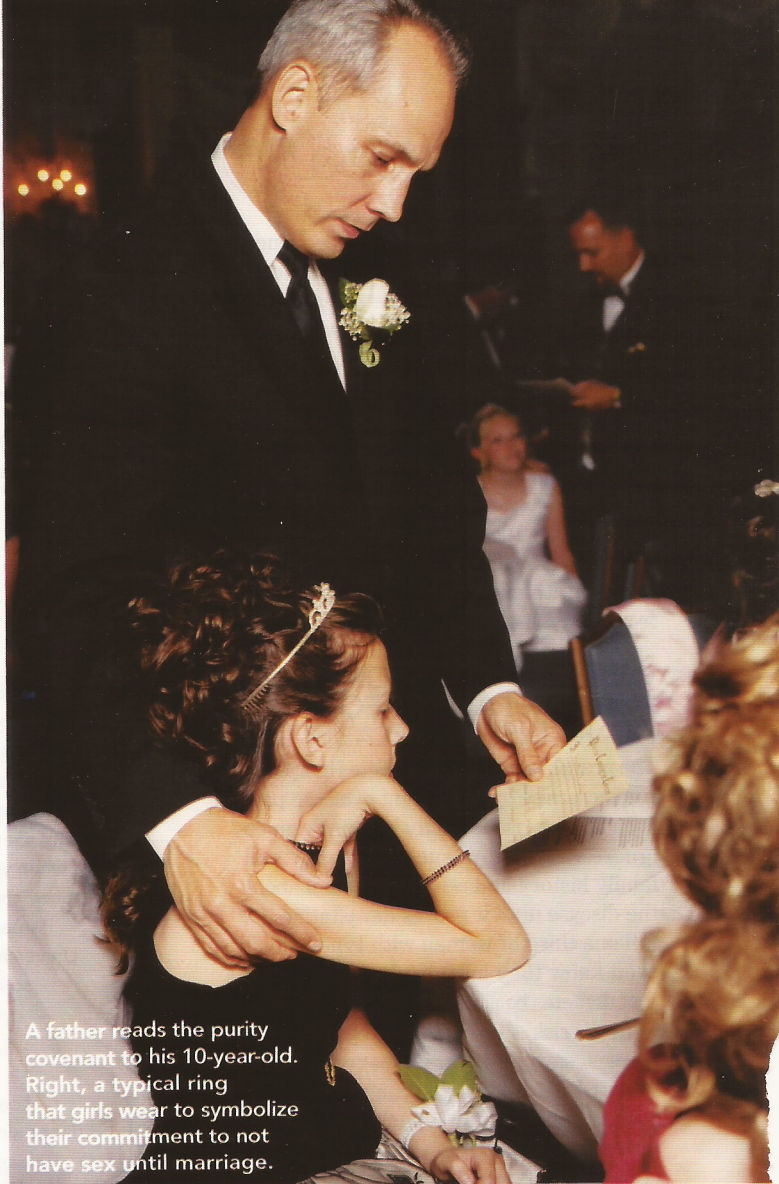


WOULD YOU PLEDGE YOUR

VIRGINITY

TO YOUR FATHER?

It's like a wedding but with a twist: Young women exchange rings, take vows and enjoy a first dance... with their *dads*. "Purity balls" are the next big thing in the save-it-till-marriage movement. Smart or scary? Jennifer Baumgardner investigates. Photographs by Juliana Sohn



A father reads the purity covenant to his 10-year-old. Right, a typical ring that girls wear to symbolize their commitment to not have sex until marriage.



A father and daughter reflect as the pastor who runs the ball talks about what a special night it is.

Go to glamour.com to share your take on purity balls in our poll.

The Regal Daughters Ballet Company performs a ceremonial dance.



In a chandelier-lit ballroom overlooking the Rocky Mountains one recent evening, some hundred couples feast on herb-crusted chicken and julienned vegetables. The men look dapper in tuxedos; their dates are resplendent in floor-length gowns, long white gloves and tiaras framing twirly, ornate updos. Seated at a table with four couples, I watch as the gray-haired man next to me reaches into his breast pocket, pulls out a small satin box and flips it open to check out a gold ring he's about to place on the finger of the woman sitting to his right. Her eyes well up with tears as she is overcome by emotion.

