



NATIONAL NETWORK OF
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State Legislators and Abortion Stories: A Toolkit for Transformation

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Introduction to Abortion Storytelling

Storytelling is a vulnerable way to share experiences and listen to another's perspective, particularly to shift a narrative and build connections between communities. Since the beginning of time, families and communities have used oral storytelling and written stories to share family histories, pass down traditions, and advise new generations on the future. This is true for sharing stories of personal abortion experiences as well — whether it was to pass on the recipe of an abortion-inducing tea back when abortion was illegal, to shift the minds of Supreme Court justices in a court brief, or connecting with a loved one to feel less alone, people have been sharing abortion stories to change the narrative —and policies— around abortion access in the United States for centuries. Personal abortion stories have been monumental in pushing for increased access to care, historically and in our modern fight. And personal stories are becoming more present in our conversation around abortion in state legislatures across the country.

An abortion story, put simply, is the true experience of someone who has had an abortion. It can be as short as the person declaring that they had an abortion, or it can explore their reasons for having an abortion, the socio-economic issues that contributed to their need for an abortion, and the financial and logistical barriers that impacted their experience. As abortion restrictions have increased, so have the presence of abortion stories in our media, pop culture, and politics.

State Legislators and Abortion Stories

State legislators have been on the front lines in [sharing their own abortion stories](#) to change the conversation about abortion access and in support of policies that protect reproductive health access for their constituents — and against abortion restrictions. In 2013, Texas state Senator Wendy Davis captured the nation's attention when she read abortion stories from the floor during a 11-hour filibuster, in an effort to stop SB5/HB2, which was later struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Whole Women's Health v. Hellerstedt*. Later, Sen. Davis shared her own abortion and ectopic pregnancy experiences in her memoir to break the stigma. But, former Sen. Davis wasn't the first, nor the only legislator to share her story publicly. Several legislators have shared their stories to defend against anti-abortion legislation and myths.

In 2011, U.S. Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) [shared the story](#) of her own abortion after a colleague expressed his anti-choice views on the floor of the House of Representatives. In 2015, Ohio State Representative

Teresa Fedor [opened up about](#) her sexual assault and the abortion she needed as a result while her colleagues sought to push through an abortion ban. In 2014, Texas state Representative Dawwna Dukes [shared her abortion experience](#) on a panel in response to her colleague, state Representative Molly White, who was a candidate for legislative office at the time, who previously shared the story of her two abortions and her quest to end legal abortion. Legislators have also spoken about their experiences to push for comprehensive reproductive healthcare and abortion access. “I shared that story because I felt it was relevant to the importance of sex education in Nevada schools, and my belief that our children need to be armed with good information in order to make good choices,” former Nevada state Assemblywoman Lucy Flores said of decision to share her abortion experience at the age of 16 as part of her testimony in support of a state sex education bill in 2014. A handful of sitting and former legislators also shared their abortion stories with the U.S. Supreme Court in [this amicus brief](#) in support of *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt* in 2016.

Non-legislators, including people who’ve had abortions also shared their stories in amicus briefs for the Supreme Court’s *Whole Woman’s Health v. Hellerstedt* case, and have recently shared their stories in committees when testifying against anti-abortion legislation, and during legislative visits to remind representatives that their constituents have abortions.

What is Reproductive Justice? A Framework for Abortion Stories

Reproductive justice is a term used to describe the human rights framework addressing our social, economic, and reproductive lives. Reproductive justice, as defined by Forward Together, is all people having the social, political, and economic power and resources to make healthy decisions about their gender, bodies, sexuality, and families for themselves and their communities.

The term was coined in 1994 after a group of Black women activists [attended](#) the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt and found that their struggles felt closer to the women of color around the world, than to those of their white counterparts in the United States. They felt that the framework of “choice” was limiting to the support and freedom they needed in accessing reproductive freedom; there is no real “choice” if you don’t have actual access to those choices. International activists were using a human rights framework, which included the right to food, education, healthcare, freedom from violence and economic justice, and this became a way to include

reproductive and bodily autonomy as a human right — as it is recognized by the United Nations. The term “reproductive rights” and “social justice” were melded to create the term “reproductive justice.”

