

# Fighting for Choice: Navigating the Streets and Politics of New York City

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Two weeks after leaving New York City, I'm sitting cross-legged on my bed, skimming through an uninteresting novel, when my phone rings. I jump up, excited at the prospect of some sort of communication with the outside world. Transitioning from the ceaseless energy of New York to my dull, rural hometown of Stillwater, New Jersey has not been easy. I peek at my cellphone's display and am pleased to find that Sage, one of the closest friends I made in the city, is calling.

"Sage!" I answer, happily anticipating a call wrought with the nitty-gritty details of our lives. "How have you been?"

Silence. It bubbles on the line, growing heavier and heavier with each passing moment. Suddenly it breaks with a guttural sob as sharp as a whip. Sage is crying, hysterically crying, interspersing unintelligible words between breaths.

"Hails," she finally gasps, "I'm pregnant."

My breath catches in my chest. I drop my book, forgotten, on the floor. The irony of her admission is not lost on me; I spent my summer working for NARAL Pro-Choice New York, an organization that advocates for women's reproductive rights.

"Oh, Sage," I breathe. "How?" Sage and I had discussed our preferred methods of birth control earlier in the summer; months ago, she'd gone to her healthcare provider and had gotten a copper intrauterine device (IUD), one of the most effective forms of birth control.

"I don't know how it happened," she says, her voice breaking. She explains that she went to the emergency room for stomach pain, and the doctor informed her that she was five weeks pregnant. Due to the physical barrier created by the IUD, the fetus was forming *outside* of Sage's uterus. She wouldn't be able to carry it to term even if she wanted to.

Sage has to get an abortion to protect her health. For years I've known that one in three American women will get an abortion in her lifetime, but until this day, I've never been aware of personally knowing someone who had.


"I just can't believe this happened," she says, over and over. "We were so careful...I never thought I'd be one of *those girls* who needed an abortion."

In that moment, as I watch Sage shrink the scope of her entire character and personhood down to this one small fact, this one small scuff on the timeline of her life, I become enraged. I cannot let Sage internalize the rhetoric of the anti-choice movement as the lens through which she views herself: *Baby killer. Monster.* I cannot let my best friend, one of the strongest, kindest, most sympathetic people I know, paint herself in this way.

"Sage," I tell her firmly, wishing she were beside me so I could place my hands on her shoulders and look her straight in the eye, "this does not define you."

I feel her silence on the line. I continue, "Abortion is a medical procedure. Women get them all the time, to preserve their health, like you, or because they can't afford to have a child. You're not alone in this, and it *doesn't change who you are.*"

Again, I hear her sniffing, and we continue to talk for a few moments before she tells me she has to go. She hangs up and I am lost in my thoughts, my eyes wet. There is a beautiful sort of paradox to the moment: I desperately wish Sage didn't have to go through this experience, but, simultaneously, I have never believed more in the work I do. Hearing someone's story firsthand – particularly the story of a best friend – confirms one's commitment to a social movement the way nothing else can. I sigh and sit with my head in my hands, staring, unseeing, straight ahead.



## NARAL Pro-Choice New York

**June 1, 2013**

I breathe deeply as I stand on the threshold of 470 Park Avenue South, New York, New York. It's an ornate 20-story building that blends into the skyline, casting what appears to be an infinitely long shadow across the screaming hot pavement. A non-profit connoisseur after years of involvement in feminist activism, I'm typically underwhelmed by non-profit offices: cramped, cluttered spaces lacking heat or air-conditioning. Even before entering NARAL Pro-Choice New York's office, nestled on the seventh floor of this building straight out of *The Architectural Digest*, I know my summer internship will not be quite what I expected.

NARAL Pro-Choice New York is a state affiliate of NARAL Pro-Choice America, one of the two most influential reproductive rights organizations in the United States. NARAL was once an acronym for "National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League," but in 2003 the organization opted to use only the acronym. (Understandably. The title was a mouthful.) Its mission is to protect women's right to choose abortion by mobilizing people to support pro-choice candidates

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and pass pro-choice legislation at the federal, state and municipal levels. NARAL also educates individuals about abortion, birth control, healthy pregnancies and comprehensive sex education – all crucial elements of the pro-choice agenda.

