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Ladies in Waiting

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Why some ISU students are holding out for marriage.

*Some names have been changed.*

BY SAM CHANTARASAK  DESIGN ALXANDRIA COLLINS  PHOTO MCLANE GILL
“I’m going to be honest. It’s hard!” Ellie* exclaims. Ellie, engaged at just 20 years old, speaks frankly about her sex life—or lack of one. Although she is getting married, Ellie and her fiancé have never had sex, and they won’t until their wedding night in May.

Ellie is one of around 10 million Americans who have chosen not to have sex before they are married—that is just 3 percent of the U.S. population. There is no doubt that waiting until marriage is an unpopular option. Although for some, the wait seems unbearable, even nonsensical, three ISU students describe the reasons behind their decision to wait, the pressures they face and how their lives have been affected by their choice.

According to the National Health Statistics Reports, around 70 percent of females and 68 percent of males would have had sex by the time they are 24. Statistics also show that the average US citizen will not get married until their mid- to late twenties. That means a pretty large percentage of students at Iowa State have probably had a go at least once, and odds are that they were not married when they did.

The question that first comes to mind is easy—why wait?

For these students, the decision is, perhaps predictably, related to their faith, however a fear of being emotionally hurt also played a role in their decisions when they were younger.

“From an early age it was just kind of presented,” Evie Sue, raised in a Catholic household, explains, “I didn’t want to get hurt. I remember having the mentality that I was going to wait and find one person to spend the rest of my life with and have sex—we wouldn’t necessarily have to be married. But then I learned more about my faith, and it changed my view of sex. I no longer see it as something to do with someone when you’re emotionally ready, but it has a deeper meaning and a deeper purpose.”

Ellie, who was not raised in a Christian family, similarly found her decision had developed from a moral, as well as religious, reason.

“Even before I was a Christian, I just kind of thought, ‘I’m going to wait until marriage because that is what good people do.’ But now I am a Christian, and I see the value and how it honors God, and it is so much sweeter to me.”

“[My decision] comes from the Bible, from the ideals I found in scripture and through my faith journey” says Sara, another Christian who made the choice to wait. “It’s more safe, you’re fully committed to each other and it’s almost like an act of worship...it’s not only a safe option, but also I see it as the most glorifying to God which is super important to me.”

Again, Sara demonstrates that religious affiliations are often not the only influences that lead students to make the decision to wait, “Most of my friend group were not having sex [in high school]. That may have influenced me too. A lot of my friends were going to wait until they’re in a committed relationship, or wait until marriage, or until they had someone they loved.”

So what does waiting for marriage actually mean?

Sara explains, “[There are] a lot of differing opinions—that’s where it is a gray area. The Bible only says ‘don’t have sex outside of marriage’ so some think we can do everything else—I’ve seen a lot of that happening. People see ‘sexual purity’ as a line and see how close they can get without crossing and others run as far away from that line as possible. Even within the same view, it’s such a spectrum.”

For Ellie, her boundaries with her fiancé are especially strict—they limit themselves to no kisses beyond their cheeks.

“We’re not going to do anything sexual—some people don’t even hold hands. Making out is really hard not to do—it’s fun—but just seeing how it becomes a thing that you start doing it, and then you become comfortable, and suddenly it’s like, ‘Oh, crap, we shouldn’t have done that.’ My personal choice is, we have to be very self-controlled.”

Other than the inevitable desires that come with being in a relationship, the decision to wait until marriage to have sex can, unsurprisingly, create extra social pressures.

“There’s an unspoken pressure from the culture around us. It’s like we’re missing out or something. That waiting really isn’t worth it,” says Sara. “Even the connotation of the word ‘virgin’—it used to be beautiful. Culturally there is a negative connotation to that [word]. Whether people mean it or not, it’s unspoken, and it’s around us. Regardless of what you choose, it’s your life, and it’s not really affecting anyone else.”

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Personal choice is also something that is important for Evie Sue when facing social pressures.

“I’m not ashamed of my decision, I know it’s kind of uncommon, but for the most part I’ve never been told I was stupid for having that decision. People have been very respectful,” she says. “Really, regardless of anyone’s opinion on whether you should or shouldn’t have sex, it comes down to the person. No one can tell you whether you should wait.”

Evie Sue says her choice is not necessarily the “right” one, it’s just the best choice for her.

“It’s not something you can force on someone. It’s a personal choice, and it should be,” she says. “Everyone should be sovereign of their body and make that decision themselves.”

There are times, however, when social pressures can affect those who have made the choice to wait until marriage. An unpopular choice for the majority of students, those who wait sometimes deal with people who are confused or who disagree.

“Sometimes I feel knocked down because of it, just because I’m like, ‘Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe I should be doing what these other people are doing,’” Sara says. “But at the end of the day, if I go back to what I believe, I can hold true to this decision I’ve made. I have chosen to believe in God, and I think having that principle in my life is empowering in a way because I have chosen this, and I have stuck to it.”

However, it is not unheard of for those who have formerly vowed to remain abstinent to rethink their previous choices once they find themselves in committed relationships.

“I have two good friends whose views changed completely. They’re in a committed relationship, and they’re having sex,” Sara says. “I think that may be a reason for not waiting. They were committed, and that would logically be, in my head, a reason to change your decision.”

Abstinence is not the only element of her faith that Sara has started to question. She acknowledges that although her views are dependent on her Christian beliefs, they are also able to change over time.

“Everything I’m saying has the bias from growing up as a Christian, but a lot of these views are changing even for me. I don’t see myself changing anytime soon, particularly in this relationship, and I think this is one thing I will stick to, but everything else is sort of changing.”

Sara acknowledges that not everything is as clear as she expected.

“With this issue right now I think it’s pretty black and white—at least according to scripture, but there are many things that are gray, and maybe this is turning gray for me too.”

Would a Christian feel guilt and be punished if they changed their mind? And how would their relationship with God change?

“Part of me is saying, if I were to change my decision, I know God would forgive me because of Jesus, and so I wouldn’t want to abuse that grace,” she says. “However, I’ve seen people who have changed that decision and still feel close to God and have a relationship with Him. I wouldn’t base my decision on that, but it’s something I’ve been thinking about.”

Although hard, the difficulties of sticking to these strict boundaries are ultimately a rewarding and empowering experience for these young women. Even for those who are waiting through choice, sex is hard to resist—especially once in a committed relationship—yet Ellie sees her relationship with her fiancé to be fulfilling personally and spiritually.

“I think a lot of people have the misconception that it’s easier when you’re a Christian—so not true. But, I think it’s something that we shouldn’t use as an excuse to have sex if we have boundaries set up,” she says. “Yes, it is very hard, but the process of waiting has been so growing for me in many aspects of life—as I am learning a lot about how to respect my fiancé—but ultimately honouring God with his commands to be pure. It’s been teaching me a lot about self-control and humility.”

It’s a choice that many students here at Iowa State will not make, and may not even think about, but for these three students and many others, it is a decision that can lead to pressures some of us may have not ever considered.

However, the choice is personal, and for these students, their choice has been empowering and spiritually rewarding. Ellie, Evie Sue and Sara will wait until their wedding night to sleep with their partner for the first time, and for Sara, her faith in her choice is clear.

“This is the decision I have made for now, who knows what will happen in the future,” she says. “I choose to trust that this will be best for me, and if I get married, will be best for my husband.”