Dr. Dorothy Roberts, author of *Killing The Black Body*, [writes](#):

“A caucus of black feminists at a 1994 pro-choice conference coined the term ‘reproductive justice,’ a framework that includes not only a woman’s right not to have a child, but also the right to have children and to raise them with dignity in safe, healthy, and supportive environments. This framework repositioned reproductive rights in a political context of intersecting race, gender, and class oppressions. The caucus recognized that their activism had to be linked to social justice organizing in order to gain the power, resources, and structural change needed for addressing the well-being of all women. Back in 2004, SisterSong brought a reproductive justice approach to the march’s leadership and helped to mobilize busloads of newly energized, diverse supporters, making the march one of the largest of its kind in U.S. history. The success of the March for Women’s Lives demonstrates a winning strategy; under the leadership of women of color, the left needs to ditch the dominant reproductive rights logic and replace it with a broader vision of reproductive justice.”

Reproductive justice is not a synonym for ‘abortion rights’, ‘reproductive rights’, or ‘pro-choice’. It is a specific framework that addresses social and economic issues stemming from the ability to make decisions about one’s reproduction and sexuality, including but also beyond abortion access. It is important that legislators not only protect the right to an abortion, but look at policies that address the totality of their constituents’ lives, reproductive healthcare access, and communities.

Applying a Reproductive Justice Lens to Abortion Stories

When we apply a reproductive justice lens to our hearing, telling, and reading of abortion stories, we open doors to connections between abortion as an experience and other parts of life. That means we aren’t surprised by connections between parenthood and abortion, living with a low income and the search for abortion funding, or how difficult it is to imagine having a family in a world where your children will be targeted, criminalized, and punished based on race alone. Every and any abortion story is likely to have deeper layers connected to topics like:

- Healthcare access and Medicaid enrollment in your state
- Economic policies related to income, especially minimum and tipped wages

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- Race relations, locally and nationally
 - Political, cultural, and economic climate of the state
 - Paid leave, benefits for children, WIC, CHIP, SNAP, and other support programs for families
 - How people are targeted, labeled, and punished in the county and state
 - Treatment of immigrants, detention, and deportation, as well as all incarcerated people
 - Financial supports and services for people with disabilities and their families
 - Youth access to abortion, especially related to parental notification and consent laws and judicial bypass
 - Many other surrounding circumstances

Values Clarification: Avoiding Abortion Stigma

Everyone has an opinion about abortion, but sometimes those opinions are steeped in stigma. One way to begin exploring your own feelings about abortion is to think about how abortion stigma may impact our thinking about abortion and the myths we've been indoctrinated with.

Abortion stigma is, as defined by the International Network for the Reduction of Abortion Discrimination and Stigma (inroads), as *a social process of devaluing people who seek and have abortions, and the people who are associated with them*. Abortion stigma leads to silencing and shaming of, and discrimination towards people who seek abortions, and those who provide them. This can extend to legislators who work to protect abortion access and share their own stories. Abortion stigma keeps those who've had abortions silent, creating hostile environments for those who choose to speak out, and allows for derogatory language to be used to erode their right to abortion by anti-abortion legislators. Abortion stigma also allows misinformation to flourish, and even be codified into law, when there is no research to support the myth or belief. For example, myths about abortion causing breast cancer, depression, and infertility are based in abortion stigma because they are rooted in the belief that abortion is inherently bad and dangerous, assign blame to the person who had the abortion should they have any unrelated health issues at a later date, and are myths that have been disproven through rigorous research, yet are still codified into state laws by legislators.

Abortion stigma isn't limited to anti-abortion rhetoric, myths, and policies. It can show up with well-meaning and supportive legislators who avoid using the word abortion, and instead use euphemisms like "reproductive choices" or "women's health" when they're only speaking about abortion. It's important

for constituents who've had abortions (and those who haven't!) to hear their legislators saying abortion aloud because it's not a dirty word, it's a medical procedure. They also want to know their legislator supports their decision. Stigma can also show up when legislators choose to highlight abortion stories that center around a health condition or medical emergency, rape, and incest, as inherently more sympathetic than abortion stories that do not center on those situations. It is possible to explain the many reasons your constituents seek abortion care, without lifting up some reasons over others. Your language is a signal to constituents who've had abortions about your stance on the issue, and it may impact their willingness to share their own stories with you. Your constituents also look to you for talking points on this issue—they will model your words, affect, and compassion for people seeking abortions when discussing the issue with their neighbors and other representatives. It's important to take stock of how abortion stigma is impacting your own beliefs about abortion, and if it is present in the messages you share with your constituents and when supporting or defending legislation.