Wondering what role I will play in the political machine that is NARAL Pro-Choice New York, I walk through the heavy front doors. The lobby is dimly lit; five elevators wait patiently for visitors. Nerves jangling, I ride up to the seventh floor. When the doors open with a ping, my pupils dilate with pleasure as I take a speedy mental inventory of my surroundings. Directly behind a set of immense glass doors "NARAL Pro-Choice New York" adorns the wall in a shimmering golden font.

The space is beautiful, but vacant. I'm surprised that I'm the only person here; intern orientation was supposed to begin promptly at 11:00, and it's three minutes to. Suddenly, a man I assume to be Christopher, my intern supervisor and NARAL New York's community organizer, emerges from a cubicle cluster. He is a stout, muscular black man, casually dressed in a grey T-shirt and black pants.

"Oh, hi!" he blurts, clearly taken aback by my presence. "You must be Hailey."

I tell him that I am, in fact, Hailey, and he smiles and nods before launching into a long-winded apology that oh my god, he is so, *so* sorry, but he sent me the wrong date of intern orientation, it's *Monday* not *Saturday*, but it's been such a *busy* week at NARAL because there are only 19 days until the legislative session ends and Governor Cuomo *really, really* needs to get the Women's Equality Agenda passed and they've just been absolutely *swamped* with paperwork and memos and god-knows-what-else but since I'm here, would I like a tour of the office?

I had never thought I would find someone who speaks as quickly as I do. His energy is absolutely contagious. Inspired, I follow Christopher curiously, taking in the office. He shows me the activist room, filled with colorful posters and an entire shelf dedicated to pro-choice merchandise: buttons and stickers and T-shirts galore. He shows me where I'll be working – a cubicle twice the size of those you see on TV, with a window overlooking the city – and the board room where we'll be having meetings. It is an activist's paradise. Already, I feel a part of something much bigger than myself.

Though there are many causes I staunchly support, reproductive rights activism has long been my passion. Denying women basic medical needs – abortion, birth control, etc. – is, in my opinion, our nation's biggest affront to women's equality. In order to become successful, autonomous individuals, women must be able to plan their families in a timely and affordable manner.

In the monumental 1973 Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, the Court ruled that women had the right to abortion until the point of fetal viability – that is, the point at which a fetus can survive outside the woman's body.<sup>1</sup> Typically fetal viability occurs between 24 and 28 weeks into pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> In 1992, women's reproductive rights were restricted in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, in which the Court ruled that individual states may impose restrictions on abortion care as long as they do not "unduly burden a woman's right to choose."<sup>3</sup>

Then the floodgates opened. Since 1992, states have been furiously passing restrictions on abortion.<sup>4</sup> Most common are time limitations like 20-week bans. Other restrictions take the form of consent laws (requiring a woman to receive consent from her parents and/or spouse before receiving an abortion), mandatory



ultrasound laws (requiring women to undergo a medically unnecessary, invasive ultrasound before having an abortion), and laws that impose undue burdens and requirements on abortion clinics.

Since 1995, the state and federal governments combined have passed 754 anti-choice laws.<sup>5</sup> The time for pro-choice activism is now. My personal connection to the issue is harder to explain because I have never needed an abortion – but just because I haven’t needed one yet, doesn’t mean I won’t in the future. Statistically, one in three women will have an abortion by the time she is 45.<sup>6</sup> Abortion is a common medical procedure, and any effort to restrict women’s access to it is an assault on women’s health care. Period.

So, that’s why I’m in New York City. I’ve chosen to live at New York University (NYU) in the heart of the Village, and I spend my first week acquainting myself with the city. Each morning I wake up at nine. Blessed by the Housing Gods with a lofted triple, I try to minimize noise for my roommates’ sake as I prepare for the day ahead. I slip on my sneakers and throw my hair up in a messy bun, packing as lightly as possible. I travel with a tiny backpack, just large enough to store my water bottle, my wallet, a map of Manhattan, and a small white notebook for jotting down my thoughts. Every morning I run my fingertips over the map, tracing the city’s spine from Harlem to the Financial District, and select a neighborhood to explore. The long straits of the avenues, the stilted lines of the streets tightly quilted into one another; I trace each route I walk on my map in red pen until it’s a crimson maze, no street left unexplored.

