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Hump: True Tales of Sex After Kids

This is Episode number 18 of Stay Happily Married, and today we're discussing the new book Hump: True Tales of Sex After Kids.

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- Lee Rosen: I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. I'm here with Kimberly Ford, a mother of three and author of the book *Hump: True Tales of Sex After Kids*. Welcome to the show, Kimberly.
- Kimberly Ford: Thanks. Thanks very much.
- Lee Rosen: How are you doing? We're so glad you could be with us.
- Kimberly Ford: I'm great. I'm happy to be here.
- Lee Rosen: We have you on the phone and am I correct that you are in California?
- Kimberly Ford: Yes. Yeah, just a little south of San Francisco.
- Lee Rosen: Well, just to give a little bit of background on you, you have received a Ph.D. in Spanish and French literature back in 2001 and since then you've been doing a lot of writing. I know you've been published -- short fiction, essays, and magazines including *Mothering*, *The Believer*, *Brain* -- is it *Brain* or *Brain Child*?
- Kimberly Ford: *Brain Child*, yes.

Lee Rosen: That's what I thought. I've seen the magazine; I see it all over. And you have three children. How old are your kids?

Kimberly Ford: They are 6, 8, and 10 now.

Lee Rosen: Okay. I have an 11 and a 14 year old so I'm slightly ahead of you, but I can't wait to hear how things are working out in your life.

Now, your book really addresses a topic that I think for a lot of people is sort of swept under the rug. It's not something that always gets openly discussed. And there are a lot of I think misconceptions out there and what I'm wondering is -- well, I think some people make assumptions that after kids a couple's sex life is really just kind of a distant priority, that it's not all that important. And then other people feel like that's what's happening but they don't like it and they want to know is this really normal, or is everything fine for everyone else and not for me?

You tell me. What really goes on in most families after the kids come in terms of their sex life?

Kimberly Ford: Right. Well, one important distinction -- the book is not a sociological study, so it wasn't a matter of taking vast samples and really trying to figure out what exactly is going on behind closed doors; but it's more sort of an attempt to sympathize with parents about how difficult this can be. And then the other two things the book tries to do is to inspire parents to have a more active sex life, even when their children are little; and then also to convince people that it is important.

It's funny, though. I never intended to write this book. I write fiction more than I write non-fiction. But I happened to notice -- I was in a new mom's group when my first child was born 10 years ago and we talked a lot about everything. And at sort of the six-month mark -- when our babies were six months old -- we all admitted that we were having a difficult time with our marriages because I think no one had anticipated the toll that the child was going to take on the marriage. And I kept waiting for someone to talk about sex.

My husband and I, actually, our sex life is very important and it always has been a priority. And one of the things that made the book possible is that we did continue to have a lot of sex, even when the kids were really little. But it was sort of this desperate thing for me in that it was the only sort of vestige of my life that hadn't been eclipsed by maternity. I mean, everything was about the baby and

so I found that maintaining our sex life was one way to make myself feel like an adult and a wife and a woman and not just a mother.

But the new mom's group, we were so absorbed with the babies that the sex talk didn't get much airing. So I wrote a couple of different essays that got published and landed and agent for a novel I was writing at the time and she said, "Kimberly, I think this is the book you need to write." And we went from there.

Lee Rosen: Right. And when you were having these conversations at the playground and that sort of thing, you were really discovering that this is not something people are comfortable talking about in their groups. Is that true?

Kimberly Ford: Well, it's interesting. I think what happens -- and this was fascinating for me. I think that it's not a topic because there are so many other topics that need airing. I mean, I think having young children is such a desperate time for both parents and for marriages and so there's a lot of commiseration that needs to happen first. And one of the premises of the book is that until your child is about two, you really just need to sort of get it out and you're really in the trenches. But once your child is two, this sort of magical thing happens in that people tend to loosen up and then the floodgates open, in a sense.

And the thing that surprised me is even casual conversations on the playgrounds and in parks and in elementary school hallways, people are dying to talk about their sex lives once the topic is broached and once there's a little bit of surplus energy after the babies are no longer quite so needy.

Lee Rosen: Right. During that first couple of years what's really going on? Is it just that everybody is kind of neglecting the marriage and neglecting the sex life, or are people sort of actively making mistakes -- things they could do differently?

Kimberly Ford: Right. Well, there are reams and reams of pages written about this and I think a lot of attention has been paid recently to how difficult -- there's a book called *And Baby Makes Three* by the Gottman's, who are psychologists, and they have some great statistics about -- something like 82 percent of marriages suffer some sort of major crisis after the babies come. And because everyone's so focused on the baby, I think that the marriage does suffer.

And I'm not sure anyone is making active mistakes. I remember in the mom's group everyone saying that her husband could have done everything right and you'd still feel like he was a total jerk because

he wasn't the one who was actively at home with this tyrant -- this teeny tyrant -- all day long. So I'm not so sure -- I mean, I think it's not that people are making mistakes so much that everybody is just completely taxed by this change, this enormous life change that affects both people individually and the marriage as a partnership.

