

Love

Sexperts set for Valentine's Day celebration

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Outside room 106 of Wil-son Hall at the University of Connecticut, a table covered in Valentine's Day cardmak- ing supplies, free candy and woven baskets filled with condoms sits beside an open doorway.

Just one step inside the brightly colored room reveals walls covered in statistics about sexual health, shelves packed with storage contain- ers of condoms and crocheted penises.

"I like to crochet," said Cassy Setzler, the program manager for sexual health and peer edu- cation initiatives at UConn.

Setzler oversees the UConn Sexperts, a group of student health educators. A part of UConn Student Health and Wellness, they hold one-on- one meetings, drop-in hours, sex education events and help with other services such as sexually transmitted infection testing and condom delivery.

Setzler, who graduated

helping students feel empow- ered are amongst the most im- portant aspects of her role.

"Through this job, I've kind of been able to destigmatize this area of health and under- stand that a person's sexual health can really affect their well-being, especially if they don't necessarily know how to engage with sexual health in a safe or comfortable manner," Mahendarkar said.

Through both outreach pro- grams and events, the group attempts to make sexual edu- cation more accessible to UConn students.

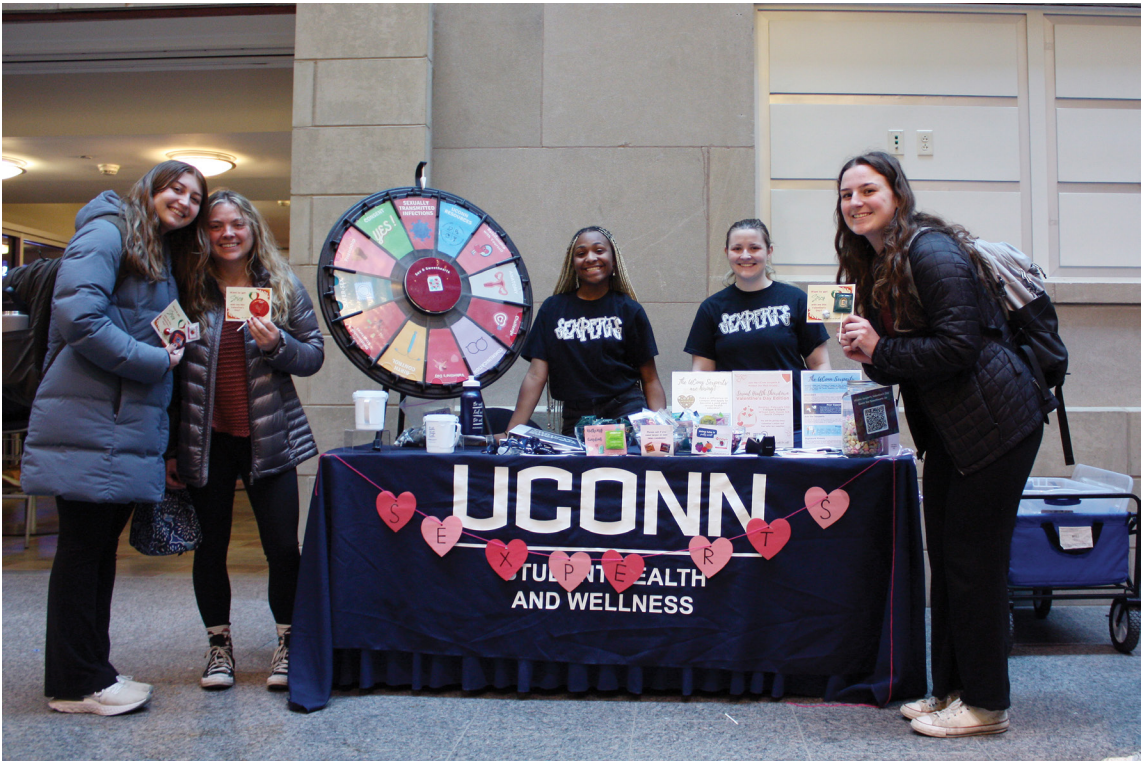
The group has multiple sig- nature events throughout the year. These include UCondom- a-thon, an event held around World AIDS Day on Dec. 1 that teaches safe sex skills at Late Night at the Student Union while giving out free ice cream, and the annual Sexual Health and Wellness Fair.

