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## ANN ARBORITES

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### Sallie Foley

#### *Sex therapist for seniors*

**P**sychologist, author, and lecturer Sallie Foley tells of a seventy-eight-year-old widow and an eighty-two-year-old single man who met on a cruise, fell in love, and married. “And as they became sexually active,” Foley recalls, “he said to her, ‘Listen, I want this to be really good for you too. How do you like your orgasms? Do you like oral sex? Do you like manual stimulation?’ The woman said, ‘Well, I’ve never had an orgasm,’ and the man replied, ‘We can’t have that!’” So for six months they drove here each week from Grand Rapids—where, in 1989, there were no sex therapists—to be treated by Foley.

“To me, that says it all—that there is no point in life where the quality of the passion and the pleasures of the passion can’t be part of your life,” says Foley, fifty-five. At a neighborhood party, she met an eighty-four-year-old woman who gleefully volunteered that she was still having sex twice a week with her 104-year-old “boyfriend.”

Last year Foley was invited to take over the sex advice column in the bi-monthly magazine of the AARP. Foley, whose steady, smiling brown eyes are rimmed by youthful eyeliner, was so busy that she had to squeeze in the writing from 10 p.m. to 1 a.m. after a full day—but her column, “Modern Love,” now reaches 35 million seniors. The AARP also just published her new advice book, *Sex and Love for Grown-Ups: A No-Nonsense Guide to a Life of Passion*.

**O**n a morning in Kerrytown, Foley grabs paper napkins and efficiently whisks the crumbs off a table near the window before sitting down for a chat. Dressed in a conservative mauve pantsuit, she’s sipping black coffee when a shopper walking by gives her an excited wave through the glass. Foley explains that it’s one of her former students from the U-M School of Social Work, where she teaches a class each semester.

Foley jokes that her “Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction” class is the only one in the school where students arrive early, but she adds seriously that registration is usually filled within minutes. She tells her students they should be “bilingual” in their work. For example, she says, when asking clients about sexual desire, “if I note that they look blank, that they don’t understand what it means, I’ll say, ‘Sexual desire—like feeling horny.’”

Foley’s clients, unlike her students, often are apprehensive before they meet her. They ask, “Will I be watched?” or “Do I have to take off my clothes?” “They have a sexual concern, and they want to come in for counseling, but they’re terrified,”



says Foley. She reassures them that “sex therapy is never hands-on touching people; it’s a form of psychotherapy.” She says she has learned to keep her mobile face “organized” and not react to her clients’ revelations. “I felt I could tell her anything,” one of them confides.

Foley grew up in Potomac, Maryland, the daughter of an engineer at Caterpillar and a homemaker trained as an elementary teacher. She studied religion and theology at Rutgers, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Drew University with plans to preach or teach, but she had an epiphany after reading Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book *The Denial of Death*. She realized she “wanted to work with people at the most challenging and difficult periods of their lives,” she says. “I entered social work school, and, as the movie [*Jerry Maguire*] says, they had me at ‘Hello.’”

After earning her M.S.W. in 1977 from the U-M, she worked eight years with cancer patients. Even for them, she observed, love was in the air when they cuddled in their hospital beds with their partners. In 1985, ready for a new challenge, she accepted an offer to be a sex therapist with the U-M’s Sexual Health Counseling Services.

She went through three years of training with experts in psychotherapy and human sexuality before she was professionally certified by the American Association of

Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT). She says, “You have to learn how to do [therapy for] desire-phase, arousal-phase, [and] orgasm-phase dysfunctions; you have to learn how to deal with sexual desire discrepancies in couples, learn how to deal with pain . . . not only on intercourse, but pain on arousal, pain on touch.” Ann Arbor is the state’s hub for sex therapy, with eight AASECT-certified practitioners; no other Michigan city has more than one.

More than half of the clients Foley sees (both through the U-M and in a busy half-time private practice) are over fifty. Finding happiness as a couple, she says, may require only a handful of sessions or may take years; not all couples succeed. Some of the toughest cases, she says, involve couples whose newfound honesty exposes deep rifts, causing them to question whether they want to be together. Other tough cases, she says, occur when individuals have been so hurt by sexual abuse, trauma, or other losses that change is painful, making them ambivalent about therapy.

In the last five or ten years she’s seen both good and bad changes in the sexual habits of seniors. “STDs in people over fifty are rampant,” she reports. “People think they don’t need to use condoms because they’re not worried about getting pregnant.” The good news for seniors is the effectiveness of Viagra: “It actually takes the pressure off and allows the couple to say, ‘Okay, we do have viable erections. What do we want to do with those? How do we want to build and change?’”

When her three now-grown children were at home (her husband, Steve, is also a psychotherapist), the Foleys weren’t like the family in the film *Kinsey*—sex talk rarely found its way into their dinner conversations. Neither, she says, is her life like that of the sex-obsessed therapist in *Meet the Fockers*. “Sex therapists are Girl Scout leaders, and they’re PTO presidents and educational chairs at their churches,” says Foley. “Because those are all things I’ve been.”

—Deborah Merion

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