New York settles under my skin so quickly that by day five, I’m desperately in love with it. I want to move there. Transfer to NYU. Become a regular at the Starbucks on the corner with my chocolate chip muffin and Metro crossword. Maybe it’s the location itself; maybe it’s the incredible

group of friends I’ve made who live with me in NYU’s Hayden Hall; maybe it’s the summer sun. It’s impossible to tell.

## Phonebanking

### June 7

To say the political process is a whirlwind would be a tremendous understatement. To be frank, the work I do at NARAL reminds me of the final five minutes in the final high school football game of the season. The clock guzzles down the seconds furiously. Cognizant of the massive victory they stand to gain if they win, the players are drenched in sweat, moving with unmatched ferocity and determination.

There are eight days remaining in New York’s two-year legislative session, and a vital piece of women’s rights legislation has yet to pass. On June 1, Governor Cuomo proposed The Women’s Equality Act (WEA), a 10-point piece of legislation that, among other things, would end pay discrimination, protect survivors of domestic violence, and codify *Roe v. Wade* in New York permanently. This means that even if the federal government were to retract women’s right to choose, women in New York would have legal access to abortion.

The bill is groundbreaking, both in its scope and the fervor with which progressive activist groups are seeking its passage. Unfortunately, the governor’s June 1 proposal date means that groups like NARAL morph from well-behaved advocacy organizations into snarling political animals on a deadline. We have just over a week to gather enough support to pass the bill. There’s a lot to do and a bunch of supporters to reach and the conservatives aren’t budging and *damn it*, one of the moderate Republicans we’d been banking on just pulled out so the Republican Senate Leader must really be putting the clamp down.

It is my second week of work.

My fear of simultaneously breaking out into hysterical laughter and hysterical sobs does not seem so irrational.

I sit in the activist room, starry-eyed and dumbfounded, as Christopher explains the current situation to me, Iris, Cynthia, and Elana – NARAL’s summer intern cohort. We couldn’t have picked a better time, or a more confusing time, to intern here. Christopher explains that, much like the federal legislative process, the Women’s Equality Act must pass both the State Assembly and the State Senate before it can be signed into law by Governor Cuomo. Right now, the prognosis is this: the Act will pass the Assembly – a body of uber-liberal lawmakers – effortlessly. It’s the Senate we need to worry about.

The biggest obstacle to the Act’s passage is Dean Skelos, the Republican Conference Leader in the State Senate. He is refusing to bring the Act to the floor, effectively silencing hundreds of thousands of pro-choice voices statewide.<sup>7</sup> To convince Skelos to give the Act a chance, we’re calling as many of his pro-choice constituents as possible, urging them to 1) attend a rally at his office, or 2) write letters to the editor in their local papers.

Phonebanking is never a particularly easy task, especially if the caller is making requests of the call-ees. Typically, I would consider this sort of work mundane, ineffective in the larger scope of public policy. Today, though, I know that the calls I make and the support I garner could vastly improve reproductive freedom in the state of New York. And so, sitting in the NARAL activist room, surrounded by the rest of the intern team, I begin to make calls.

Fifteen minutes in, I’m surprised I haven’t ripped half my hair out in frustration. I’ve made 30 calls. Fifteen went straight to voicemail, 10 were immediate hang-ups, four were picked up by adamantly anti-choice women who couldn’t understand



why they were on our list in the first place, and one was a grumpy 83 year old woman who “frankly, couldn’t give two beans about abortion.” (Two beans. She actually said that.) I’m losing my motivation and beginning to wonder how I can possibly change the world when the people I’m calling won’t even let me get a full sentence out of my mouth.

