

# NEWEST BOOK

## SUBJECT'

### *Extraordinary educator breaks new ground*

By Katie Liesener



UNTIL THIS YEAR, most people could take one glance at Kim Marshall's bibliography and assume they had him pegged. It seems too easy: a grade school curriculum series, a kid-friendly book explaining evolution, a how-to book for teachers and dozens of articles on school desegregation, evaluation rubrics and the like.

His newest book might rattle their assumptions. *The Great Sex Secret: What Satisfied Women and Men Know That No One Talks About.*

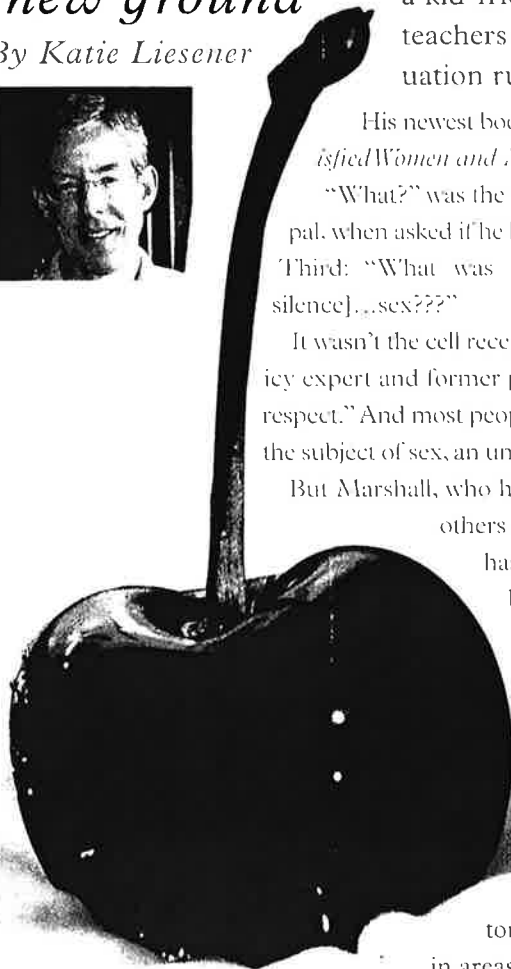
"What?" was the first response of Bob Weintraub, Brookline High School principal, when asked if he had heard of Marshall's book. Second response: "The Great...?" Third: "What was the third word?" Finally: "I'm sorry... [uncomprehending silence]...sex???"

It wasn't the cell reception. Kim Marshall is a well-known school curriculum and policy expert and former principal, for whom Weintraub and others have a "tremendous respect." And most people who have made a career in education would be loath to touch the subject of sex, an understandably touchy one in a profession that deals with children.

But Marshall, who has worked eight years on the book, is used to tackling subjects others shy away from. After more than 30 years as a sex educator, he has developed a certain comfort level discussing sex. "You don't blush. You're very matter of fact. No question throws you," he explained. "You also face the challenge: How do you explain something that is confusing or embarrassing that people don't like to talk about?"

In the case of his latest book, that mute subject is how sex can be—and usually isn't—as enjoyable for women as for men. Okay. But why Marshall? To understand why he felt so moved to stick his neck out for couples' sexual satisfaction is to know the history behind all those other writings. It's a history of being guided by a nearly naïve belief that he could teach in areas where others did not, or dared not, tread.

In the beginning, that optimism had all the makings of an instantaneous deflation. The newly graduated Kim Marshall walked into his first classroom in 1969 with a lot of social liberalism and not much of a clue. In truth, when he was pursuing his government degree at Harvard, he'd had zero intention of going into education. The son of a CIA agent, he had studied government, not education, at Harvard and had big plans to go into international



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work. But to avoid being drafted for the war he opposed, he entered inner-city teaching, a deferment at the time. What he thought would be a slight life



detour took him to a different kind of front line—the King School in Roxbury.

Before Marshall arrived, the school had been shut down for two months due to spiraling violence. The neighborhood was crawling with prostitutes, pimps, drug addicts and drunks. During a false fire alarm, his students found a dead woman, naked and mutilated, in an adjacent lot.

For the children, it was a challenge to feel safe or confident, let alone to learn. In his first years teaching sixth grade, Marshall quickly awoke to their reality. He had his tires slashed, was gripped in a half nelson by one boy, held up with a tear-gas canister by another, taunted by his students, called a racist by a guidance counselor, had two ribs separated when a boy punched him in the chest, and had another teacher suggest he be fired.

“I got my butt kicked,” said Marshall, 58, at the Clark Road home he shares with his wife, who is general counsel for the Department of Education. A sandy-gray-haired man in glasses and sweater, he recalls those years with his long legs stretched out on his coffee table.

“One of the things I encountered going into teaching was this whole snobbery about it, which I had myself,” he said. “With a Harvard education, you sort of think of ‘grander things.’ My realization in my first year was there’s nothing more difficult and nothing grander than doing a good job in the classroom. The question was: Was I good enough?”

Despite the self-doubt, the tears and walls he punched in frustration, Marshall continued to give up his Saturdays to take students on eight-hour field trips of the city and put in extra hours trying new classroom approaches. As time went on and his methods improved, the

children responded more and more.

Marshall was driven by a belief that all students could achieve at high levels, if they had the necessary advantages. He saw the ideal learning environment whenever he visited a relative at Phillips Exeter Academy, where students studied on a leafy campus and enjoyed multi-million dollar facilities. Marshall’s students had a treeless lot and a school that ran out of money for pencils. The seemingly hopeless contrast only fueled his drive. “Talk about inequality,” he said. “I went to a private school since fourth grade on. Is that fair? You can’t help going through that with a sense of injustice.”