One way to address stigma is to learn more about the spaces where you or your staff may harbor stigma and read abortion stories and research that challenge the stigma and offer a different perspective. Continuing to learn is key. Think about what you are learning from the stories as a state legislator and how you can make policy change for your constituents, particularly as it relates to reproductive justice.

Lastly, you and your staff can try a reflection exercise to put yourself in the situations of your constituents and think about the circumstances they're experiencing as they're deciding to have an abortion.

Activity: Situating Yourself in the Issues

The following reflection exercise is adapted from a toolkit called [We are Brave: Race, Money, and Abortion Access](#) by [Western States Center](#), [Forward Together](#), and [All* Above All](#).



You'll need a pen, paper, and about 15-20 minutes to read, free-write or draw, and reflect.

“Think about one of the most important decisions you can make in your life – do I want to be a parent? This one decision can have serious economic, social, emotional, and physical consequences on you. What would you have [or had to have] to consider or reflect on before you could make that decision? What are all the things that go into making that one decision?”

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- Who are all the people in your life whom you might consult regarding this decision?
 - What are all the social institutions that would shape your values and options?
 - What are all the circumstances, questions, considerations, or consequences (economic, social, cultural, etc.) that count in your decision-making?
 - What specific values inform your decisions about parenting?

Write your responses using a concentric circle diagram (See example, above right).

Consider: If we change the question [...] to “Should I continue a pregnancy?” what would change in your responses?

Reflect:

- Where do you have relative privilege, access, and solid support? Where do you struggle with access or support?
- Where do you experience respect? Where do you experience shame or stigma?
- In your community, what social justice issues do you know of that could affect a person’s circumstances to parent as they choose to or access an abortion they need?
- What surfaces for you as you reflect on all of these questions? What questions and insights might be valuable in the heart-to-heart conversations you plan to have?”

To close the reflection, consider what information or messaging you need to deepen your understanding of the factors and dynamics—including political and institutional—that shape people’s decision-making about pregnancy and abortion. You may want to review some facts and statistics or seek out support or resources to fill in any gaps.

Conversations with Colleagues

Dialogue, storytelling, and intentional conversations are powerful tools for organizing and building greater understanding about abortion, both culturally and politically. Conversations about abortion can serve as a catalyst to grow one’s leadership, deepen connections, and make abortion access a reality. For legislators who experience challenges in working with their colleagues on abortion, it’s helpful to have a plan.

Addressing your own stigma and that of your colleagues, and helping them work through it, perhaps by using the empathy building activity above, begins with values, not data. Data can play an important role,

but people tend to make decisions from their deepest values, with or without supporting data. Helping colleagues understand their constituents' situations and opening up with compassion can be a great value to start with. Other values might be loyalty, autonomy, trustworthiness, and collective power. The next section is designed to help you prepare for conversations with colleagues from a values-based place.

Activity: Starting a Heart-to-Heart Conversation with Your Colleagues

As you're gathering support for abortion legislation, or rallying the caucus to stop a bad bill, you may want to have deeper conversations with your caucus colleagues about the values you hold around abortion and shift their opinions of and stigmas towards it. This might be especially needed among your own colleagues who share your political opinion on abortion, but who may be in a leadership position when it comes to committee or party strategy. The following is a modified version of the National Network of Abortion Funds' "[Heart-to-Heart Abortion Conversations: A Toolkit for Individuals](#)" _ redesigned for use by legislators with their colleagues. From having a plan to setting goals, this guidance can be used to prepare for a conversation that leads to a better understanding, an ask, or moving someone's opinion on abortion.