They also have a Kahoot! Show-

cial events this week instead of our more run-of-mill one-on- one programs."

Setzler pointed out that, in addition to Valentine's Day, Saturday also marks National Condom Day. She added that there are chocolate strawberry flavored condoms for the holiday.

Some of those events, such as the "Good Vibrations Pleasure Pop Up Workshop" where Sex- perts explain how to use sex toys and safety tips, are more



Sex & Sweethearts with the University of Connecticut Sexperts at the Student Union on Feb. 9, 2024. The UConn Sexperts educated students on safe sex.

PHOTO BY BLAKE SYKES, GRAB PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

from both UConn and UConn Health and was a Sexpert during her time as a student, said that mission of the Sexperts is to provide UConn students with education, resources and opportunities to have open and honest conversations about sex and sexuality so they feel comfortable and empowered to make informed decisions re- garding sex.

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Sugita Mahendarkar is one of those peer educators. A fifth-semester physiology and neurobiology student, Mah- endarkar is in her fourth se- mester as a Sexpert.

“I thought that this would be a good opportunity to be- come more informed and ex- plore this area and see what I thought of it and if I liked it,” Mahendarkar said. “So I ap- plied, and I really like being a Sexpert. I really like telling people about their health and how they can be healthy on campus.”

Mahendarkar said that des- tigmatizing sexual health and

down,” which Setzler said is presented at least 20 times per semester to organizations such as fraternities and sororities.

They have partnered with other organizations as well, such as with the UConn Student Union Board of Govern- ors for Sex Education Bingo. Students could win sex toys, among other prizes donated by the board.

“Some people could be re- ally shy, so we understand that [...] even if they want to go to an event, they might not feel entirely comfortable going and we get that,” Setzler said. “We try to make it accessible for people and relax[ed] so that people aren’t intimidated.”

With Valentine’s Day ap- proaching, they have also seen an uptick in one of their other services: “gloveBOX.” Setzler says that students are provid- ed with 20 different types of condoms for free in a surprise box delivered to their resi- dence hall or picked up at the Sexperts’ office. There are dif- ferent types of boxes to fit dif- ferent needs.

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Through both outreach programs and events, the group attempts to make sexual education more accessible to UConn students.

“It is a big week for people because we get a lot of condom orders this week and stuff be- cause people want Valentine’s Day to be special,” Setzler said. “We do some of our more spe-

focused on sexual health. Oth- ers, like the Valentine’s Day card making station outside of their office, celebrate less-sex- ual aspects of the holiday.

“We embrace awkwardness, I think, because, yeah, sex can be awkward,” Setzler said. “And that’s part of the beauty of it.”

“We also remind people that you don’t have to have sex on Valentine’s Day,” Setzler said. “Valentine’s Day is the day to love yourself, love your friends, love your family. It’s not just about romantic love.”

Both Setzler and Mahendarkar understand that students can be hesitant to engage with their office and events for differing reasons, and both emphasized the effort put into ensuring events are safe, comfortable and accessible spaces.

“We know that when people laugh, it’s because they’re un- comfortable and they don’t know what to do, right?” Setzler said. “They might be curious, but they don’t know how to ex- press that. Or they’re with their friends and they’re like, ‘oh, if I stop at this table, what will my friends think?’ And, if people laugh and walk by, that’s okay. We’ll get them next time.”

Mahendarkar added that some of the people who laugh will some- times double back and return with questions such as how to use a certain type of condom after overcoming the initial awkward- ness they may be feeling.

“We embrace awkward- ness, I think, because, yeah, sex can be awkward,” Setzler said. “And that’s part of the beauty of it. So we just try not to shame anyone. If they do feel uncomfortable, we’ll meet people where they’re at.”



Birdbrained Science: Inhuman ways to love

by Gabrielle Wincherhern
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Happy (early) Valentine's Day! Are you tired of seeing chocolate-covered strawberries, bouquets of roses and watching everyone post their partners? Me too, so in this special edition of Birdbrained Science, we're going to look at a few dis- plays of love in non-human species.

