a class. But one day my Dean (who wanted publicity for the program) sent over a reporter. I gave her a wonderful interview, full of plans for improved classroom activities, evaluation parameters, and all the usual things, nothing sensational. As this young lady walked out of my office I felt really smug.

However, as she entered the elevator, she met a member of our staff — who hadn't been briefed about how to talk to the media about our program, and he gave her the inside story including a juicy scoop about our informal sessions in the basement. A week later an article popped up in a San Francisco paper — an article that was picked up by the wire services and reprinted nationally. That article fueled the fires of anti-sex-education conservatives nationally.

That sounds dreadful! What happened to your sex education program?

Honestly, it was a catastrophe. A woman in New York formed a group “Parents Against Unauthorized Sex Education” or something like that and started a campaign to get people to write to their senators and representatives. I was named in the Federal Register every week by one legislator or another railing against me “this immoral woman teaching teachers to teach kids to have sex.”

To make a long story short, the feds felt the heat and, though they admitted our work was important, they cut off our funding. I succeeded in convincing them to let the teachers finish their Masters and do a short evaluation (which was very positive, by the way), but that was the end.

It was a terrible time for me. Brought down at the peak of my sex education career — I even literally fell down the stairs and had to come to work on crutches! I was still doing the mother-family thing at home and my career in Sex Ed

appeared to be over, so I decided to develop something else, which turned out to be NYU's program in International Intracultural Community Health Education.

In the end, NYU kept their graduate programs in Human Sexuality the first in the country and our program helped save SIECUS (Sex Information and Education Council of the United States) by giving them space at NYU, but my career had been pretty effectively stymied.

Meanwhile, Maury became an administrator at Brooklyn College, and he and I wrote a book together. We retired from academia in 1993 after having traveled the world together as part of my work with the international programs.

What has retirement been like for you?

Maury and I searched all over the country for a place to live that was warm, intellectually-stimulating, had tennis courts and would deliver the *New York Times* every day to our door. So we moved here to a suburb of San Diego; sadly, Maury (who was five years older than I) died suddenly only three months after we'd moved here.

I'm so sorry, Marian. That was some time ago, correct?

Oh yes, many years ago. Six months after Maury died, I met another man; he was also a retired Naval Officer, older than I, and I must say, a rather a prim and proper man. We were together six or seven years, but then he died as well.

Then after him, I met another terrific guy ... and this one was the most fun! He'd been a community college professor — in Anatomy & Physiology of all things — and said to me, “Look, we're in our 80s, we know everything about anything, we're not stupid enough to mingle our finances or get married, let's just have fun together.” And fun we had! He died two years ago.

What's your love life like now, Marian, if I may be so bold?

I'm 92 and still looking!

What is the current state of health and sex education?

I do keep up with my field, and I've noticed that there is more focus on prevention; I like that. Sex Education is finally getting its due. There are more and more jobs out there for health educators. It's about time!

Any final words for our readers?

Well, there is one thing: I appreciate the fact that Obama's health plan has added the suggestion that doctors discuss “end of life” issues with their patients. Myself, I'm a member of the Hemlock Society and the Compassionate Care Alliance, and I have all my personal health direction papers in order. It's about time more of us accepted the reality of our mortality and put end-of-life care into our own hands.

Thank you so much Marian for your time, candor, and your inspiring stories.

I left Marian realizing that, even though she may not have mainstream name recognition, in the long run, her work as a pioneer who paved the road for professional training in Human Sexuality and Health Education has probably influenced more lives than Dr. Ruth. She's kept mentally, physically and politically active (did I mention she's the organizer for the Democratic party in her region?), has a strong support group of women, and she's kept sex a natural part of her life all these years. Thank you Marian; may you remain my role model for many years to come! ☺

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