The man's date? His 25-year-old daughter. Welcome to Colorado Springs' Seventh Annual Father-Daughter Purity Ball, held at the five-star Broadmoor Hotel. The event's purpose is, in part, to celebrate dad-daughter bonding, but the main agenda is for fathers to vow to protect the girls' chastity until they marry and for the daughters to promise to stay pure. Pastor Randy Wilson, host of the event and cofounder of the ball, strides to the front of the room, takes the microphone and asks the men, "Are you ready to *war* for your daughters' purity?"

Wilson's voice is jovial, yet his message is serious—and spreading like wildfire. Dozens of these lavish events are held every year, mainly in the South and Midwest, from Tucson to Peoria and New Orleans, sponsored by churches, nonprofit groups and crisis pregnancy



RING: AMEEE BARCHIKO

centers. The balls are all part of the evangelical Christian movement, and they embody one of its key doctrines: abstinence until marriage. Thousands of girls have taken purity vows at these events over the past nine years. While the abstinence movement itself is fairly mainstream—about 10 percent of teen boys and 16 percent of girls in the United States have signed virginity pledges at churches, rallies or programs sponsored by groups such as True Love Waits—purity balls represent its more extreme edge. The young women who sign covenants at these parties tend to be devout, homeschooled and sheltered from popular culture.

Randy Wilson's 19-year-old, Khrystian, is typical: She works at her church, spends most weekends at home with her family and has never danced with a male other than her father or brother. Emily Smith, an 18-year-old I meet, says that even kissing is out for her. "I made a promise to myself when I was younger," she says, "to save my first kiss for my wedding day." A tenet of the abstinence movement is that having lovers before marriage often leads to divorce. In the Wilsons' community, young women hope to meet suitors at church, at college or through family connections.

The majority of the girls here are, as purity ball guidelines suggest, "just old enough...[to] have begun menstruating...." But a couple dozen fathers have also brought girls under 10. "This evening is more about spending time with her than her purity at this point," says one seven-year-old's dad, a trifle sheepishly. The event is seemingly innocent—not once do I hear "sex" or "virgin" cross anyone's lips. Still, every one of

the girls here, even the four-year-old, will sign that purity covenant.

Encouraging girls to avoid sleeping around is, without a doubt, a good thing. The same goes for dad-daughter bonding; research shows that girls who have solid relationships with their fathers are more likely to grow up to be confident, self-respecting, successful women and to make wise choices along the way. Question is, is putting girls' purity on a pedestal the way to achieve these all-important goals?

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athers who are protective of their daughters' virginity are nothing new. "Keep your flower safe!" a good friend's dad used to tell her when we were in college, and we'd laugh—both because it was too late for her virginity and because there was

something distasteful to us about his trying to control her sex life. Recently, though, protecting girls' virginity has become a national, not just familial, concern. In 1996, after lobbying by the religious right, Congress allocated nearly half a billion dollars for public schools nationwide to adopt sex ed programs that advocate abstinence only. Today, all but a few states use government money for classes that basically warn against any sexual activity outside of marriage.

The movement's latest mission is to make abstinence cool (it's been called "chastity

chic"). There are Christian rock concerts where attendees sign pledges, sites like geocities.com/thevirginclub that list stars who have held off on sex until marriage (Jessica Simpson, divorce notwithstanding, is one of their patron saints), and supportive bloggers (abstinence.net features one called "The Professional Virgin"). Silver Ring Thing, a national abstinence group for teens, has an active MySpace page filled with comments like this from "Brianna": "I vowed to stay a virgin till marriage two years ago and it's been a long tough road... but it gets a lil' easier everyday."