Creating a Goal and a Plan for Conversations with Colleagues

1.) Set a Goal for Your Conversations. For example:

- Increase your comfort level in saying "abortion" out loud to someone, particularly your colleagues who use euphemisms.
- Be a good listener so a legislator or staffer who is on the fence about abortion knows you are empathetic and open to letting them work through their thoughts and feelings.
- Let someone know you had an abortion, if applicable.
- Find out what someone you care about really thinks and feels about abortion.
- Make it clear that even if you don't agree on abortion, you share values like loyalty, friendship, compassion, and love. These values can lead you to different perspectives and decisions, but shared values still connect you.
- Ask for support on a policy, political moment, or future conversation with friends or colleagues.

2.) Identify who you want to have conversations with. Make a list of potential people you imagine reaching out to. Think about what you know about them, your best guess to their views on abortion, your best guess as to values they hold and legislation they've sponsored that you also share, etc.

- **If you're talking with someone who already supports abortion access:** You can move them into action to join you in having heart-to-heart conversations with your colleagues, as well as to connect their abortion support more deeply with racial, economic, and reproductive justice.
- **If the person you're talking with is in a space of transition or unsure about how they relate to the issue of abortion access:** Set a goal in advance for how you'd like the conversation to end. Will they respond to you listening and showing empathy as they ask questions? You can connect them with information and offer to be there for them with an open mind as they learn more.
- **If the person you're talking with is strongly opposed to abortion:** Set a goal before you start for how you'd like the conversation to end. What's the most important part of the conversation to you? Do you want to show them that they can ask questions about abortion access safely? Do you want to show that you are a source of information and invite them to question one of their viewpoints? Do you just want to be able to say the word "abortion" in their presence? Be realistic, authentic, and willing to end the conversation without requiring them to share your perspective. You don't have to change their mind overnight.

3.) Identify places where you will have conversations. Make a list of potential locations you might be able to have the conversation where both you and the other person will feel comfortable. Get out of the office or statehouse if it feels appropriate!

4.) Reflect on what you know about the person and their values. If you're not sure, you can ask them about their life and their values, and then share more about your own, even before you broach the topic of abortion!

5.) PRACTICE! PRACTICE! PRACTICE! There's no substitute for a practice conversation. Ask a friend or staffer to pretend they are the person you want to converse with. Try the conversation on for size and get feedback from the person supporting you.

6.) Identify how and when you will follow up. The conversation doesn't always have to end with an ask to co-sponsor legislation, sometimes it can just be a follow up for another conversation over lunch.

7.) Thank them for having a heart-to-heart. Talking about abortion can feel complicated or awkward for some people. Be sure to thank your colleague for taking the time to have the conversation with you.

Case Study: We Testify Abortion Storyteller Mallory McMaster and Her Experience with an Ohio State Senator

“I believe it’s important to have conversations with our elected officials and engage in dialogue about the issues most important to us, even when we know they disagree. The first few times I met a state senator known to be vehemently antiabortion, I had not yet had an abortion. I was nervous, but I still made an effort to walk up and introduce myself. I could tell that he didn’t agree with my position, and had little interest in what I had to say. I was disheartened, but kept trying.”

A few short months after I had my abortion, I went to speak with him again for a lobby day. Even though I was living in a different district, I wanted him to know how much my abortion had meant to me. I had my story prepared and I was ready to explain exactly how having access to an abortion allowed me to achieve the things he wants for his constituents. I thought if I used his terms and talked about the values he talks about, he might listen. Ultimately, he refused to meet with me and instead sent a staffer to meet with me in the hallway. The staffer looked apologetic, and I could tell he didn’t want to be there. I started my story, explaining how abusive my marriage was, how disastrous an unplanned pregnancy was, and how grateful I was to have the opportunity to keep my life on the track I had planned through an abortion. I kept trying to break through the staffer’s professional façade and appeal to his empathy. I think I made some progress; he eventually stopped interrupting me with anti-abortion talking points and even nodded in agreement a few times. At the end he said, “Look. There’s no way the Senator is going to change his position on abortion, but I’m really glad you shared your story.”

That Ohio state senator is never going to support abortion access, but I’d like to think that if enough people like me shared their stories with his staffers, they might be able to steer him away from his detrimental anti-abortion positions and encourage him to focus on other issues that actually reduce unintended pregnancies and help his constituents access the resources they need to achieve their goals and care for their families.”

