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It Ain't Over Till It's Over: Making A Case For Condoms (PHOTOS)

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One of the reasons I started my website, Marlothomas.com, is that I wanted a place for women (including me!) to come together and dream. Women should know that they don't have to hang on to an old dream that has stopped nurturing them -- that there is always time to start a new dream. In that spirit, I'm so excited to introduce a new series called "It Ain't Over," profiling women who have pursued -- and fulfilled -- their dreams and passions, no matter what their age or circumstances. I find these stories endlessly inspiring. I hope you do too.

By Lori Weiss

For most people, casual dinner conversation with the neighbors doesn't usually include the subject of condoms -- but when the man you're breaking bread with just happens to be Dr. Carl Djerassi, the inventor of the birth control pill -- well -- you never know what will come up.

"It was 1980 and I remember the conversation like it was yesterday," recalls Marsha Graham Bartenetti. Carl said that condoms were a great method of birth control. They simply had a bad image. He said, 'Marsha, you're in the entertainment business, you're creative, you need to come up with something to change that.'

And that very same night, she did. In a flash of inspiration, she drew the picture of a pretty compact women could carry in their purses, that would discreetly hold two condoms. Appropriately, she called it *Just In Case*. And then, tucked it away in a dresser drawer for 23 years.

"I spoke to everyone I could think of and they just laughed," she says with a hint of sadness in her voice. "Even my attorney said, 'women aren't going to carry condoms. What would people think?' At the time, no one was talking about AIDS. And women were just starting to realize the dangers of STD's. We weren't using condoms, no less carrying them. We just hoped and prayed and made pacts with God."

A single mom, Marsha couldn't wait around for people to take her seriously, so she continued pursuing her other aspirations. An accomplished singer and voice-over artist -- she relocated her life, and that dresser, from Sausalito to Los Angeles and eventually became the "Voice Mail Queen" -- a familiar voice to any of us that have found ourselves locked in voice mail jail.

"But I never stopped talking about *Just In Case*," Marsha says, "even to my daughter once she was old enough. It wasn't until my mother passed away and I came across a box that had an unpublished manuscript in it. My mother was Martha Stewart before there was a Martha Stewart and apparently she'd put all her ideas and art work into a book -- but never had the courage to bring it to a publisher.

"It was like a neon sign for me. She'd let her ideas sit in a box. That's when I knew I couldn't let the same thing happen to me. I couldn't let my idea sit in a drawer anymore."

It was more than two decades later and Marsha's daughter Rachael had grown up and gone out on her own -- becoming a make-up artist -- and the perfect partner to help her mom launch the discreet compact that she'd conceived so long ago.

"Believe it or not, we still got some backlash. It was 2003 and boutiques were afraid to carry them. And one well known lingerie company, that sells edible panties, considered condom cases to be too risqué!

"But what really shocked us was when we set up a booth at a very big woman's conference out here in Los Angeles, and moms were coming by, saying 'Oh no, not my daughter, she's too busy studying to be having sex' or 'I couldn't get her one of those, what would she think of me.' If we keep judging it to the point of silence, we're throwing our daughters under the bus."

Undeterred, Marsha and Rachael kept moving forward. They rented space at a lingerie trade show in Las Vegas and despite the fact that they found themselves surrounded by a sea of sex toys and costumes, their exhibit drew crowds ten people deep. A home party company purchased 5,000 red compacts on the spot and told them to get ready, because their business was about to take off. They quickly ordered 20,000 more -- which became their first big lesson in business.

"Don't manufacture until you have the order," Marsha says, rolling her eyes. "They used the 5,000 for a promotion and left us holding the other 20,000."

But it was a letter they received from a father that kept them from becoming discouraged. He'd found the company online and bought a condom case for his daughter as she was going off to college.

"He wrote to thank us and to say that he hoped other parents would love their daughters enough to get over the fear of talking about these things. And that's when we had a revelation -- we needed to connect with people who weren't afraid to talk about anything. The next day we reached out to the media and to county health departments around the country."

It wasn't long before Marsha and Rachael found themselves on the set of the syndicated television show *The Doctors*; their website sales soared and they were receiving orders for cases of compacts from health departments who wanted *Just In Case* to be part of their safe sex campaigns.

"Now we need to get the message across to women my age," Marsha, who recently turned 62, says. "There are huge numbers of baby boomers getting STD's and HIV. They're relieved they can't get pregnant -- so they're not thinking about anything else. It's a game of Russian roulette out there today and women who are newly divorced or widowed don't understand that."

As Marsha glances off in the distance, her eyes land on the book her mother had stored away -- and she's reminded of all the ideas she's yet to put into place.

"It's great that women are out there living their lives and having fun -- we just want them to be safe. So I'm going to do whatever I have to, to keep getting that message out. I carry a little post-it note with me all the time. It says rest if you have to, but don't quit. And that's what I want to say to anyone who's ever packed away something they've believed in. Keep going."

"Think of the very worst situation that could occur. Do you think people will laugh at you? Throw you out? Picture what that looks like and realize it probably won't happen. But maybe something else will. Maybe even something really great."

More information on the Just In Case compact is available at Justincaseinc.com.

Just In Case



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