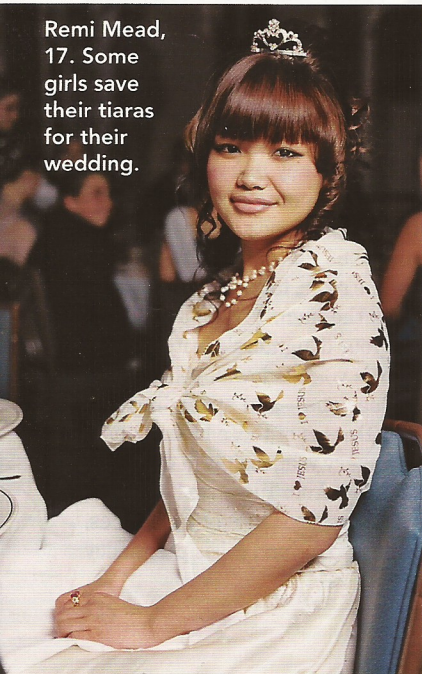
The first purity ball, with all its queen-for-a-day allure, was thrown in 1998 by Wilson, now 48, and his wife, Lisa, 47; the two run Generations of Light, a popular Christian ministry in Colorado Springs. "We wanted to set a standard of dignity and honor for the way the girls should be

treated by the men in their lives," says Lisa, a warm, exuberant woman with a ready smile and seven children, ages 4 to 22. Lisa's own father left her family when she was two, and despite a kind stepfather, she says, she grew up not feeling valued or understood. "Looking back, it's a miracle I remained pure," she says. "I believe if girls feel beautiful and cherished by their fathers, they don't go looking for love from random guys."

That first ball got some positive local and Christian press, as well as inquiries from people in 21 states interested in throwing

"I MADE A PROMISE TO MYSELF...TO SAVE MY FIRST KISS FOR MY WEDDING DAY," SAYS AN 18-YEAR-OLD.

Remi Mead, 17. Some girls save their tiaras for their wedding.



A familiar scene: the line in the ladies' room

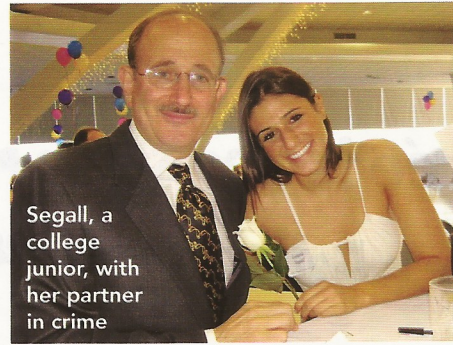


their own. Today, South Dakota's Abstinence Clearinghouse—a major association of the purity movement—sends out about 700 “Purity Ball Planner” booklets a year (tips include printing out the vows on “beautiful paper” and serving wedding cake for dessert). While the Wilsons make no money from their ball, a cottage industry for accessories has sprung up. Roam the Internet and you'll find a \$250 14-karat pearl-and-diamond purity ring; for \$15, you can buy a red baby-doll T-shirt with I'M WAITING emblazoned on the chest, its snug fit sending a bit of a mixed message.

The older girls at the Broadmoor tonight are themselves curvaceous and sexy in backless dresses and artful makeup; next to their fathers, some look disconcertingly like wives. In fact, in the parlance of the purity ball folks, one-on-one time with dad is a “date,” and the only sanctioned one a girl can have until she is “courted” by a man. The roles are clear: Dad is the only man in a girl's life until her husband arrives, a lifestyle straight out of biblical times. “In patriarchy, a father owns a girl's sexuality,” notes psychologist and feminist author Carol Gilligan, Ph.D. “And like any other property, he guards it, protects it, even loves it.”

When it's time for dads and daughters to take the pledge (some informally exchange rings as well), the men stand over their seated daughters and read aloud from parchment imprinted with the covenant: “I, [father's name], choose before God to cover my daughter as her authority and protection in the area of purity....” The men inscribe their names and their daughters sign as witnesses. Then everyone returns to their meals and an excited buzz fills the room.

Purity balls are, in fact, part of a larger trend throughout (continued on page 236)



Segall, a college junior, with her partner in crime

“I crashed a purity ball”

As a college student, I don't see my dad very often. But when we do get together, I always enjoy the company and the conversation, even his obsession with tai chi. Today is a pretty strange outing for us, though: I've made him infiltrate a purity ball, held in a convention center on Jekyll Island, Georgia, so I could see what the whole phenomenon is about. Technically I'm qualified to be here: At 21, I'm still a virgin.