Abortion Stories in the Public Realm

Abortion stories have been crucial to swaying the public both for and against abortion policies. Abortion stories are critical to policy change because they illustrate the real experiences of people seeking abortions, and the barriers they face, in a way that constituents can understand, sometimes better than statistics and stump speeches can. Abortion stories remind the listener to have empathy for their loved ones, friends, and neighbors who might be navigating severely different situations from their own. Research has [shown](#) that people are likely to feel more positively toward women who've had abortions and abortion providers after a friend disclosed their own abortion experience. Abortion stories in media often begin the conversation, which continues between friends and loved ones, who have deeper conversations about their feelings towards abortion, and sometimes personal disclosure.

Legislators have shared abortion stories in the public realm—their own and those of their constituents—in a number of settings, including media interviews, opinion editorials, floor speeches, and donor events.

As a legislator, you can discuss with your staff when you think sharing an abortion story would be most appropriate to furthering your strategy or in illustrating your stance on the issue.

Case Study: How Abortion Stories Changed a Member of Congress

In a [January 2015 op-ed in the Akron Beacon Journal](#), U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH), who had credited his Catholic faith with his longtime opposition to abortion, shared news of his evolution on the topic. He wrote:

"I have sat with women from Ohio and across the nation and heard them talk about their varying experiences: abusive relationships, financial hardship, health scares, rape and incest. There are endless stories about women in troubling situations — the woman who became pregnant and has a violent spouse; the woman who lost her job and is unable to afford another child; or the underage girl worried she'll be thrown out of her house if she reveals her pregnancy. These are just a few of the many stories I have heard...These women gave me a better understanding of how complex and difficult certain situations can become. And while there are people of good conscience on both sides of this argument, one thing has become abundantly clear to me: the heavy hand of government must not make this decision for women and families."

Case Study: Abortion Stories Tipping the Scale in Illinois' Passage of HB40

In 2017, the Illinois General Assembly passed HB40. This bill would repeal a trigger law ensuring abortion will remain legal in the event Roe v. Wade were to be overturned, and lifted the insurance coverage ban on abortion for Medicaid recipients and state employees. The pro-choice majorities in the legislature ensured the bill had a path to passage, however the fate of the legislation depended on the signature of Governor Bruce Rauner, a Republican who ran as a pro-choice candidate. Governor Rauner experienced political pressure from all sides over what to do with the legislation, which came to his desk ahead of a re-election bid.

Brittany Mostiller, Program Director at the Chicago Abortion Fund, and Abortion Storyteller with We Testify:

“I was invited to a meeting with Governor Rauner to discuss whether or not he would sign HB40 into law. I was excited to talk to the governor about the Chicago Abortion Fund, our work, and to tell him what it’s like to need an abortion as a lifelong Illinoisan. During the meeting were a lot of mundane conversations about Medicaid reimbursement rates, legal language, and the gap in funding for people who need abortions, but cannot use their public health insurance. I was able to talk to him about the real challenges that our callers faced when seeking an abortion, and the rising costs for abortions as they progress from the first trimester into the second, due to financial and logistical barriers. Governor Rauner seemed intrigued as I was speaking about our callers and what it means to actually get an abortion; the process of booking an appointment, finding money to pay for the abortion, arranging childcare, taking time off of work, traveling to the clinic. It was clear there was a disconnect between the policies and the real-life experiences of Illinois residents, and those traveling to Illinois, when seeking an abortion. I then decided to be brave and share my own story with him, and the dozens of people gathered in the meeting. I wanted to remind him that the abortion fund callers aren’t an abstract idea of people outside of the room, and that I am one of them. I knew what it was like to call an abortion fund asking for \$650 to help me afford my abortion. I knew what it was like to arrange childcare for my three daughters. I knew what it was like to have to call off my shift at the grocery store, unpaid because I didn’t have sick days, and then find a ride to the clinic. It seemed like there was an ‘a-ha’ moment for Governor Rauner, which meant a lot to me as most of the meeting was going ‘business as usual’, and I didn’t feel like his staff were very engaged. He thanked me for sharing my experience and said that my story illuminated the challenges of accessing abortion care in Illinois while on Medicaid. I felt powerful, like I represented abortion fund callers and our experiences well, and like the government actually heard me and my story. A few days later, I was invited back for another meeting, and to my surprise, it was for his press conference as he signed HB40 into law!”

