

SPECIAL SECTION PLAN A

NCJW's Campaign for Contraceptive Access

by SAMMIE MOSHENBERG

In a packed room at Washington, DC's prestigious National Press Club, NCJW President Phyllis Snyder took to the podium and officially launched Plan A: NCJW's Campaign for Contraceptive Access on June 7, 2007, the 42nd anniversary of the historic Supreme Court decision legalizing birth control for married women, *Griswold v. Connecticut*.

But the message of the day was not about past victories. It was about present-day challenges that mean we can no longer take access to birth control for granted. And it was about committing to a new campaign. Plan A's proactive, community-based approach will help advocates around the country to secure and protect access to contraceptive

information and options for all women.

Since the launch, Plan A activity has accelerated. Equipped with the Plan A Healthy Community Checklists, volunteers are taking to the streets, the phones, and the Internet to gauge their communities' standing on five Plan A issues: affordable contraception, comprehensive

sexuality education, emergency contraception, pharmacy refusals, and young women's access. From Arizona to Minnesota, they are mobilizing and educating their communities through forums, screenings, and newspaper articles, and encouraging them to sign up for Plan A action alerts on www.ncjw.org.

Why now? In October, President George W. Bush appointed an outspoken birth-control opponent, Dr. Susan Orr, to oversee the government's family-planning program. Thanks to changes in Medicaid, drug companies have lost their incentive to supply colleges and community health centers with discounted contraceptives. And in November, both the House of Representatives and the Senate approved a \$27.8 million increase in abstinence-only-until marriage funding. (On the plus side, a \$27.8 million increase for Title X, the nation's family-planning program, was included in the same package.)

But the real action is at the local level, where Plan A can have a huge impact, build-

ing on the presence NCJW already has in communities around the country. In some states, this means expanding access, in other states it means blocking restrictions. Already, the list of involved NCJW sections and individuals is growing, as grassroots supporters take action in their own backyards, determining whether local schools teach comprehensive sexuality education and if contraception — including emergency contraception — is easily available and affordable.

In the months to come, NCJW will be reaching out beyond its own constituency to other progressive, religious groups and leaders, whose voices have a special resonance on these issues. After all, the argument for restricting birth control and denying students anything but abstinence-only curricula is often couched as a religious issue. Plan A seeks to clarify that imposing one religious belief on all impinges religious freedom — stifling the ability to make personal health decisions based on one's own religious beliefs.

NCJW believes that the protection of women's rights is a moral imperative, and a woman must have the right to exercise her own moral judgment when making personal decisions. This is an especially powerful message when carried by people of faith, speaking out in their communities. And that voice is being strengthened thanks to Plan A: NCJW's Campaign for Contraceptive Access.

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A pioneer in the fight for birth control, NCJW has long believed that the availability of contraception is key to the economic independence, well-being, and equality of women. Although contraception is widely supported in the US, it is not universally accessible, even long after legal barriers were thought to have been dismantled once and for all.

Plan A: NCJW's Campaign for Contraceptive Access aims to secure and protect access to contraceptive information and options. A community-based, proactive national campaign, Plan A empowers individuals and groups to take action for contraceptive access.

PERSONAL DECISIONS, PUBLIC ACTION

Plan A works toward ensuring that all women — regardless of economic status, age, or location — have the information and options they need to prevent unwanted pregnancies and disease.

How much do you know about access to contraception? Take this challenging quiz to find out!

1. The vast majority of Americans support the availability of birth control — and they use it. What percent of American women have used a contraceptive at some point in their lives?
2. How many millions of unwanted pregnancies have been prevented over the past decade, thanks to family planning clinics for low-income women that are funded by Title X of the federal Public Health Service Act?
3. Nearly half of all 15- to 19-year-olds in the United States have had sex at least once. What chance does a sexually active teenager who does not use contraceptives have of becoming pregnant within a year?
4. Pharmacists have refused to fill birth control prescriptions — including emergency contraception — in at least 19 states. What steps can you take if you or someone you care about has trouble getting a birth control prescription filled?
5. When taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex or birth control failure, Plan B emergency contraception can reduce the risk of pregnancy by up to 89%. Plan B prevents pregnancies — it does not end them. It works in the same way as other hormonal birth control methods, like the pill or the patch. How does Plan B prevent pregnancy?
6. Unlike comprehensive sexuality education, which includes information about abstinence and contraception, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs do not significantly affect the rate of abstinence, according to a 2007 congressional report, yet they continue to receive generous government funding. Since 1996, how much has the federal government spent on abstinence-only programs?
7. In how many states has the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or the courts determined that refusal to provide contraceptive coverage (as part of prescription drug coverage) is sex discrimination?

Find the answers to these important questions and learn more about Plan A at www.ncjw.org. Just look for the link to the *NCJW Journal*.



NCJW President Phyllis Snyder launches Plan A at a Washington, DC, press conference.

BRIDGING THE GENERATIONS



by ERICA BRODY

Through the generations, NCJW members have held firmly to the belief that the right to prevent unwanted pregnancies is fundamental to women's equality and well-being. And they've passed down this family value to their children.