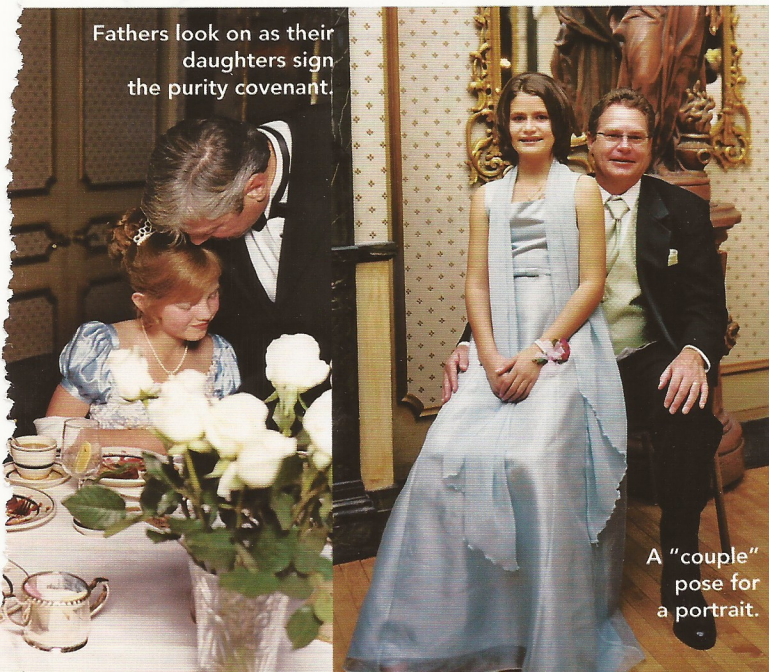
We waltz awkwardly around the ballroom, dodging teens in tiaras who've just signed purity pledges. I picture my last boyfriend and those nights when we'd go to dinner and a movie, come back to his house, and things would heat up. The last person I would have wanted to think about was my dad! It would be like having a third person in the room with you. Weird.

Back at our table a father puts his arm around the back of his daughter's chair, smiles at her and says, “This is a big promise. You have to cherish it.” She flashes him a gleaming metal smile, but I am troubled. If I were to take a pledge but then lose my virginity, would I no longer be my father's “jewel” or “treasure,” like the table place cards say? I know I'd feel guilty. And ashamed.

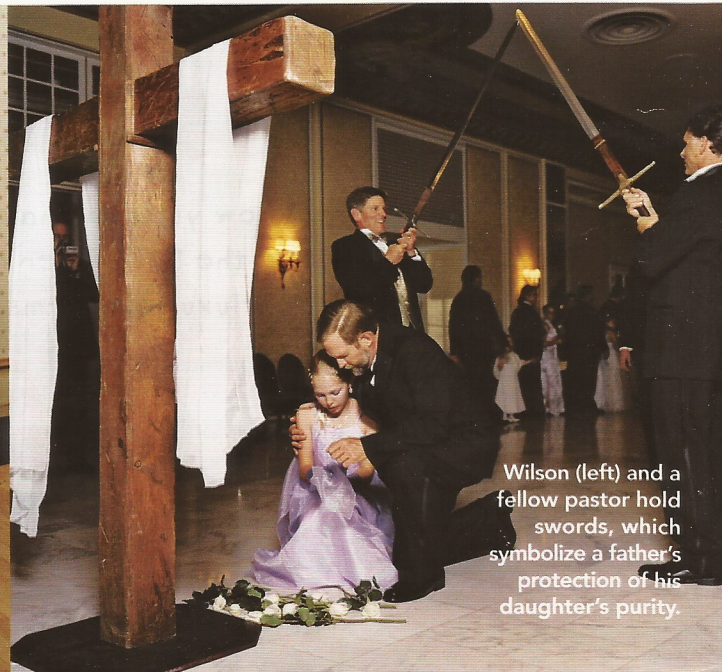
I can see why a father would want to protect his daughter. I've faced the regret of a meaningless hookup. I've had friends in unhealthy relationships. But part of growing up is learning to deal with disappointment. “I'd never make you take a pledge like this!” my dad tells me. “I'd hope that the values we've given you and your experiences will help you make your own choices.” Spoken like a true dad. My relationship with him is by no means perfect, but this ball makes me realize that deeply rooted in our connection is an understanding that he will love me with no conditions attached. To me, that's a true pledge of protection and security.