Sighing, I plunk the next 10-digits into my phone and wait with the receiver pressed to my ear, already feeling defeated. I’m calling a woman named Peggy Smith – who shares the same name as a member of my family, incidentally – and I brace myself for the inevitable beep of a hostile answering machine. In a surprising turn of events, though, I hear a friendly “Hello, this is Peggy. May I ask who’s calling?”

I’m shocked – a live person! A friendly-sounding live person I stammer and stutter and gather my phone script and pen and say, ever so intelligently, “Uh – uh – Peggy, hi, it’s Hailey from NARAL Pro-Choice New York and I was hoping you might be willing to help us and maybe write a letter or attend a rally maybe?”

There’s silence on the end of the line.

“Pardon?” she asks.

Annoyed at myself, I breathe, take a moment to collect my thoughts, and begin again, this time reading the phone script.

Ten minutes into the call, I believe I have found my new best friend. Peggy Smith, I’ve learned throughout the course of our brief conversation, is a “tried and true” feminist. She’s been volunteering with NARAL since 1969. Peggy had an abortion in her 30s, unwilling to handle the financial and emotional pressure of another child. (She’d already had three.) Her story is the norm: 6 in 10 American women having an abortion already have a child, and more than 3 in 10 already have

2 or more children. Feeling enormously lucky that she’d had the ability to plan her reproductive future, Peggy began to fight on behalf of the women who were not so lucky and risked being affected by conservative anti-choice legislation.

Her voice is almost musical, lilting like a pianist’s arpeggios as she recites to me the history of feminist activism. So shocked by her kindness and openness, I find myself nearly forgetting the purpose of my call, instead soaking up her experience like a sponge. In a bout of honesty, I explain to her that I am concerned about the passage of the Act, given the harsh political game and the time pressure we face.

“Honey,” she tells me, “they’re not gonna stop fighting this act. And you had better be damned sure we’re not gonna stop fighting them. Women need reproductive autonomy, plain and simple. And if we have to play some politics and go to some rallies to make these lawmakers see justice, then so be it. But don’t you ever give up.”

I compare Peggy to the woman who didn’t have two beans to give, and feel a bout of warm compassion in my chest. She’s right, of course, and given her 50-plus years of experience, I know it would be foolish of me to disagree. After collecting her information and entering it into our database, I wish Peggy a wonderful evening and hang up the phone.

I hum, grinning to myself, as I dial the next number on my list. I look up briefly and realize Christopher has been watching me for the duration of the call. He’s smiling.

Throughout the course of my internship, I partake in many a phone bank. I grow to love these calls – successful calls, especially – and I become more comfortable asking people I’ve never met to support my cause. However, the “people person” that I am, I much prefer to speak with constituents

face-to-face. After the first two weeks of my internship, my cohort and I begin to embark on projects that propel us out of the activist room and into the New York City streets.

## Drive-and-Honk

### June 18

Within three minutes of entering the office, Christopher has given us a packet of petitions, a box of pens, a stack of “Equal Laws for Equal Lives” signs, and some clipboards, all contained in an oversized plastic storage bin. Today, Iris, Cynthia, and I are off to Staten Island to represent NARAL at an impromptu “drive-and-honk” at Senator Diane Savino’s district office. Savino, a Democrat, is a member of the Independent Democratic Caucus in the New York State Senate. Originally a huge proponent of the Women’s Equality Act, she has somehow become an unexpected obstacle in its passage over the weekend.

So off we go to Staten Island. As soon as the ferry docks on the other side of the river, the three of us meet the rest of our cohort: a bunch of representatives from other women’s rights groups in the city. We are a motley crew: eight women and two men, all in our 20s; white, black, Hispanic, Jewish; some dressed professionally in suits and ties, others in shorts and T-shirts. We’re all quite different, but our objective is the same: we want the Act passed as soon as possible. Our chants are to this effect, and are corny, even by activists’ standards. They include:

*There ain’t no power like the power of women, and the power of women don’t stop!*

*We demand a vote! We demand a vote!*

Ten minutes in and our voices are hoarse, our arms are sore from holding our signs high, and sweat has collected on our brows in the potent 5 p.m. sun. We chant to garner the attention (and honks) of the cars driving by.