Some grew up, like Joan Butwin, when "nice girls didn't." Others, like Terry Vismantas, "came of age during the era of free sex, love, and rock 'n' roll." Some grew up when the pill was ubiquitous; others, like Sue Schreiber, when only married women could get the pill.

Historically, NCJW was an early supporter of Margaret Sanger's work, passing a 1931 resolution in favor of women's access to confidential family planning services. Today, contraception is fully legal, yet access is still not guaranteed and varies state by state. In the decades between, NCJW activists worked hard to expand women's access to contraception, preventing sexually transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancies through education, funding, and policy changes. History shared through personal stories has helped fuel this movement, as generation after generation has passed down tales and memories of what life was like before.

Before *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), the Supreme Court case that established a married woman's right to use birth control.

Before *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), which expanded that right to include unmarried people.

Or even further back, when it was a federal offense to distribute birth control — or even information about contraception — through the mail or across state lines.

In recent years, the backlash against contraception and information has grown more prevalent and politically powerful, spurred largely by a religious right committed to curtailing the ability of others to make their own personal decisions. Headlines attest to this: women unable to get birth control prescriptions filled, inadequate funding for programs that provide poor women with contraception, laws that exempt employer-provided insurance from contraceptive equity, barriers for young women, abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula that mislead students about the efficacy of contraception, and attempts to redefine contraceptives as abortifacients.



Yet such restrictions aren't universal. Many states have passed laws that expand access, whether it's New York women being able to buy emergency contraception with a Medicaid card or Kansas public school students being taught comprehensive sex ed.

Plan A: NCJW's Campaign for Contraceptive Access was designed as a vehicle for expanding access in communities around the country. In some states, that means defending current access from new restrictions. In less restrictive states, this means educating more women and young people about contraception and making sure that all women who want to use contraception can.

Of the hundreds of members who took a recent *NCJW Journal* survey, more than 85 percent said that reproductive rights activism transcended the generations in their families, with many members reporting that they and at least two other generations in their families are staunch proponents of access who take action through NCJW. For some, this means their children and mothers; for others, their children and grandchildren.

Consider Judy Traub (b. 1935), co-president of the Palm Beach (FL) Section. Traub first got involved with reproductive rights activism in the early 1980s as a member of the Minneapolis (MN) Section. In Minnesota, she was asked to run for the state legislature on a pro-choice ticket. As a state senator, Traub sponsored legislation on medically accurate, comprehensive sex education. After all these years, she says, "We're still fighting for the same things."

"I want [my granddaughter] to have full access to reproductive health care, medically accurate sexuality information, and to know that she lives in a country where the agenda of a small, narrow-minded minority does not control access to information for the balance of the population."

Traub says she was "always upfront on the issues" with her daughter, Stacy Saef (b. 1968). Both remember the first time they marched together at a reproductive rights rally, wearing matching NCJW T-shirts. Today, Saef — treasurer of the Chicago North Shore (IL) Section — says she's "blessed with two beautiful children" but doesn't plan to have any more. "It's essential that every woman has the ability to choose if and when to have a child. As the mother of a young daughter, I will do everything within my power to ensure Plan A's success so that my daughter has the same access to information about reproductive options and, when the time comes, the same access to contraception that I had and continue to have."

For NCJW board member Joan Butwin (b. 1936), a member of NCJW for 45 years, protecting access is "extremely

important," especially at a time when younger generations of women have no firsthand experience with the obstacles their mothers faced. Butwin's daughter, Peninsula (NY) Section board member Ellen Begun (b. 1965) remembers her mother explaining the importance of protecting the rights of all women to make reproductive decisions for themselves. Today, as the mother of a middle-schooler, she feels that comprehensive sex education is crucial. "Kids need to be educated."

For her part, Sue Schreiber of the Omaha (NE) Section (b. 1938) remembers "the first fight" — "to get contraception available without restrictions." Today, Schreiber's daughter, Omaha Section president Deb Marburg (b. 1967), follows in her mother's footsteps.

"I don't want the generations that come after me to have to fight the way that those before me did," says Marburg. "I can't imagine thinking that I don't need to do anything. That's how you lose what you have." And already, she's thinking ahead to the day when she passes the torch to her sons, 6 and 8. "It's my responsibility to educate my children about how we value people's health and the choices they make."

For Terry Vismantas (b. 1951), daughter of NCJW past president Esther Landa (b. 1912), reproductive rights are "absolutely a family value... In my family we respect the rights of individuals to make choices."

For many supporters, Plan A is personal, not just political. "I have a daughter who might need access to medications that a pharmacist refuses to dispense, says Traub. "I have a grand-

daughter who will grow up in this country — I want her to have full access to reproductive health care, medically accurate sexuality information, and to know that she lives in country where the agenda of a small, narrow-minded minority does not control access to information for the balance of the population."

As Vismantas put it, "It's time to get the grassroots fired up." And with Plan A, they'll have the tools they need to mobilize their communities. For many NCJW members, that mobilizing will start at home.

➤ To learn more about Plan A and NCJW's reproductive rights work — or to find out about Plan A efforts in your community — please visit www.ncjw.org, email PlanA@ncjwdc.org, or call 202.296.2588.