—LAURIE SEGALL

TOP: RABBANI AND SOLIMENE. CARDS: PAUL ARMBRUSTER



Fathers look on as their daughters sign the purity covenant.



A “couple” pose for a portrait.

Wilson (left) and a fellow pastor hold swords, which symbolize a father's protection of his daughter's purity.

American culture of fathers spending more time with their daughters and sons—the amount rose from 2.6 hours a week in 1965 to 6.5 hours in 2000, the most recent year for which statistics are available. This togetherness has a real payoff for girls: Those who are close with their fathers generally do better in life than those who aren't. Dan Kindlon, Ph.D., a Harvard-based psychologist who did in-depth interviews with 113 girls and teens for his new book, *Alpha Girls*, found that those who had the best relationships with their dads were the most accomplished academically and had the strongest sense of self. Another much-cited study on the subject by two sociologists tracked 126 Baltimore girls from low-income families. It found that those with involved and caring dads were twice as likely to go to college or find a stable job after high school than those without such fathers; 75 percent less likely to give birth as teens; 80 percent less likely to ever be in jail; and half as likely to experience significant depression.

Of course, adolescence poses a tricky challenge: Teens are often more interested in hanging out with friends than in spending time with dear old Dad. And their fathers may not be sure how to treat a child who's morphing into a young woman. (I vividly recall the betrayed look my father gave me when he caught me, at 14, emerging from a makeout session in my room.) Some experts wonder if dads' involvement in the family is seeming less important these days, given mothers' more dominant role—they're becoming the breadwinners in record numbers. Says Margo Maine, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in West Hartford, Connecticut, who often works with families, "Our culture—and even fathers themselves—underestimates the power fathers have on women's self-esteem and identity."

Randy Wilson wants to change that. With his bright smile, steady eye contact and the erect posture of a small but confident man, he reminds me of the magnetic self-help guru that Tom Cruise portrayed in *Magnolia*. "Way to go, men!" Wilson says. "I applaud your *courage* to look your daughter in the eye and tell her how beau-

tiful she is. If you haven't done it yet, I'll give you a chance to do it right now."

I strike up a conversation with Christy Parcha, an 18-year-old brunette who's here to perform a ballet later on; her 10-year-old sister is attending the ball with their dad, Mike, a math teacher at a local community college. Christy's eyes are bright, her cheeks flushed, and a smile permanently animates her face.

GIRLS WHO ARE CLOSE WITH THEIR FATHERS GENERALLY DO BETTER IN LIFE THAN THOSE WHO AREN'T.

Although she just graduated from high school, she is not going to college but instead will be teaching ballet classes, continuing with piano lessons and writing a book about "emotional purity," which Christy thinks is even more important than the physical kind. "I am just trying to reserve all those special feelings for my husband," she says ardently.

As it turns out, *not* allowing herself to think sexual thoughts makes her nervous, too, because she wants to experience pleasure with her future husband: "I don't want to be a burden to him in that I am not enjoying [sex]." Recently, a friend took her to see a movie about Queen Esther, *One Night With the King*—"a really romantic story," according to Christy. "So I watched it and I had these huge feelings rise up inside me, and I was like, 'OK, they are still there!'" she says, flopping back in her chair with relief. Still, Christy doesn't want to date. She associates sex outside of marriage as a girl "getting used, betrayed, having guys deceive you, all that kind of thing."

Other girls at the ball are far less eloquent about the pledge they've just made. To them, the excitement of the ball is buying fancy dresses and primping; one 14-year-old in the bathroom tells me she started getting ready at 9 A.M. When I ask Hannah Smith, 15, what purity means to her, she answers, "I actually don't know." Her older sister Emily jumps in: "Purity, it means...I don't know how to explain it. It is important to us that we promise to ourselves and to our fathers and to God that we promise to stay pure until.... It is hard to explain." I suspect that the girls' lack of vocabulary has to do with a universal truth of girlhood: You don't want to talk about sex with anyone older than 18, *particularly* your dad. At the same time, the girls seem so unsure of the reasons behind their vows that I can't help but wonder if they've just signed a contract whose terms they didn't fully understand.