Bus drivers honk nine times out of ten, without fail. Most of the men in their 20s and 30s whistle and honk; we can't decide if they are expressing a show of solidarity or catcalling us. Some women drive lazily by, wholly disinterested, while others actively read our signs and, after a moment's hesitation, honk with reckless abandon. By the end of the hourlong session, it's difficult to determine how successful our event was – but if honks and cheers are indication, it's clear that Staten Island supports the passage of the WEA. Getting back on the ferry, chatting animatedly with Iris and Cynthia, I am pleased with our expedition, but concerned. Our efforts aside, will the Act pass?

Two days later, I am met with a near-silent office when I come into work. Staff members sit at their cubicles, muttering into their phones, heads propped on their hands. I make my way to the activist room, preparing to start the day, when Christopher walks in and tells me what, deep down, I already knew: The Women's Equality Act failed.

It failed. After months of NARAL's intense campaigning, the New York Senate never brought the full Act to a vote because of the controversial abortion provision.

I feel so discouraged. This is a testament to how polarizing the issue of abortion can be. New York is considered one of the most progressive states in the nation, and the fact that a simple pro-choice provision could not pass here makes me wonder about the future of abortion access at a national level. If pro-choice legislation cannot pass in New York, I don't know if it can pass anywhere. And that really, really scares me.

## Surveying

### July 10

One of the beautiful things about working at an organization like NARAL is that your work is never done. When the Women's Equality Act fails, we allow ourselves a day or two at most to mourn – then it's back to business. Here, my internship shifts to encompass a new duty: surveying. If you've ever walked more than five steps on a New York City street, you have, without a doubt, come into contact with a street surveyor. They're everywhere, like ants or litter or other undesirables. You can spot them by the clipboards poised eagerly in the crook of their elbows and the identical T-shirts they wear, emblazoned with the logo and slogan of the organization for which they work.

There is a method to surveyors' madness. Always smile. Always make direct eye contact. (Do you know how hard it is to make eye contact in New York City, when pedestrians' eyes are constantly glued to the pavement or their handheld devices?) Don't partake in ideological debates about your cause. And, most importantly, prepare yourself: you will be turned down, avoided, and cursed at much more often than you would like.

The idea of asking for money on a city street has never sat well with me. Seeing organization-sponsored surveyors standing in close proximity to low-income or homeless individuals, both groups asking for out-of-pocket donations, always seemed a cruel juxtaposition. What right have social justice organizations to ask for cash when thousands of people can't even afford basic amenities?

Luckily, I'm able to make peace with my role as a surveyor because NARAL doesn't toss us onto the sidewalk to ask for donations. Rather, I have spent the previous week compiling a 20-question survey, intended to gauge New York



Outside Senator Savino's office.

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residents' perceptions of reproductive health accessibility in the city. It ranges from the broad to specific, including questions like:

- *Have you or someone you know ever gotten an abortion?*
- *In your experience, is emergency contraception easily accessible?*
- *Did you support the Women's Equality Act that protected a woman's right to choose?*

Our surveying methodology is strategic: in order to end up with a diverse selection of opinions from people of all classes and backgrounds, my friends and I rotate between each of the five boroughs of New York City: Manhattan, Queens, the Bronx, Staten Island, and Brooklyn. We stand in front of City Hall on Broadway, outside of a Starbucks brimming with flustered bankers in the Financial District, in the heart of a bustling street vendor fair in Brooklyn. We never go to the same place twice.

What shocks me most about my surveying experience is the extent to which many individuals are not even foundationally aware of the pro-choice/anti-choice debate. I first realize this stark knowledge gap on a hot day in early July. Smooth waves of humidity rise from the highway like ghosts, trembling and barely visible amidst the speed of the traffic. Every five minutes the subway groans and rattles, aggravated at being awoken from its fleeting sleep, as disgruntled commuters emerge from the train's underbelly. It is hot and the very air is in flux.