He set about creating advantages for students. One of his biggest breakthroughs was developing learning stations, a new teaching strategy in which students worked at group stations organized around different subjects. There was no textbook for such a strategy; Marshall wrote the material himself every night.

He refined and published those lessons as the *Kim Marshall Series* (still selling after 26 years), then went to work in the Boston Public Schools’ central office in 1980 as a policy advisor, and eventually, director of curriculum and planning. After earning a master’s in education, he achieved his “dream” in 1987, becoming a principal at Mather Elementary School in Dorchester.

Like all principals, Marshall was on call 24/7, rushing between the many crises that erupt in a school, soothing parents and offering a smiling presence to the children. But more than surviving a hectic school day, he developed an obsession with trying to improve his school.

### *Drop in visits work*

**TAKE A PROBLEM** as basic as classroom assessment. After several failed approaches, Marshall decided the best way he could give feedback to

teachers would be to regularly drop in for five-minute visits. Keeping a diary of his struggles with shyness, procrastination and a severe lack of time and sleep, he found at the end of the year he had still managed 462 more visits than the year before.

Solutions to these basic problems can affect the overarching ones, like consistency across the curriculum. And those can have a tangible effect on children’s learning, as Marshall found in 1999. A year after the MCAS test was instituted, Mather achieved the largest jump in test scores of any elementary school its size in the state.

Marshall has written continuously about what worked and what didn’t in his school. But he also keeps a zealous eye on the latest breakthroughs of researchers and other principals, gripped by a simple fascination: “Here are these two schools, with the same types of children, but one school’s doing really well and the other is flat-lining,” he said. “So what are the key ingredients to the successful school? What’s the secret sauce?”

“You can ask him any question, and he’ll reach into his briefcase and have something relevant to what you just asked,” said Charles Adams, principal of Satellite West Middle School in Brooklyn whom Marshall coached. That relentless hunt for answers to the biggest questions looming for schools and educators means little rest for Marshall. “I do have a sense of a mission and intensity, so I don’t play a lot of golf, let’s put it that way,” he said. “I want to make a difference.”

It’s easy to get that sense watching him at home. Every granule of his time is put to double purpose. Using phone and computer, Marshall multitasks in an office that is a paper avalanche waiting to happen. He reads two newspapers a day and jots writing ideas on hundreds of note cards. Instead of partying, he and his wife spend New Year’s Eve reflecting over their accomplish-

ments and friendships.

And then there are Sundays, Marshall's 10-hour marathons working on perhaps his most innovative service, the Marshall Memo. Here's the premise: Any busy principal or teacher does not have the time to read up on all the latest educational research. So Marshall acts as a designated reader for his subscribers. With the rapacity of a paper shredder, he devours over 100 educational articles a week and spits out short, zippy summaries of the best ones. (Writing a précis—Marshall said with a smile—is something he learned to do well in school.) The weekly emailed memo, which he started in 2003, has grown to 5,000 subscribers entirely without promotion.

Tom Cavanagh, principal of Brookline's Baker School, calls it "the best educational document being produced for K-12 teachers and administrators." Nevertheless, if made to pick Marshall's greatest contribution to education, Cavanagh said he would pick his example. "There are maybe two or three people I've known in my whole life who are as focused as Kim Marshall," he said.

Marshall acknowledges a certain "stick-to-it-ive-ness" to his character, but he takes an even more pragmatic view of the things he's done. The kind of guy who drops the "Harvard" off his bios and whose role models are today's teachers, he said what has motivated him in everything he's written is: "Somebody had to do it." When he sees a gap in what people need to know or talk about, he steps in to fill it.

And as Marshall was to learn, sex is the Swiss cheese of all subjects. When Marshall taught sex education as a principal at Mather ("No one else wanted to touch it with a 10-foot pole"), he met with students' embarrassment, myriad myths and misconceptions and "a homophobia you could cut with a knife." Because honest, informative materials were scarce, his first class was

guided by anonymous questions students wrote on note cards.

## *A letter to his children*

**THE BOOK BEGAN** as a similar, but separate, endeavor, a letter to his children before they left for college. (His daughter is now a schoolteacher and his son, a college senior, plans to be.) The purpose was to prepare them for a problem he felt even most adults were bashful about: In a caring relationship, women should reap as much physical pleasure from sex as men, but research shows they often don't. Because people are reluctant to discuss the problem, he said, "It's not surprising that every new generation tends to go back to the same situation: one-sided sex."

When he found the "experts" tended to accept the status quo or suggest sex naturally lends itself to dual satisfaction, he decided, "Somebody had to write this book."

So he took up the mantle of "somebody" and re-wrote his 12-page letter into the 40,000-word book of research and argument that culminates in the remedy he believes will help.

So far, some colleagues don't know what to make of the book and others have avoided it altogether. But Marshall is heartened by the responses of those who have read it—among them, an older widower who said he only wished he had it years ago, and a younger woman who gave it to her boyfriend.

When it comes to sex, Marshall said, "We are all born clueless." Of course, the same goes for all subjects, to be tackled at various times in life—principals facing rising dropout rates, students struggling with multiplication tables and Marshall himself as a rookie teacher on the verge of tears. But for Marshall, that human ignorance is not a cause for despair, but a directive to find the clues and follow them, wherever they may lead. *d*