There is no data on whether girls who attend purity balls remain abstinent until marriage; chances are many do, given the tight-knit communities they live in. But there is striking evidence that more than half of teens who take virginity pledges—at, say, rallies or events—go on to have sex within three years, according to findings of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the most comprehensive survey of teens ever taken. And 88 percent of the pledgers surveyed end up having sex before marriage. "No pledge can counter the fact that teenagers are, in fact, sexual beings postpuberty," notes Cary Backenger, a clinical psychotherapist in Appleton, Wisconsin, who works with teens, including several who have taken virginity pledges. "You can't turn that off."

Disturbingly, the adolescent health study also found that STD rates were significantly higher in communities with a high proportion of pledgers. "Pledgers are less likely than nonpledgers to use condoms, so if they do have sex it is less safe," says Peter Bearman, Ph.D., a Columbia University sociologist who helped design the study. For these teens, he believes, it's a mind game: If you have condoms, you were planning to have sex. If you don't, sex wasn't premeditated, which makes it more OK. The study also found that even pledgers who remained virgins were highly likely to have oral and anal sex—risky behavior given that most probably didn't use condoms to cut their risk.

Curiously, the teen pregnancy rate is on the decline nationwide. Proponents of an abstinence-only philosophy point to this as evidence that pledges work. But a just-released study by the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University attributed 14 percent of this drop to teens holding off on sex—and 86 percent to teens using more effective forms of birth control, like the Pill. Says study author John Santelli, M.D., a specialist in adolescent medicine, "If most of the progress in reducing teen pregnancy rates is due to improved contraceptive use, national policy needs to catch up with those realities."

Leaders of the abstinence movement firmly believe, however, that teaching kids about the mechanics of sex and contraception "arouses" them, sparking them to have sex. They claim that those who break their vows were not "strong" pledgers to begin with, and that many more teens do keep them (teens the researchers didn't speak to). "Kids who abstain are not out there breaking hearts; they're not dogs in heat. They go on to have great, intimate sex," says Leslee Unruh, president of the Abstinence Clearinghouse. "The purity

movement celebrates sex but not sex outside of commitment.”

Girls who are getting married do need information about sex, Unruh continues, and she's there to provide it. (On one occasion, “I had a girl call me from her wedding,” she says.) “I let them know what to expect, that there might be some discomfort,” and she gives detailed information about touching and lubricants when necessary. Unruh thinks purity balls are a commendable way to get girls who want to stay virgins to do so. As she says, “They help girls realize that their fathers care deeply about their future, and then they decide to keep themselves pure.”

Many experts strongly disagree. “Virginity pledges set girls up for failure,” contends Kindlon, who specializes in adolescent behavior. “I like the father-daughter bonding part of the balls, but it is unfortunate that it is around a pledge that is doomed. I always counsel parents to try to encourage teens to delay sex. But when you completely forbid teens to be sexual, it can do them more harm than good. It's like telling kids not to eat candy, and then they want it more.”

“When you sign a pledge to your father to preserve your virginity, your sexuality is basically being taken away from you until you sign yet another contract, a marital one,” worries Eve Ensler, the writer and activist. “It makes you feel like you're the least important person in the whole equation. It makes you feel invisible.”

It's not hard to imagine the anxiety young women must feel about being a purity failure. Carol-Maureen, an acquaintance from my hometown of Fargo, North Dakota, who got a purity ring in seventh grade and still wears it at 22, told me, “If I had sex before marriage and my parents found out, I'd be mortified. I'd feel like I failed in this promise to them, even though it's really not their business.”

