

Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy

Volume 2

Article 19

10-1-1993

The Power of Unity

Deborah J. Warnes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/circles>

Recommended Citation

Warnes, Deborah J. (1993) "The Power of Unity," *Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy*. Vol. 2 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/circles/vol2/iss1/19>

This Personal Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Circles: Buffalo Women's Journal of Law and Social Policy by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

THE POWER OF UNITY

by Deborah J. Warnes

Editorial Note

When most people think of the pro-choice movement in Buffalo, New York, the Spring of Life in 1992 comes to mind. However, much occurred prior to this date that helped make the pro-choice movement a success. This is an account of one woman's experience as a pro-choice escort. Although this commentary recounts the history of the pro-choice movement in Western New York, it can be seen as a microcosm of the national debate occurring in the hearts and minds of people everywhere, every day. No matter which side of the abortion debate one is on, it cannot be denied that our society is paying a high price in its attempt to resolve this controversial issue.

We dedicate this piece to the memory of Dr. David Gunn, and to pro-choice supporters throughout the nation, who have demonstrated that the power of unity can make a difference.

Early each Saturday morning, men and women approach one of two Buffalo area abortion clinics. They arrive on foot, by car, or by way of public transportation. Quietly they gather together. For identification purposes, blue tie-on aprons are donned and teams are deployed. The Pro-choice Escorts have arrived.

Deborah J. Warnes is a computer systems coordinator for a local law firm. Her local and national publications include poetry, satire, and non-fiction. Ms. Warnes is currently publishing her first novel.

IN THE BEGINNING

I remember when I decided to become a clinic escort for the pro-choice movement. It was the fall of 1988, when I first observed a Pro-choice Network rally in Buffalo, N.Y. The members of the Network were dismayed by the indifference the police showed towards anti-choice protesters. As I watched I felt a stirring of my conscience. I had not expected the chaos I saw. Anti-choice forces were physically blocking the entrance to the clinic, while dozens of police milled around, laughing, and joking. Soon I realized that the only people who were being controlled by the police were the pro-choice forces. I wondered how I could

have lived in this city for most of my life and not have known the extent to which women were suffering at the hands of anti-abortion forces? It was then I decided to dedicate myself to the pro-choice movement.

At that time, pro-choice supporters were not as politically savvy as we are now. We believed the authorities would enforce the law and protect the clinics, but this experience taught us otherwise. We learned that we had to rely upon ourselves, through the power of our unified voice, to protect a woman's right to an abortion.

A year later on a Saturday morning in October 1989, over one hundred anti-choice protesters were blockading the entrance to the Buffalo GYN Women Services. This blockade would alter the course of the history of the pro-choice movement in Buffalo.

[The patients] were pulled, shoved, yelled at, and video taped . . . The police were, once again, unresponsive and insensitive to the needs of the patients.

As in previous blockades, patients trying to gain access to the clinic were faced with swarms of anti-choice protesters who jumped on cars, shoved their hands through open windows, pulled on door handles, and laid on windshields. Those patients approaching on foot faced even greater obstacles. They were pulled, shoved, yelled at, and videotaped. In response, we escorts devoted all our energy to shielding patients and rerouting them to alternate clinics. The police were, once again, unresponsive and insensitive to the needs of the patients. They took 10 hours to arrest less than 40 anti-choice demonstrators, and allowed some of the most ardent to go home.

We were angered by the inadequate response of the Buffalo Police. A handful of escorts demanded answers from the Central Booking Department, but none were forthcoming. This was hardly surprising in a city where the mayor has a sign behind his desk stating, "Abortion Kills Children." However, we were not discouraged. Our dissatisfaction drove us to contact the Common Council, which precipitated investigatory hearings regarding police conduct during anti-choice demonstrations. Consequently, our persistence and perseverance established our presence as a force championing the freedom of choice.

Over time, we developed tactics and strategies that continued to bolster our success. Our mastery was evident in February 1990, when the anti-choice protesters assembled to rush down the driveway to blockade the Buffalo GYN, as they had done the previous October. This time, we escorts responded by linking arms and forming a physical barrier across the driveway and were triumphant in stopping the blockade. It was an exhilarating experience. This victory illustrated unequivocally that not only were we capable of ensuring patients' access to the clinic, but more significantly, we were able to preserve the power of autonomy and control that the anti-choicers desperately wanted to take from us.

September 1990 started a battle which continues today. Faced with the threat of a full-scale blockade, two brave female attorneys obtained a Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) against the anti-choice forces. The TRO was carefully designed to protect both the patient's right to enter clinics, and the anti-choice forces' First Amendment rights. The TRO successfully stopped the planned blockade and remained in effect for one and a half years. On February 14, 1992, Federal Judge Richard J. Arcara gave us a deeply appreciated Valentine by making the TRO a Preliminary Injunction. In our struggle, the

injunction has equipped us with the ability to fend off the opposition.