Lee Rosen: Now, you've talked a lot about other moms. Is your book really a mom book or is it a dad book as well?

Kimberly Ford: That's a good question. It's funny, a lot of people have actually read the book either in galley form or in manuscripts because I felt strongly about everyone reading it before it went to print -- everyone who's in it. And the book is -- there are lots and lots of different stories that involve a lot of different people, so a lot of people have read it.

And the responses I've gotten from the men have been incredibly encouraging. I think people will think it's a woman's book, but it's not in the sense that there's a whole chapter about vasectomy that's a big popular one with the men. There's a chapter called "Viva Las Vegas" which is about strip tease and lap dances and what not, and it's quite racy so that's another popular one with the men.

And there's a lot of male voices. We happened to fall in with a group of elementary school parents here in Menlo Park that are just really exceptional people and they're very candid and smart. And so a lot of the voices that are in the book are male voices and they're compelling and they're rich and they're honest and funny and smart. So I think that if men can sort of look aside and not think that it's a women's book that there's a lot to be had in there for me.

Lee Rosen: Are there things that, as a man, that I need to be thinking about or we as a gender need to be thinking about when children come on to the scene for the first time?

Kimberly Ford: I think that's actually a very good question. And it's a tough question in that I think it's very individual. The thing that I would say is that men just need to pay attention to their wives in the sense that -- or the mothers of their children, I should say. It's a time of enormous upheaval, especially for the woman because this event has happened at the site of her body and there's all sorts of bodily changes that are going on.

And even is she is a primary breadwinner and the dad is at home, there are some things that I think are just much more intense for a woman in terms of becoming a mother than for a man becoming a father. I think that in order for the sex life to stay alive and thrive,

that paying attention is really key. And by that I mean trying to remember what it is that your wife likes or doesn't like, or paying attention to her new needs, or paying attention to different moods and just sort of giving her due in terms of the major upheaval that's happening in her life.

Lee Rosen: Right. That makes sense. Now, you have some -- you describe it as fairly racy chapter titles. You cover some topics that are pretty edgy things, at least in the minds of some people. These things are not often talked about in the media. They're not often given a lot of attention. Are they critical? Are they important facets in keeping a bond strong between a husband and a wife?

Kimberly Ford: I think that the chapters you're referring to -- there's a chapter on female masturbation, there's a chapter on pornography, there's again that chapter on Las Vegas, there's a whole chapter that's devoted to vibrators, there's a chapter that's a sex toy trunk show chapter.

I think that one of the things that happens when people read this book is there's sort of a voyeuristic thing that happens that I appreciate. And there are plenty of chapters that are not about me and my husband and our sex life. But people are fascinated by some of this stuff. And if you've never been to a sex toy trunk show, then it's fun. It's exciting to have a voyeuristic experience of it. Or, if you've never been to a strip club in Las Vegas, the same thing goes.

I don't think that every couple needs to be watching pornography, by any stretch of the imagination. And I don't think that everyone needs to be using vibrators or whatnot. But I think that in sharing what is working for different people in their marriages and by introducing some of these more racy topics as somewhat mainstream, I think that it allows people to take some risks maybe that they wouldn't otherwise.

One of the things that I get to at the end of the book, and it's one of my favorite chapters, is that there is a privilege and there's a huge advantage to having sex with the person that you also have parented children with, in that there's a familiarity and there's a trust and there's a long history, presumably. Maybe not long in terms of chronology, but in terms of trust and experience. And that allows for couples to do some experimentation.

If you've never watched pornography before -- I hadn't until we were going to have our third baby and it was one of those things that it was really -- there's a very trusted thing with my husband and I that allowed that to be an experience that I never would have

thought I would have enjoyed because I'm quite a feminist. But I think that those things are not -- it's not prescriptive in the sense that everyone needs to be doing these things, and yet I think that marriage allows you, especially if you're looking at long-term monogamy -- if you're going to have sex with the same person for the next 50 years -- that there should be some room for experimentation in whatever guise.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, I suspect in some circles you will get some push back about all of that, but it makes a lot of sense. I mean, it certainly makes sense in every relationship to at least learn about all of your options and possibilities.

Kimberly Ford: Exactly. It's funny. The pornography chapter in particular I think there will be some flack to be taken, but I had a long discussion with my very closest friend when she read the manuscript and I found that along with -- well, it was a good experience for me because it made me sort of step back and really think about why. And it's not a pro-pornography chapter, by any means, but to try to figure out why we can make these statements and why we can sort of endorse things that are a bit edgy and feel good about it. So I think I'm prepared for some of that stuff.

And clearly if there's some controversy, there's some controversy; and that's not a bad thing. If a husband and a wife can bond over the fact that they were shocked by the Las Vegas chapter, then that's a good thing as well.

Lee Rosen: Right. Now, the book is not all fun and games. I mean, you cover some pretty serious topics. You talk about depression. You talk about aging, about teaching your kids about sex, that sort of thing. Was the writing of this book a learning process for you?