Queens Plaza is a hub of activity. Whereas central Manhattan provides us a sampling of individuals on the upper end of the income spectrum, Queens is, on average, home to people less economically privileged. (The average "middle class" individual in Manhattan, for example, makes between \$80,000 and \$235,000 annually. In Queens, the median income is \$26,234.)<sup>8,9</sup> I'm looking forward to surveying here; it will be useful to get the perspective of low-income individuals because reproductive health information and services have historically been denied or inaccessible to less wealthy populations.

Standing in the center of the shade-less sidewalk wearing my black cotton "I Love Pro-Choice New York" T-shirt, I feel two fine lines of sweat trickle down the small of my back. In this heat, the likelihood of people stopping to fill out a survey is slim – and the likelihood of people being grumpy is guaranteed. In a show of strength, I swallow my grimace and glue a broad smile to my face.

At 1:15, the Q-train rumbles up to the station and spills a stream of teenagers onto the platform. Most look no older than 18; the boys wear low-hanging jeans and baggy T-shirts, the girls tight tops and tighter bottoms. They are a rambunctious group, joking and teasing one another good-naturedly.

It's a long shot, but I have nothing to lose. "Hey, do you guys have a moment to fill out a survey?" I call out.

A few turn to look over their shoulders with distaste. One, a girl I figure to be about my age, takes pity on me in my desperate, sweaty glory, and turns around to take the clipboard from my outstretched hand.

Her group erupts in protest. "Tasha," they groan, "come on!"

Tasha, whom I have already taken a liking to, glares at them. "Will you cool it and get over here?" she calls back, waving the clipboard threateningly. Slowly, the rest of the grumbling troupe meanders over, taking the surveys and pens from my hands. There is a moment of silence as they mull over the initial questions – biographical data, name, age, etc. Then, their pens still.

"What's NARAL?" pipes up one of the boys I assume to be about 17.

I smile and repeat the catchphrase I've memorized verbatim. "NARAL is an advocacy organization that fights for reproductive justice. We support issues like a woman's right to choose, comprehensive sex education, and birth control availability." The group eyes me warily, listening to my explanation and then lowering their eyes back to their papers. Some chew on their pen caps.

"So what's 'pro-choice' mean?" asks one of the girls. I turn to face her, surprised. In all my time as a pro-choice activist – at Brandeis, at home, and here at NARAL – I have never been asked that question. The pro-/anti-choice dichotomy is one of the most basic controversial issues of our generation – how can it be that these teens aren't aware?



**Surveying near the Brooklyn Bridge.**



I explain that being pro-choice means supporting a woman's right to choose to have an abortion. It is clear that some understand the concept, while others are still confused. Throughout the course of their survey, I am asked many similar questions, each more shocking than the last: "What is comprehensive sex education?" "Why does it matter if the mayor is pro-choice?" "They have laws about this kind of shit?"

Halfway through one of my explanations, a boy rolls his eyes and shoves the clipboard at me in frustration. "I don't get this. I'm outta here," he mutters. He is followed by two of his friends.

I watch them leave, disappointed and stunned by their incomprehension. Somehow, the very diction I've used to craft the survey is too complicated. Words that I now recognize as pro-choice jargon are unfamiliar to the ears of these teens. I realize that my survey is likely to further alienate people who do not understand by making them feel uneducated and embarrassed. If NARAL truly wants to cater to the needs of all people regardless of race or class, the organization needs to adopt a less lofty approach. We need to educate the masses. As the teens that shirked their survey illustrated, people will not support our cause or engage in the discussion if they don't understand the matter at hand.

## Jasmine Burnett

### July 12

It's easy to forget that abortion politics are inaccessible to some when I am working in an insular pro-choice environment. Occasionally, NARAL invites pro-choice figureheads to give presentations to the interns and staff. Sometimes they are mild-mannered, soft-spoken, and cordial. Sometimes, they say things like this: *"I'm gonna say what the fuck I want to say, how I want to say it, when I get pissed off."*

This is my introduction to Jasmine Burnett, a self-identified queer, black feminist activist who has spent the better part of her 34 years smashing the patriarchy and stunning her audiences with profanity-peppered quotes. Barbed words boomerang out of Jasmine Burnett's mouth like razor blades; their power is matched only by the intensity of her vibrant, multicolored clothing and sharp, short Mohawk. Four NARAL interns and six staff members sit around the boardroom table, simultaneously floored by Jasmine's unapologetic tirade and quietly thankful that we have reached a point in time in which voices like Jasmine's are central to our movement.

