

# The Century Project Weathers a Storm



photo by Karen White

Frank Cordelle leading a class discussion while others view The Century Project.

## Paul Rapoport

In 2006 (issue 26.1), *N* magazine contained an article about *The Century Project* by Frank Cordelle. Simply described, the Project is a chronological series of nude photographic portraits of more than a hundred diverse girls and women of many ages, shapes, sizes, and conditions, plus their personal statements about their bodies and experiences. The statements are as important as the photographs.

The Project has a 19-year record, well documented, of exhibition in many states (and two countries). It has been praised often by professionals: psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, counselors, educators—and by many others, including naturists.

There's no doubt that it is challenging. On the occasional complaint about the nudity, an exhibition of the Project has been visited by police, but with no action ever taken. In one instance, after viewing the Project, a police officer left wiping his eyes.

A few years ago, John Foubert, now an Oklahoma State University professor, found out about The Century Project. He claimed in a media release from February 2009 that The Century Project is “an unconscionable act of exploitation of children that

research shows will cause many harms to our nation's college campuses.” (Let's ignore his confusion of children with college students.) Reputable research shows no such thing with regard to children or women (or men), a point to be discussed shortly. Research on The Century Project itself shows that it is very effective with its positive message about body acceptance, body development and diversity, life processes, recovery from illness or abuse, and much more.

Foubert claimed further that “some pictures that are shown in this exhibit fall under common researchers [sic] definitions of pornography.” No reputable definition of pornography has anything to do with The Century Project.

Foubert starts some of his attacks on The Century Project with “My name is John Foubert. I am a national expert in the prevention of sexual assault.” Let's examine the basis of that claim.

In 1998, he started the organization One in Four, of which he was President for ten years. Its stated aim is rape prevention. Its name comes from an ostensible statistic that one in four college women has been subjected to rape or attempted rape. There is no reliable or verifiable source for that figure.

Also in 1998, Foubert became a faculty member at the University of Virginia. In January 2000, a student explained in its college newspaper, *The Declaration*, why “more than a few women, activists, and survivors [of sexual violence] spit fire at the mention of John Foubert.”

Under Foubert’s guidance, the centerpiece of One in Four has been The Men’s Program, to reduce men’s sexual violence towards women. This program, the student demonstrated, was insensitive, patronizing, controlling, self-serving, and (unsurprisingly) homophobic. It was based on stereotypical myths about sexuality, showed no understanding of rape’s causes or nature, ignored experts, and silenced women. It contained much violent and abusive content.

In 1999, a researcher at Western Illinois University found no evidence that The Men’s Program reduced rape. Another called Foubert’s program “irresponsible and ethically unacceptable.” At the University of Virginia, Foubert dismissed ideas from feminist students, while promoting a Miss Virginia beauty pageant.

In 2002, he moved to the College of William and Mary, also in Virginia. Amongst both students and faculty members there, he gained a reputation for intolerance and intimidation of those disagreeing with him. In 2008 he left for Oklahoma State University. In 2010, when a student explained why she thought well of The Century Project, Foubert prevented her from completing her program.

Under his promotion, One in Four spread to a few dozen college campuses. *The Men’s Program*, incidentally, is a grandiose name for something that lasts about an hour.

Notably, Foubert stated in 2008 ([oneinfourusa.org/president.php](http://oneinfourusa.org/president.php)) that One in Four had “the most effective rape prevention program ever evaluated in the research literature.” His program was “evaluated” in 2007 by (predictably) Foubert himself.

One in Four has thrived on misrepresentation. It trades on keeping women frightened, alarmed, and suppressed. It pretends that Foubert and his followers will save them with his disreputable program.

Such are John Foubert’s qualifications to write about The Century Project and vindictively try to punish people who support it or actually understand nudity. His more detailed attempts to criticize the Project or other images of nudity involve misusing information; distorting or changing others’ statements in quoting them; mentioning irrelevant, inconclusive, or weak research to try to conceal his wrong argument; and ignoring the impressive research and statements that contradict his prejudice, acting as if they do not exist.

Here’s an example of Foubert’s tactics with others’ research. One set of researchers concluded in 2000 ([sscnnet.ucla.edu/comm/malamuth/pdf/00arsr11.pdf](http://sscnnet.ucla.edu/comm/malamuth/pdf/00arsr11.pdf)): “For the majority of American men, pornography exposure (even at the highest levels assessed here) is not associated with high levels of sexual aggression.” That is a careful, qualifying statement in a long, complex article. Foubert cited this article in his 2009 media release to justify saying that “seeing pornography causes men to behave aggressively toward other people.”

About The Century Project, one woman wrote, “I never saw anything more compelling in my entire life.” John Foubert says it’s just like *Playboy*.

Another woman to Frank Cordelle: “We have a brief time in this life, and it is the rare individual who breaks out of the day to day and moves to add something beautiful, strong, and curative to life. You have done a great thing.” John Foubert calls it pornography.

Thousands of women thank Frank Cordelle, not a few with tears in their eyes. John Foubert claims The Century Project causes women to be raped.