Kimberly Ford: That's a very good question. The sort of weightier topics -- there's a chapter in the beginning about the really serious difficulties of raising children. I think a very important facet of the book -- the darker, more weightier issues -- because raising children is really difficult and it is taxing on the marriage, certainly, and it does make your sex life more of a challenge.

The dark parts of the book -- it wasn't so much a learning process for me as it was cathartic. It was really freeing on some level to be able to write about these things because they are very private. And I think that the dark part -- those really early baby years were dark for me and I think it was cathartic to be able to write about those years. And also to know that hopefully that will be an important facet in the book for people because there should be sympathy, if

not empathy. I mean, it's a very difficult thing to be raising children and trying to maintain your sanity and your sex life and whatnot.

But it also was a validation too in the sense that my husband and I have made some sort of unorthodox choices about -- I mean, nothing crazy, but we've made some sort of unorthodox choices about how we're going to raise our children, so it was validating to write about those things in a way that was positive and that have been received positively by people who have read the manuscript.

Lee Rosen: Right. Well, you're good at making people want to read the book. Listening to you it's like I think I need to go through this thing with a fine-tooth comb.

So all in all what would you say is your message? What is it that you really want out there? What do you want people to walk away with?

Kimberly Ford: It's funny. Again, I see myself as a novelist. And I was just talking to my husband the other day about how promoting a novel will feel very different from promoting this book in that if a novel's not for everyone, it's not for everyone. But it's interesting because I really -- when the book comes out there are going to be a whole bunch of appearances and we're having these parties at people's homes.

And there's going to be a lot of promotion of the book in large part because I feel really strongly about the message, which is that whether you need to be sympathized or whether you need to have some motivation or inspiration, it's a book that is a story of a lot of different people and it's discussing a topic that's very, very important and one that's not discussed freely. And so what the book hopes to do is redress that and provide a little dialogue, even if it's dialogue between a reader and a text. The hope is that there'll be a little bit more intimacy in the air and a little bit more sex in the air and that people's marriages will benefit from that.

Lee Rosen: You know, some of the most successful writers today are people that really reveal their innermost details of their lives and their innermost thoughts and all that, and I think that's great. But you're in a position, and others like you, where revealing your life requires you to reveal details about your spouse or, in some cases, about children, that sort of thing. What kind of reaction have you gotten out of your husband, writing this kind of book?

Kimberly Ford: You know, it's funny. I had a long discussion at one point with Tobias Wolff about this when he wrote *This Boy's Life*. The nature of this sort of memoir is interesting -- well, it's not a memoir. What I've written isn't what he wrote was. You're only revealing what you

want to reveal and what you're very comfortable revealing. So in fact it's not a lot of me and my husband in the sack and it's not a lot of "this is our favorite position" and things like that. There's actually relatively little in terms of that sort of revelation.

Everything in the book we're both very comfortable with. He's obviously read the manuscript and again it's something that we both feel strongly about and we feel very comfortable with in terms of our group of friends and our larger social circles and it's fine. My kids are 6, 8, and 10 and so I'll be curious to see what happens when they become adolescents because I think that will become a little different.

I had a funny experience with my sister, who actually figures largely in the book too, and I was saying, "What if the kids are embarrassed about this whole thing?"

And she said, "Well, they might be embarrassed if you do Irish clog dancing or something." And she said, "This is certainly a more worthwhile thing for them to be embarrassed about." And the fact is that I stand by everything that's in the book and I feel good about sharing these things with the world.

So my children may think it's mortifying at some point, but I think that's all right. I think they'll ultimately benefit from the message.

Lee Rosen: Well, I agree with your sister. I think all of our children will be mortified by us at some point.

Kimberly Ford: Exactly. By something, right?

Lee Rosen: Exactly. So you might as well go with something you can be sure about rather than having to --

Kimberly Ford: Right.

Lee Rosen: Good choice.

Kimberly Ford: Thank you.

Lee Rosen: Kimberly, anything else that we need folks to know about your book? I know it's coming out July 8th this year, 2008. Anything else you'd like to add before we run?

Kimberly Ford: No, except that I really -- I've spent some time on your website and I commend you all for what you're doing. Marriage is difficult and maintaining your sex life is difficult and I think all parents can use

all of the different supports that they can get their hands on. So hopefully *Hump* will be helpful for people and they'll have a good time reading it.

Lee Rosen:

Well, thank you so much for joining us. A special thank you to Kimberly Ford for being with us today and talking with us about *Hump: True Tales of Sex After Kids*, which will be out July 8th, 2008 on St. Martin's Press. You can pre-order the book now -- we are providing a link in the show notes -- at Amazon.com. So check it out, *Hump* at Amazon.com.

You can also get a lot more information about the book at a special website, www.humpthebook.com. And we will also have that link in the show notes. The site allows you to share your stories about sex after kids and also check out the blog Hump. So there's a lot of good stuff going on at www.humpthebook.com.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. We would love to hear your comments. Please call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083 or feel free to shoot us an e-mail at comments@stayhappilymarried.com.

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