

Alexander Sanger Speech – Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts - 1995

First of all, thank you for the warm introduction, and let me tell you what a privilege it is to be here with you, surrounded by the commitment and courage I can feel in this room. This is an important evening, not just for the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts but for our entire movement.

The strength you have shown and are showing here tonight --- supporting each other and reinvigorating Massachusetts Planned Parenthood after such a deadly blow --- is truly remarkable. You who have struggled through this tragedy probably don't have the distance and perspective to see how remarkable your own effort is. But we at other Planned Parenthoods do.

The violent outburst that took the lives of Shannon Lowney and Leanne Nichols, and wounded many others, was the very thing all of us, all over the country, had feared. But we also had always somehow believed that it wouldn't happen to us at Planned Parenthood. Our ability to deny painful possibilities is a factor in giving many of us the courage to continue. For you, that denial has been totally and cruelly shattered, and we in other places cannot know what that feels like. But your experience, so close to home, has also made a dent in our denial. Still, we are all here tonight, and we will all be back at work tomorrow, in Cambridge, in Brookline, in Worcester, in Lowell, in New York City, and all over the country.

That is testimony to the sacrifices our movement has always made, and will continue to make. Sacrifices we make willingly --- the giving of time, energy, passion, and money. For example, the dedication of our board members and the bravery and calm of our volunteer escorts --- the extraordinary patience and tact demanded of our clinic staffers on the phones and at the front desk --- and further inside the clinics the counselors, nurses, doctors, social workers and everyone else. Every day, you do a professionally difficult, emotionally taxing, sometimes rewarding but sometimes thankless job. Helping clients cope with everything from unintended pregnancies, to battering and abuse, to receiving the news that they are HIV-positive.

I know those of you on the education staff are doing your best to remain calm and diplomatic with school officials who are fearful about teaching sexuality education that can help prevent the spread of HIV to your students. And at the same time, public affairs and executive staff are absorbing and fending off the most hateful political and personal attacks, while defending our ability to provide vital reproductive health care and education services.

You, the staff, board, volunteers, and donors make those sacrifices, make those efforts *willingly, lovingly*, out of our commitment to the health and lives of the women who need us, along with their partners and families. We do it because we also remember that our movement was borne of the not-at-all voluntary sacrifices forced upon women. The sacrifice of their lives and their health, when denied the means of preventing pregnancy, and access to safe abortion. My grandmother and her family also made enormous sacrifices for this movement 80 years ago.

My grandmother was jailed 17 times, her largest sentence being 30 days in the Queens County Penitentiary for opening the nation's first birth control clinic and thereby founding our affiliate in

the Brownsville section of Brooklyn in October, 1916.

Her sister was jailed in the same penitentiary and being of better health went on a hunger strike, the first U.S. prisoner ever to do so. After a week without food and water, the Governor of New York ordered her forcibly wrapped in a blanket and force fed. As she hovered near death, the Governor pardoned her. It took Ethel years to get her health back.

Earlier in 1914, when she started a newspaper called *The Woman Rebel* and was indicted by Anthony Comstock on nine counts of obscenity, thereby facing 45 years in jail, she fled to Europe the night before her trial. She took my father then age 5, my uncle, age 10, and my Aunt Peggy, then 4, down the hall to a neighbor and left them. She was gone for 11 months. My father never forgot it. My Aunt Peggy never understood what was happening. All she knew was that her mother was gone. She died a week after her mother's return from exile. It was a loss my grandmother and my father never got over.

My father was sent to a boarding school at age 7, so that my grandmother could carry on the cause. His letters to his mother are pathetic. "Dear mother: I went to meet the 8 am train like you said. You weren't on it. I waited for 9 o'clock train you weren't on that one either. I walked back to school. When are you coming to see me?"

In 1916, a Harvard student from New York, young Van Kleek Allison was arrested and convicted on obscenity charges, for distributing Margaret Sanger's pamphlets to factory workers. He was sentenced to three years in jail. The women of Boston organized a protest meeting where Margaret Sanger was able to speak. The group who organized the rally later organized PPLM. One of them, Mrs. Pauline Ames, has a daughter, Pauline Plimpton, who is on our Board in New York City.

I don't know enough about Van Kleek Allison to know what personal events motivated his birth control activism. But I do know plenty about Margaret Sanger's motivations. I wish more were written about her feelings about her mother, my great-grandmother, Anne Purcell Higgins. My grandmother may have been a self-proclaimed "Woman Rebel" (the name of her first newspaper), but she was not rebelling against her own mother. She was rebelling on behalf of her mother.

Ann Purcell Higgins was poor. Very poor. Her husband, my great-grandfather, was a stone mason who only got intermittent work. A large part of what would have been his livelihood, carving gravestones, was not open to him. He was an independent thinker, and a political enemy of the church in Corning, New York. That was ultimately good for our movement, because my great-grandfather's taste for challenging authority clearly was passed along to Margaret Sanger, but it was bad financially for my great-grandparents and their kids.

Ann Purcell Higgins was pregnant 18 times, had 11 children, seven miscarriages, and died at age 49 of exhaustion. Her husband lived to be 85. As Margaret Sanger used to say, those 18 pregnancies didn't affect him much.

Giving women the means to escape the fate of her own mother was a principal motivation for Margaret Sanger. That, and her experience as a nurse on New York's lower east side, where she

learned first hand of the carnage caused by botched illegal abortions. Then, *legal* abortion was not even an issue. But her battle for birth control, even to prevent the need for abortion, made Margaret Sanger an enemy of the Catholic Church, many in government, and the medical profession. Of course, the right to birth control and the right to safe, legal abortion cannot be separated. So of course, Margaret Sanger's opponents then were many of the same ones we face today. She and her political enemies understood each other quite well, I believe, and agreed on many points.

