

the school of hard knox

SHELBY KNOX CONTINUES HER FIGHT FOR COMPREHENSIVE-SEX-ED RIGHTS

AT THE TENDER age of 24, feminist activist Shelby Knox already has a decade of experience as a comprehensive-sex-ed advocate under her belt. That's because she began fighting for truth in the classroom at an age when most of us are still trying to figure out what sex is all about. In 2001, Knox was a 15-year-old devout Christian high-school student in Lubbock, TX—a town with some of the highest teen-pregnancy and STD rates in the nation—who had pledged to remain a virgin until marriage as a result of her school's abstinence-only sex-ed program. But when a friend got pregnant after being convinced by her boyfriend that she couldn't conceive if it was her first time, Knox took it upon herself to push for more comprehensive sex education in her community. First, she became certified by the Red Cross to give accurate sex advice, and then she went up against her local school board to change the status quo. Struck by Knox's tenacity, filmmakers Marion Lipschutz and Rose Rosenblatt documented her battle against the school board; their footage became *The Education of Shelby Knox*, the surprise hit of the 2005 Sundance film festival. "I honestly looked around and said to myself, 'The parents need to do this. The state needs to do this.' But neither of them would," says Knox of her political awakening. "That was when I became an activist. My activism was born out of anger."

Though Knox ultimately lost her fight against the Lubbock school board, her work as a feminist organizer was just getting started. She moved to N.Y.C. after college to work for the Sadie Nash Leadership Project, an activism program for young women, and was asked to housesit for



feminist icon Gloria Steinem. As luck would have it, Steinem returned home early, and though Knox was too intimidated to speak to her at first, Steinem broke the ice, and an amazing mentorship relationship—that included a stint as housemates—was born. "Gloria said, 'I just saw this movie about you,'" recalls Knox. "Then she said, 'Evidently, most of the [feminist] movement knows about you, and I'm the last one to know. So why are you not talking to me?'"

Steinem treated Knox like an equal, empowering her with the confidence to speak to anyone. This proved especially useful when Knox, at 20, became the youngest person ever to testify before the House Committee on Oversight and Government

Reform during the first congressional hearing on abstinence-only sex education.

Knox says she believes sex ed in Lubbock has improved overall since she was 15, but it still has a long way to go. That's why she's traveling back to her hometown in February to give a keynote address on intergenerational feminism at the town's annual conference on the advancement of women. She will be hosting a panel there on sex education before moving on to Oklahoma State University in March to serve as its activist-in-residence. "It's a school-by-school battle," says Knox, and she's perfectly poised to keep fighting it. To find out where she'll be appearing next, visit www.shelbyknox.com. [JENNIFER CHEN]