Jasmine Burnett is a community organizer much renowned in her field. She has come to explain to us the meaning of reproductive justice, a term that glides loosely from the lips of NARAL staff though many of us lack a comprehensive understanding of its meaning. Before, as my fellow intern Iris and I had prepared for the workshop and made our way to the conference room, we laughed snootily and tossed our hair, assuming the workshop would be an overview of what we already knew about the pro-choice movement. Five minutes in, as we sit dumbfounded in our chairs watching our paradigms get blown to bits by this steamroller of a woman, we realize we couldn't have been more wrong.

Jasmine gives us the definition of reproductive justice: a combination of reproductive health access, services, and positive social attitudes at the intersections of race, class, and all identity categories. I learn that reproductive justice is an ideology best embodied by a never-ending list of factors that combine and overlap to form a colorful tapestry.

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**Preparing for the Reproductive Justice Brown Bag Lunch.**



I have never questioned the validity of our work before, but in this moment, I wonder: Is it enough? Are we masking our anger, sacrificing our well-deserved anger so we can function properly in the political machine? And if so, at what cost?

Reproductive justice is having low-cost reproductive health services available to all. Reproductive justice is the universal freedom to have healthy children, or not to have children at all. Reproductive justice is void of male privilege, white privilege, straight privilege, and class privilege. Reproductive justice is demanding medical services and social attitudes that we as women, and all people, deserve.

Throughout the course of Jasmine's presentation I can literally *feel* my mind expanding. I follow Jasmine's sweeping hand gestures and intense facial expressions as she paints for us the injustices of the world. It's a lot to digest. To keep things interesting, Jasmine has brought with her a tambourine named Glory. She shakes the tambourine to celebrate moments of discussion that resonate with her most. Towards the end of the workshop, a staff member asks how we, NARAL Pro-Choice New York, can be stronger participants in the fight for reproductive justice.

"Great question!" she proclaims, feverishly shaking Glory until the room is resonating with trebly silver pings. Jasmine supports NARAL's initiatives, but she believes we can do more. Sometimes, talking to legislators and passing policy is not enough. "People need to make demands!" she bellows, striking her flat palm on the boardroom table. "People get so afraid – I don't know when we got so afraid. I am challenged by social justice as a movement because *people are not saying what they feel.*"

I consider this, and take a moment to look around the room. I look at the phones we use to call our legislators, arranged perfectly in a tidy line. I look at the walls, pleasantly decorated with posters, memorabilia, and photographs from NARAL's prior rallies. I look at the flat screen TV on which Jasmine's PowerPoint is projected, the expensive business attire we are all wearing, the legal pads and ballpoint pens strewn across the table.

Suddenly, the work we do seems insular to me – too far removed from the struggles on the ground. Where is the anger? Where are our demands? The Women's Equality Act, NARAL's brainchild, its baby, didn't pass. Texas recently passed a sweeping anti-choice bill that bans abortion at 20 weeks and shuts down the majority of the state's abortion clinics, despite Wendy Davis's epic filibuster and the fervent protests of pro-choice activists nationwide.<sup>10</sup> Right now, pro-choice activists have a lot to be angry about – and we're sitting in a boardroom, eating cheese and crackers and shaking tambourines.

Logically, I understand that social movements need multiple components. Some organizations do grassroots work, talking with folks "on the ground," rallying, partaking in civil disobedience. Some organizations, like NARAL, advocate the

*politics* of policy, working with the upper echelon of the state's public servants to pass a pro-choice agenda. I have never questioned the validity of our work before, but in this moment, I wonder: Is it enough? Are we masking our anger, sacrificing our well-deserved anger so we can function properly in the political machine? And if so, at what cost?