Putting the 'wing' in wingman

If I were to talk about every avian courtship ritual that in- volves dancing, we'd probably be here until next year's Val- entine's Day (sidebar: did you know dinosaurs probably had dancing courtship rituals simi- lar to birds?). So, I will only fo- cus on a particular kind of dan- cing, and that is group dancing.

Certain manakin species will perform synchronized courtship displays in groups to attract fe- males. These groups typically con- sist of a dominant, or alpha male and at least one beta male (yes, that is actually what they're called). Al- though all the males are involved in the dance routine, usually the alpha is the one who gets the girl (betas later have a higher chance of becoming an alpha — maybe partly due to all that dance practice — so "beta-ing" for alphas could be an effective long-term strategy for some males).

My takeaway from this? Get your friends involved in your she- nanigans and do a jester dance to- gether. Also, teamwork makes the dream work — but mostly if you're an alpha male.

I got (you) a rock

If you're on the same side of Instagram as I am, you might have seen something on social media about this already. But if you haven't, allow me to enlight- en you: In some species, male penguins present single females with rocks in hopes of form- ing a potentially lifelong bond. If the female deems the rock good enough, she will also find a rock, and the two will go back- and-forth finding rocks, which they will eventually use to build an impressive nest. From there, they'll start a family together.

Of course, there's practical, sci- entific reasoning to all of this. A male penguin who selects a good nest-building rock signals to a fe- male that he will probably be able to find other good nest-building rocks, meaning he can help build a good nest that will protect their offspring. This, in turn, will maxi- mize the chances of the offspring's survival, thus maximizing the chances that the parents' genes will get passed down.

But even so, I think there's still something cute and poetic about it. Male penguins offering rocks to prospective partners aren't just offering rocks; they're showing the cornerstone of the foundation of their future together.

And honestly, I can get behind that. If someone got me a really cool rock, I would probably also start a family with them. That's why we have engagement rings, right?

BFFs: The 'B' stands for 'bottlenose'

Shifting away from romantic

examples of love, let's look at dol- phins. Some of you might know about my hatred for dolphins and be confused by my decision to in- clude them, but I do have to grudg- ingly admire them every once in a while. This is one of those cases.

Male bottlenose dolphins will form pair bonds, where they pretty much just constantly hang out with each other for a long time, sometimes even for life. Males in these pair bonds have an easier go at most things in life than un- paired males, like hunting and reproduction. I think that's pretty neat. After all, everyone wants to find someone who will do things with you and make life a little bit easier. And isn't that what friend- ship is all about?

I'd give you the skin off my back

Some of my friends have prob- ably heard me talk about caecilian (pronounced the same as "Sicil- ian") mothers before. For those of you unaware, caecilians are a kind of amphibian. They sort of re- semble big worms, only they have spines and sometimes (depend- ing on the species) also eyes.

This specific display of love is considerably less wholesome than the other examples I've discussed so far. Maternal dermatophagy, also known as skin-feeding, is found in some caecilian species. If the name didn't give it away, it's when offspring peel off their mother's skin and eat it. During this period, mothers will grow skin rich in lipids, microbes and other good stuff. By eating the skin, caecilian offspring will ob- tain all these benefits.

In other words, mothers liter- ally give the skin off their bodies to feed their children. And aside from the simultaneous repul- sion and fascination this incites in me, I've never quite been able to put into words why that's always stuck with me. To me, the whole thing feels representative of paren- tal love in general, no matter the species. I've always thought of love as involving some sacrifice, but I guess the extent of that sacrifice will always get to me.

Some people might say I hu- manized animals way too much in this article. Maybe I shouldn't be looking to animals to figure out more about love and hu- man relationships. I should re- spect that there is evolutionary, "survival-maxxing" logic behind every example I discussed here. But I don't really see why I can't do both. I can acknowledge that there are scientific reasons be- hind every one of these cases, and that animals aren't the same as humans. And I can also look at animal relations and use what I've learned from them to reflect on my own relationships and what they mean to me. I hope this article made you do the same.

So if you're single and spend- ing this Valentine's Day alone, just remember there are all kinds of love out there. And so by exten- sion, there is some kind of love out there for you. It might not be traditional, or in any form you're expecting, but it's there. Even if it's not romantic, I hope you have people in your life who you love and who love you. And I hope you celebrate that with them.

