



## Interview with Rose Rosenblatt & Marion Lipschutz, filmmakers of “The Education of Shelby Knox”

*(Provided courtesy of P.O.V.)*

**P.O.V.:** How did you become interested in the topic of sex education?

**Rose Rosenblatt:** We first became aware of the issue when we were working on an earlier film called "Live Free or Die," which was the story of an OB-GYN from Bedford, New Hampshire who was teaching sex ed in his local schools. He was fighting to continue teaching while a group of right-to-lifers on the school board were trying to oust him.

When we learned that the federal government was getting involved in the business of funding abstinence until marriage education — at the expense of comprehensive sex education which was giving kids information about condoms and contraceptives — we thought it was really an important subject to tackle.

**Marion Lipschutz:** These days, everyone from Jon Stewart to The Nightly News is talking about sex ed. Four years ago when we started making this film, people weren't interested in the topic. We were rejected by one funder who said the culture wars are over... I rest my case.

**P.O.V.:** Why do you think the issue is so prominent today?

**Lipschutz:** Certain topics surface as hot button issues, depending on the political climate. Sex ed involves sex, kids, morality, parental involvement and politics.

But when the national dialogue centers around polarized political and moral points of view, I think a film like "The Education of Shelby Knox" that tries to bridge two extremes is very, very useful. We are presenting a diversity of viewpoints on an issue that people think they already know the truth about. In fact they often don't.

**P.O.V.:** In the making of this film, what was most surprising to you?

**Rosenblatt:** Paula and Danny Knox were a big surprise. I didn't know that they would get so involved and become major characters. They were wonderful.

**Lipschutz:** Yes, we knew that we had Shelby's coming of age story, her struggles as she moved from being a conservative Christian to a liberal Christian. But we hadn't banked on the dimension that her parents would offer to this transformation. Although at the end of the story they disagree with a fair number of Shelby's political points, they remain a

loving family and deeply supportive of their daughter, which is a message of wholeness and healing.

**Rosenblatt:** We were hoping that an audience, despite their politics, how they felt about a scene like the True Love Waits pledging or even about Ed Ainsworth, would get pulled in to this family and would root for them. That somehow all that extremism would get neutralized and the viewer would identify with this family and understand their struggle to support their daughter.

The other big surprise we discovered in filming was Superintendent Clemmons. I mean, we had no idea that in the end it would turn out he was having an affair with his secretary the whole while that Shelby and the Youth Commission were lobbying him for better sex ed. You know, while he was saying, "no, we can't give these kids sex ed because that will lead to more sexual behavior." That was just the perfect payoff, and it's every filmmaker's dream because when you go into making a film you have no idea what your ending's going to be.

**Lipschutz:** We did debate whether or not to include Superintendent Clemmons' affair at the end of the film. It was like a gift from the gods, how couldn't we? But we debated it for a couple of reasons. Was it a cheap shot? It's obviously funny. Did it even dramatically fit the story we were telling? But some of the local news pieces made the point that while the superintendent was having an extra-marital affair, the kids of Lubbock were being told not to have sex until they were married and only to have sex within the confines of marriage. It would be hard not to include this.

**P.O.V.:** Was there a key scene that turned out to be really pivotal?

**Rosenblatt:** The True Love Waits ceremony is an extremely pivotal scene in the film and it can be looked at in many, many ways. That scene is the dramatization and visualization of the issue that prompted this film, which was to understand how the government is funding abstinence until marriage. That's an abstract idea, with numbers behind it — the dollar amount the government is putting into this. But here, in this scene, is the actual emotional, visual, dramatic moment. What abstinence until marriage looks like and what it feels like. It was startling to us to see these young kids, aging from eleven to twenty, taking this vow with their parents. It was the heart of the film in a lot of ways and propelled us even further on.

**P.O.V.:** How did the process of making the film change you? What did you learn?

**Lipschutz:** Well, making the film made me older, grayer and more tired and added a lot of frequent flier miles to my account!

Really, any time you make a film you're partaking in somebody else's life and world. That always changes you. This film could be called "The Education of Marion Lipschutz and Rose Rosenblatt." We are New Yorkers — well, I grew up in Poughkeepsie — but we're basically New Yorkers and we went deep in the heart of Texas to the panhandle.

And we went with preconceptions. We're open, but any time you go somewhere new you have preconceptions. We arrived expecting Lubbock to completely reflect its demographics, and it wasn't what we expected. What I really learned was: stop, look, listen. Really take people for what they are and you'll learn a whole lot about how similar we are in many ways.

**Rosenblatt:** A documentary filmmaker has two masters — or, in this case, two mistresses. The first thing a filmmaker really needs is a point of view, your own point of view. Once you know where you stand on a subject, you have to respect the diversity that presents itself to you in the form of your characters. It is possible to bring these two things together in your film, but it's tough. It requires complete fairness to the discussion. Take Ed Ainsworth — we wanted access to him very badly because he's so clearly the other side of Shelby. When we talked to Ed, he said, "I know, this film is about the two sides, it's me and Shelby." And I knew in that moment that we had a responsibility to give Ed as much space as we could to say what he believes.

If you really present both sides of the story it's the most exciting, dynamic tension. Because then you throw the ball to the audience. The audience has to grapple with this issue, which is really the most powerful way of effecting change, in either direction.

**P.O.V.:** Who do you want to see the film?

**Lipschutz:** Well the short answer is, viewers like you. It's easy to look at this film and think, "oh that's Lubbock, Texas," where they teach an extreme version of abstinence until marriage. The fact is that abstinence until marriage education policy exists all over the country in less extreme forms. My son's school right outside of New York City won't talk about abortion and is giving incomplete information on how HIV-AIDS is transmitted. So it's not just Texas.

**Rosenblatt:** I'm hoping that people will walk away from watching the film feeling that dialogue and common ground is reachable. Because we found such a dialogue with the Knoxes. One of the best scenes is when Paula says to Shelby, "how did you become so liberal, you were raised in a house of Republicans?" I think there's a lot of room for dialogue, more than we know when we set up "red state-blue state" stereotypes. We defeat ourselves by doing that.