ABC Pitch: Planned Parenthood Peer Educators Not Only Help Their Peers Make Smart Choices About Sex, But Also Work to Serve a Community with a Stigma against Sex and Gain a Wealth of Knowledge

 When most people think of New Mexico they think of the beauty and the affluence- the colorful desert, beautiful snowcapped peaks and broken mesas along with a wonderful community for artists. However the reality is that most of New Mexico is albeit beautiful far from affluent. It is the poorest state in the union and has a high violent crime rate. Drugs are a major problem due partially to the ease in obtaining high quality drugs at a low price. All of these factors are stacked up against teens growing up here along with the highest teen pregnancy rate in the US at 93 out of every 1000 girls in New Mexico getting pregnant compared to the national average of 68 out of 1000. This could be due to a far from comprehensive sex education program in schools, the strongly conservative, religious community or the fact that 60.5% of teens in New Mexico use contraception compared to the 75% national average. However nestled in this state of juxtaposition are a group of intelligent, empowered young women trying to beat the odds and make sure that everyone of their peers that seeks knowledge about sex and sexual health can get it in a non-judgmental, open way from someone their age.

 This group of young women is trying to break through the taboo in their community about sex and normalize it. They realize that it is a religious place where sex is rarely talked about mainly because there is a lot of guilt around it. However there are still the normal teen issues as well: stigma that resounds about losing your virginity, pressure to give into your partner and too little talk about the consequences of sexual activity. Between the lack of sex talk in the community and the many pressures teens face it makes it almost impossible for many teens to reach out to their parents about sex and sexual health. This is where the peer educators step in. The group is found the way most things in teenage culture are established, word of mouth. Planned Parenthood educates them about sex and sexual health and then requires them to take a test once a year to become certified. Other students know they can come to them for honest, accurate information and trust them because they are one of them. Peer educators become known in their community and receive texts, calls and face to face questions. A positive peer pressure has developed where this group of girls feels that it is their job to educate their peers, give them the knowledge to keep themselves safe and take the appropriate action. There is no way to eliminate teen pregnancy but they believe they can make a difference by letting people know what they can do to prevent it. All of the girls that participate in the peer educator program have grown as human beings. Sure they know a lot more about sex and have had the opportunity to spread that knowledge to make better decisions and help others do the same, but they have gained far more than that. One of them got a college scholarship for her peer education and another cites the wonderful presentation skills she developed. All of them say that the program has prepared them for life long success. These young women have emerged self-assured and confident. They have realized the importance of having an open mind and not pushing your values or judgment on others. Most of these girls feel they can do anything after discussing sex in a community where sex is still seen as something people do but do not talk about. As one girl said “the world is her oyster”.