Is Foubert jealous of Frank Cordelle’s insight, skill, and success? His obsession with The Century Project seems unlimited. He watches for all its coming exhibitions and then continues his smear campaign by writing to the Project’s hosts, local media, and state legislators, telling them to ban it.

His partial “success” has been limited to one college campus. At the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in 2009, a Vice-Chancellor, Brian Chapman, read Foubert’s malicious attack on The Century Project just before it was to open. He immediately forbade exhibition of all photos in it that were of people under 18. (Those photos are in the book of the Project, which was readily available on campus.) Angered by the unjustifiable censorship, UNCW’s student newspaper, *The Seahawk*, published all the images that Chapman had banned.



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NORA, AGE 11



MAHOGANY, AGE 16

The protest grew. Dozens of letters objecting to his action went to Chapman, who then told the media that letters he had received supported his decision.

His reputation for deceit and unilateral bad decisions emerged in discussions in the university's Senate. One month after The Century Project left Wilmington, Chapman was forced to resign. And Foubert himself is now under investigation at Oklahoma State University.

Although images of nudity may occasionally surprise, confuse, or bother some people, and individuals may misuse some, naturists need to oppose the claim that the existence or viewing of such images causes or increases sexual violence or crime. Countering it may be a tough task. But the mythology and censorship surrounding nudity, especially the non-sexualized variety in naturism, are large and hysterical, and as disturbing as John Foubert's fabrications and bullying.

More than 40 years ago, a presidential *Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, carried out largely under Richard Nixon, concluded (see the book *Sex and Sensibility*, by Marcia Pally) that there is

*no evidence...that exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent behavior among youth or adults. The Commission cannot conclude that exposure to erotic materials is a factor in the causation of sex crime or sex delinquency.*

Recall that Foubert believes that The Century Project is fundamentally explicit erotic sexual material. Even ignoring that delusion, the above quotation indicates that his specific claim about harm, even from material that really is pornographic, is false.

In 1989, John Money, of Johns Hopkins University, "found no evidence that sexually explicit material causes or maintains sexual crimes or aberrations." In 1993, the FBI stated that it had "no evidence that pornography causes crimes."

What about the Internet and its assumed influence on sex crimes against children? A 2008 task force created by 49 state attorneys general found ([cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/ISTTF\\_Final\\_Report-Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/ISTTF_Final_Report-Executive_Summary.pdf)) that risks minors face online "are in most cases not significantly different from those they face offline." Furthermore, "unwanted exposure to pornography does occur online, but those most likely exposed are those seeking it out."

Whatever one thinks pornography is or does—problems with it are undeniable—for the past 43 years at least, researchers have tried to make the connection Foubert endorses. All reputable attempts have failed.

There is much evidence that America's high level of body dysmorphic disorder and poor self-image (both prevalent amongst females), too early pregnancy, abortion, sexual violence against



DEIRDRE, AGE 37



FLORENCE, AGE 70

women, and similar social pathologies is linked to harsh body phobia coming from the narrowness and negativity towards sexuality that pervade American officialdom.

The harm is not mainly where some think it is. It's in the attitudes that foster the above serious problems, which push children to grow up to continue them. It's no help to deny what The Century Project is and to refuse to acknowledge its longstanding very positive record.

Inadvertently perhaps, some people continue to lead children to think their bodies are inherently faulty or bad; there are strangers everywhere who will snatch them; child sexual abuse (horrible, agreed) is an epidemic; photos of nudity cause or increase incidence of sex crime; and all nudity in photos of children must lead to sexually exploitative, harmful activity against them.

While it's not hard to see where all that comes from, naturists should know it's wrong. It also does not protect children. Aside from often calling for massive censorship and removal of important freedoms based on uninformed opinion (and sometimes prejudicial rants), these wrong ideas tend to make children anxious and afraid concerning their bodies, and less likely to repel or report sexual abuse on the rare occasions it occurs. Is that desirable?

Although The Century Project is not explicitly naturist, naturists will recognize themselves on almost every page of it and may easily identify with all its concerns and understand its

triumphs. Many naturists will also recognize John Foubert as the typical anti-nudity "savior" who schemes and threatens in order to hide his own problems, and accuses others of the intolerance and deceit that he himself demonstrates. Although Foubert is smarter than most, his manipulation is easy to detect if one is familiar with his subject or does a little digging.

Naturists in particular should never take body phobic claims at face value. Too often, John Fouberts are constructing a cover for the old equation: image of nudity = sexual activity = pornography = immorality = obscenity = automatic harm = get me a law to make me feel better.

Such people must be thwarted. The continual practice, promotion, and expansion of naturism, which is connected in a deep sense to The Century Project, are good ways to do so. Both The Century Project and naturism clearly represent a notable component of living a life of dignity and justice in peace and in hope. **N**

*Paul Rapoport is a consulting editor for N and a member of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and published the book Bodies and Souls: The Century Project, by Frank Cordelle, in 2006.*