The injunction calls for a \$10,000 penalty for the first proven contempt and doubles the penalty for each successive violation. Each and every individual who believes she or he is above the law must be prosecuted. To date, six individuals have been prosecuted, and all have been found guilty. Once served, all are bound by it - not only the named defendants. Escorts' testimonies have been critical in proving these charges against anti-choice protesters because their terroristic methods often intimidate patients from coming forward to tell their stories.

SPRING OF LIES

In late 1991, the entire country looked on when anti-choice leaders announced that Buffalo would be the next Wichita. As the months progressed, concerned individuals and groups from across the nation contacted Buffalo's pro-choice community to offer their support. Ultimately, it was the energy of the Buffalonians who insured the defeat of Buffalo's anti-choice movement. Our past and present successes have been built upon the fact that we operate as a community based group with a core of dedicated women and men who keep the organization cohesive. As a group, we spend hours fund raising, planning, and training, always vigilant for the next siege.

During the summer of 1991, as we watched events in Wichita unfold, we determined that should Operation Rescue ever come to Buffalo, we would be prepared. Buffalo would not become another Wichita.

In late 1991, anti-choice leaders announced that Operation Rescue planned a campaign against Buffalo's clinics for the Spring of 1992. In the aftermath of that struggle, triumphant pro-choicers would show the world that what anti-choice protesters claimed would be the

"Spring of Life," was nothing more than a "Spring of Lies."

The national media converged upon Buffalo with a vengeance as the campaign began. Ironically, the cameras presented us with a problem. Although we wanted the world to witness the failure of anti-choice activities, we had a duty to protect the anonymity of each patient who fought the throngs to enter the clinics. We had to use all means possible to shield the patients: signs, umbrellas, and our bodies. Strategies employed often depended on the particular patient and the hostility of the anti-choice forces. Some patients were given aprons and pretended to be escorts to evade detection. Others quickly learned how to chant, and they became another pro-choice voice. Throughout the siege, the escorts pulled together as a team and were able to help the patients into the clinics with the least amount of harassment and intimidation possible.

While it is for the benefit of the patients that we continue our mission, escorts seldom have more than a few moments of contact with any particular patient. A patient's privacy is of the utmost concern, and we are hesitant to do anything which may invade it. However, sometimes we are allowed a glimpse into the patient's world.

The choice to have an abortion is an emotionally wrenching decision. The pain inflicted by the protesters is unjust and unforgiving.

Some cried, some spoke solemnly, while others bespoke their convictions. One particular patient confided in me. At 20 years old, this woman- the unmarried mother of two children who she deeply loved - was pregnant. She was in a relationship with a man who was earning minimum wage, and they knew they

could not afford the financial responsibility of another child.

We talked for a long time and I encouraged her to discuss her concerns with the clinic counselor. When I asked her about birth control, I was astonished to learn that she knew nothing about it. I gave her phone numbers of organizations which could provide her with information and explained that regardless of her immediate decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy, this knowledge would give her more control over her life. The counselor gave her additional information and advised her that abortion was an option, but that the choice to terminate her pregnancy should be given much consideration.

Three days later, I saw the woman again. She had decided to terminate her pregnancy. The understanding and support she received from the counselor and the escorts provided her with the strength to make the decision that was right for her. Surprisingly, she threw her arms around me, kissed me on the cheek, and thanked me for understanding. As I walked away from her, I thought this was not the same woman to whom I had spoken a few days earlier. This was a woman at peace with her decision. I was glad to have been there for her.

Constantly, I remind myself that the escorts are there because of the women. It is easy to get caught up in the confrontations with the anti-choice forces and forget that we are not here to discuss the philosophy of choice. I try to look beyond the "issue" of abortion and toward the women themselves. The choice to have an abortion is an emotionally wrenching decision. The pain inflicted by the protesters is unjust and unforgiving. At times we are criticized by pro-choice outsiders who do not have a clear understanding of our role as escorts. But as long as we are doing the best we can for each patient, we will persist in our dedication and be there as long as we are needed.

AFTERMATH

The Spring of Lies accomplished one very important thing: it changed the demeanor of patients. Women watched the events transpire through the media and learned that there were people who would stand up and defend the rights of all women to choose abortion. This knowledge has given more women the confidence to defend themselves from anti-choice attackers. I am happy to see fewer women coming through the lines crying and shaking, and more who approach the clinic with their heads held high, proud of who they are and comfortable with the decisions they have made.

No woman should be made to feel shame over whatever choice she makes regarding her reproductive process. Moreover, no woman should be made to answer to strangers regarding this personal choice. The ultimate tragedy is not abortion -- it is the lack of funding and education regarding safe, accessible and affordable birth control. The most effective contraceptives in the world are useless if people are unaware of their existence. There is still so much to be done.

We must get angry when our rights are threatened, and we must learn to focus that anger into constructive action. It has been 20 years since *Roe v. Wade*, and the legal battle continues to rage. Yes, we now have a President who is pro-choice, however, we must look beyond the next four years. If the twelve year anti-choice Republican administration taught us anything, it is that we must continue to fight with all of our available resources. We can never again become complacent.

Recognize the power of a unified force. One voice may not be heard, but thousands of voices cannot be ignored.