Marie, a Texan I met through a colleague, took a virginity pledge at 14 but actually felt no shame about breaking her vow a year later. “When I took the pledge, I was true in my heart, but as I got older I had a broader world view,” she says. Still, she snuck around to have sex with her boyfriend so her parents wouldn't find out, and ended up getting pregnant at 19; she married quickly thereafter. Would she ever ask her son to take a virginity pledge? “No,” she says. “I don't want him to tell me something just because he thinks I want to hear it and then lie to me about it.”

Figuring out your sexuality on your own terms is a major passage into adulthood. Back when I was 19 and contemplating having sex for the first time, I presented my virginity to my boyfriend as this great

treasure he could take from me. He looked at me and said, “But I don't want to take anything. You should be having sex with me because you want to—and if you don't, then you aren't ready.” I was embarrassed by the smack-down of my “gift,” but his words made me realize sex wasn't just something to give to him but something to do for myself, too. Learning that was more meaningful to me than actually having sex.

When I point out to Christy Parcha's father, Mike, that experience with relationships, bumps and all, can help young women mature emotionally and become ready for sex and marriage, he warily concedes that's true. “But there can be damage, too,” he says. “I guess we'd rather err on the side of avoiding these things. The girl can learn after marriage.” Like other fathers I speak with, Parcha says that if his daughter were to fail in her quest to be pure, she would be met with “grace and forgiveness.”

But, he continues, “I am not worried about that. She is not even going to come close to those situations. She believes, and I do too, that her husband will come through our family connections or through me before her heart even gets involved.” Randy Wilson's oldest daughter, Lauren, 22, met her fiancé, Brett, a young man from the Air Force Academy, at church, and other fathers and daughters mention this to me as a hopeful sign that God will open similar doors for them. God has been throwing some curveballs lately, though; a week before the ball, Mike and Christy Parcha's pastor, Ted Haggard, a man who has openly railed against gay marriage, made headlines nationwide when he admitted to receiving a massage from a man (one who claimed Haggard had paid him for sex), showing how at odds what is preached and what is practiced can be.

Following dessert—chocolate cake or fruit coulis for the adults, ice cream sundaes for the girls—couples file into the adjacent ballroom. Seven ballerinas, including Christy Parcha, appear in white gowns with tulle skirts, carrying on their shoulders a large, rustic wooden cross that they lift up and rest on a stand. Lisa Wilson cries as she presents each of their three ceremonial dances, one of which is called “I'll Always Be Your Baby.” Afterward, Randy Wilson and a fellow pastor, Steve Holt, stand at the cross with heavy

rapiers raised and announce that they are prepared to “bear swords and war for the hearts of our daughters.” The blades create an inverted “V” under which girls and fathers kneel and lay white roses that symbolize purity. Soon there is a heap of cream-colored buds wilting beneath the outstretched arms of the cross.

It's a memorable image at the end of a memorable night. I've been moved and charmed by the Wilsons, an uncommonly warm, polite and loving brood. Over and over, the five daughters have told me how great their father is at giving them attention, love and hugs. When Khrystian ballroom-dances with him, they look so comfortable in each others' arms that you wish *every* girl in the United States could have that closeness.

But the real challenge, in my mind, is for a father to remain loving toward his daughter and at the same time nurture her autonomy. The purity movement is, in essence, about refusing to let girls grow up: Daddy's girls never have to be adults. “The balls are saying, I want you to be 11 forever,” says Kindlon. These are girls who may never find out what it means to make decisions without a man involved, to stand

up for themselves, to *own* their sexuality.

I deeply wish that the lovely things I have seen tonight—the delighted young women, the caring, doting dads—might evolve into father-daughter events not tied to exhorting a promise from a girl that may hang over her head as she struggles to become a woman. When Lauren Wilson hit adolescence, her father gave her a purity ring and a charm necklace with a tiny lock and key. Randy

Wilson took the key, which he will hand over to her husband on their wedding day. The image of a locked area behind which a girl stores all of her messy desires until one day a man comes along with the key haunts me. By the end of the ball, as I watch fathers carrying out sleepy little girls with drooping tiaras and enveloping older girls with wraps, I want to take every one of those girls aside and whisper to them the real secret of womanhood: The key to any treasure you've got is held by one person—*you*. ©

Jennifer Baumgardner is coauthor of Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future.

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