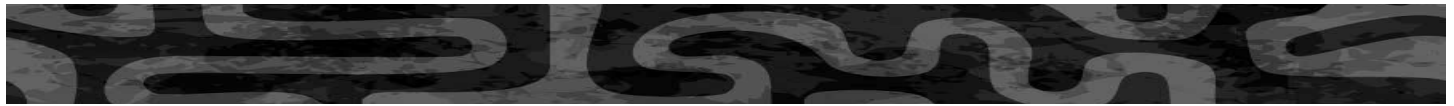
## Reflections

I mull over these questions for the entirety of my internship experience. By the end of my stay, I realize I'm leaving with more questions than I came with. If I'm working for a policy organization, am I becoming so immersed in the upper echelon of decision-makers that I'm forgetting to educate the masses? How do I make people care about this issue if some people are not aware this is an issue at all? How do I help people understand that even the most "pro-choice" places can be hostile to women's rights?

I unpack some of these questions with Christopher in my exit interview. I have said my tearful goodbyes to my NYU friends; I've officially moved out of Hayden Hall. This is my final destination before I leave the city for good, and as I enter the NARAL conference room for the last time, I get goosebumps on my arms.

Christopher and I sit across from each other at the enormous conference table. I give him feedback as my supervisor – all positive – and he gives me feedback on my performance throughout the course of the summer, saying I have "fire, wit, and humility" enough to carry the pro-choice movement. I feel a potent glow in my heart at his words – Christopher does not dispense compliments lightly – and though I feel a heavy sadness as we hug goodbye, I'm inspired by his certainty that I will continue to make a difference.





Outside, my mom is leaning against the building, coffee in hand; she will drive me home to Stillwater, New Jersey. It's only an hour away by car but feels so, so much further. Realistically, I know Manhattan is home to millions of people; my eight-week stint is a mere blip on the radar of New York City's timeline. But standing there, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the city that has become my home, I experience a heartbreaking bout of nostalgia. I know I will never in my life feel this particular way again.

On the first day of my internship, Christopher said to me, "Ask questions here. Learn everyone's story, their history, their beliefs. Everyone got involved in this work for a specific reason."

Why did I get involved? What's my story? I'll sum it up this way: one in three. By the time I am 45, it is a statistical absolute that I will know at least one woman who has had an abortion. They are our mothers, our sisters, our best friends, ourselves. They are photographers, writers, CEOs and politicians. They are white. Black. Hispanic. Atheist. Catholic. Wealthy. Poor.

One day, it could be me. It could be me just like it was Sage; just like it was the hundreds of women I spoke to on the streets of New York City. Restricting women's access to abortion and birth control negatively alters the course of millions of women's lives.

Now that I'm back at Brandeis, I'm working for NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts as a Campus Campaign Organizer. I'm mobilizing activists on my campus, but sometimes it doesn't seem like enough. In early October, a Nebraska judge ruled that a 16-year-old foster child could not have an abortion because she was "not mature enough;" in September, Ohio passed a

mandatory ultrasound law. Across the nation, states are incrementally restricting women's right to choose.

Sometimes I feel like I'm fighting a losing battle. It would be easy to become disenchanted with the pro-choice movement; the anti-choice voice is loud, powerful, and currently screaming decibels above our own. But every time I hear another woman's story, I see Sage. I see myself. I see the hundreds of women I spoke with this summer whose lives would have been drastically, drastically different if they hadn't had access to reproductive health care. Their stories keep me inspired. They keep me fighting.

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## Notes

1. "Roe v. Wade: 1973." Last modified January 2013. [http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC\\_CR\\_0410\\_0113\\_ZS.html](http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0410_0113_ZS.html)
2. "Pregnancy Viability – What Does it Mean?" Last modified October 2011. <http://www.babymed.com/prematurity/pregnancy-viability-what-does-it-mean>
3. "Planned Parenthood of Southeastern PA v. Casey: 1992." Last modified January 2013. <http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/91-744.ZS.html>
4. "Campus Campaign Organizer Toolkit." NARAL Pro-Choice America. October 2013.
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9. Redinski, Piotr. "What is Middle Class In Manhattan?" New York Times. February 28, 2013. Accessed November 1, 2013.
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