There was "common ground" on the fact that access to birth control totally changed the power dynamic of relationships. It gave women the power to move into roles other than motherhood, without having to give up their sex lives. The opponents of birth control in that era at least had the honesty to argue that giving women that power, that autonomy, was bad. They did not stoop to the kinds of lies we see today like "condoms don't work." And they did not resort to the equally false fetus worship we see in today's anti-choice movement.

This debate really has always been about the status of women, not about the status of fetuses.

A few centuries ago, the debate over the status of women and contraception, was not a debate, but an inquisition. I'm talking about literally burning people at the stake, mostly women, accused of witchcraft.

Although persecution at the witch trials in Salem and Cambridge may be most famous here, author Uta Renke-Heinemann has documented that centuries earlier Germany was the country with the most witch trials. What helped to create that horror was a 1484 Papal Bull, or encyclical. It was called *The Witches Bull*. When he issued it, Pope Innocent The Eighth also appointed two inquisitors. The following year, 41 women were burned at the stake in one county in Germany alone. Pope Innocent was concerned that people in some parts of Germany were engaging in sorcery designed to, quote, "prevent men from begetting and the women from conceiving, and to make the conjugal act impossible."

Pope Innocent's inquisitors, in their book, *The Witches Hammer*, came up with many theological explanations as to just why the devil chose women as his instrument for witchcraft. I won't take your time with those --- I'd rather share with you the inquisitors' more general views on women. They felt that, "If it were not for women's evil tricks, not to mention witches, the world would be free from countless dangers." "If we look into it," they wrote, "we find that almost all kingdoms on earth have been destroyed by women." Women's sexuality and attractiveness was a central issue. For these men, beautiful hair in women meant proximity of the devil. Seriously. If they lived in our century, they'd be censoring shampoo commercials, never mind condom ads.

The Pope's inquisitors felt that contraception was murder. Sound familiar? Following that twisted logic, they too killed in the name of morality, in the name of life, in the name of God. And they singled out midwives, the only reproductive health providers of their time, for their wrath. Midwives also dispensed the limited contraceptive advice that was available at the time. That, too, was seen as tantamount to murder. One-third of all women executed as witches at that time in Germany were midwives. Now witch persecutions are back, but instead of a stake and a match

in a town square; we have a man with an Uzi in a clinic waiting room. No one ever took a shot at my grandmother. We legalized birth control in this country without a shot being fired.

Massachusetts has had more than its share of persecutions of the pioneers in our movement.

In 1832, Dr. Charles Knowlton published a book in New York called *Fruits of Philosophy, or the Private Companion of Young Married People*. This book was the first history of contraception published since the Greeks and contained a complete description of various chemical methods and douching.

Since there was no principle of double jeopardy in our criminal justice system in the 1830's, Knowlton was prosecuted three times for this book. Not in New York, but in Massachusetts, in Taunton, Cambridge and Greenfield. After his conviction in Taunton, a juror asked him for a copy of the book. After his conviction in Cambridge, he spent three months doing hard labor. He was acquitted in Greenfield.

In 1877, Anthony Comstock, the single-minded vigilante against birth control, arrested Ezra Heywood in Boston for writing a book entitled *Cupid's Yokes: On the Binding Forces of Conjugal Life*. It didn't give any contraception information but it did describe Comstock as a "religio-monomaniac"!!! Heywood was sentenced to two years of hard labor; but President Hayes commuted the sentence because of Heywood's poor health. He was later re-prosecuted by Comstock for publishing an advertisement for the book and two poems by Walt Whitman. He was sent to jail for two years.

But family planning has been a heartfelt human goal since the earliest of times --- even when the methods available were unreliable, unscientific, unpleasant and unsafe. Human history has shown that people will always try to take control over this essential part of our lives, no matter what the opposition.

Despite government and church resistance to our movement's early activists, millions of women and men (granted, far fewer men), understood that a woman's power over her own life, health, and reproductive destiny was good and necessary. And history has borne out that view. Women, men, children, and all of society are better off for the public health impact of the family planning movement. We are also better off for the contributions of so many brilliant and creative women who might never have made their mark had they, like my great-grandmother, had to spend virtually their entire adult lives pregnant. I'd like to share with you one of the thousands of letters my grandmother received. This one came from a woman in Oklahoma:

"I am one of the women who is only 25 but looks 50. Ten years ago, I was full of life, thinking of nothing but happiness. Today I am a wreck, not able to do my work without help. During 10 years, I have born four babies and three miscarriages. I am just able to get around a little from a miscarriage I had a month ago at three months. My baby is 16 months old. I know if I could keep from getting pregnant a few years I could gain my health back and be able to care of my children....."

Can you help me? If you will tell me the preventative means oh, how happy I would be. My husband is a day worker and is never well. All of his kindred died with TB. I am afraid he has the awful disease now but nothing could stop a man's constant demands on a woman. I know you will help. I will always sing your praises. Please no one will ever know."

This letter is why I'm here and why you're here. We can not go back to those days. That is why we make the sacrifices we do.

But as long as we continue to sacrifice every day, willingly, lovingly, for the communities we serve, then those who were, against their will, martyred for our movement --- they will live on in our work.

We in other affiliates have not walked a mile in your shoes, and we hope and pray we will never have to endure what you have. You who are there in the clinics every day serving women and teens --- in the schools educating and in the streets and legislatures lobbying and organizing--- and carrying on despite your fears and your own poignant memories --- *You are all, everyone of you, Heroes.* We are all inspired by your work and sacrifice. I thank you for it.

Remarks by Alexander C. Sanger
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