Sharing an Abortion Story

Abortion stories are often shared strategically to tip the scales of public perception of abortion during legislative debates and policy discussions. You and your staff may decide that sharing abortion stories would be helpful to your overall strategy for legislative efforts, but where do you find constituents who would be willing to share their stories, and how to you ethically share the story? Here are a few steps:

Finding Storytellers

There are several ways you and your staff can connect with constituent storytellers who are willing to share their story or submit it to be read as testimony. As you speak out about abortion access more publicly, constituents may reach out and offer themselves up as support for the cause; you can maintain a record of their interest and reach back out to them when the time comes. Additionally you could put out a call to your constituents on your website or via email to see if anyone is interested in submitting testimony. We wouldn't recommend putting a public call out on social media without offering a private place for people to submit their story to you (email, website contact form, etc.) because it could open them up to harassment. Many people who have abortions are willing to share their experiences, but they aren't aware of opportunities, particularly in their own community. Grassroots organizations like National Network of Abortion Funds' We Testify program, All* Above All, State Innovation Exchange, Advocates for Youth's 1 in 3 Campaign, Planned Parenthood, the Abortion Care Network, and others are always available to connect you with storytellers and stories from your district or state.

Framing the Story

When sharing an abortion story, you'll want to frame the story so your colleagues understand how it connects to the larger issues you're discussing or how the constituent's abortion experience would be helped or hindered by the legislation you're discussing. Centering the story with statistics, cultural or geographic norms, and other context will help frame the story better for the listener, particularly for your constituents who aren't accustomed to hearing abortion stories, and may judge someone for making different decisions than their own. Centering love, compassion, and support are always great ways to frame an abortion story, particularly because everyone loves someone who had an abortion—even if they don't know it yet!

Editing for Clarity vs. Editing for Stigma

Often, testimonies must be edited for time, length, clarity, and sometimes difficult content like rape and incest. Keep a critical eye on whether you're editing for clarity and length, or editing for stigma, such as taking out information as to how many pregnancies or abortions someone had, their feelings towards their abortion, or adding language to create sadness over the experience when there was none. Of course, you want to make sure that the story is clear and concise, and that there's nothing that would be

shared that would paint the person who had the abortion in a negative light, however that must be balanced with the realities of their situation, too.

Receiving Consent to Share an Abortion Story

Sharing abortion stories is just like sex: consent should be clearly expressed and can be revoked at any time. If you are planning to share an abortion story, ensure the person who had the abortion approves the venue and setting in which the story will be shared. Some people are okay with a more intimate setting but worry about repercussions if their story is shared in the media or from the legislative floor. It is also crucial to ask the storyteller how they would like to be identified with the story, be it by their full name, just a first name, initials, or anonymously.

Deciding When an Abortion Story Would Be Appropriate for the Medium

As you and your staffers are deciding a strategy around a policy, you may want to think about whether an abortion story is helpful to your efforts. Things to think about are the setting in which you'll be sharing the story, whether it's on the floor of the legislature or at a donor's home or in a widely read publication, and how the story will be received. Does the story include a difficult subject matter? If so, think about how the audience will receive the story as you or the storyteller shares it.

Who Shares? Legislator vs. Storyteller

Deciding who should share can be a delicate issue. We don't want to separate people from their stories, however often only the legislator is allowed to make a floor speech. When applicable, think about who would be most effective in sharing the story, and what the storyteller's preference is. Ask yourself, *Would it make more sense for me to stand by my constituent in a show of support as they share their story, or for me to share the story for them?* Both are powerful, however when possible, inviting your constituent to share their own story is even more poignant.

Protecting the Storyteller's Identity When Necessary

When people who've had abortions speak out, they are often met with harassment and other vitriol. It's important that you ask the storyteller how they would like to be identified during their testimony and let them know it's possible they could experience some backlash. Storytellers can choose to share their stories with their full names, first name only, first name and initial, pseudonym, or anonymously. It's all

up to them and their comfort level. It's important to be clear about what level of support your office is, or is not, able to offer should the storyteller experience any backlash and harassment.

Case Study: State Senator Wendy Davis, the Famous Filibuster, and We Testify Abortion Storyteller Sam Romero

In 2013, the Texas legislature called a special session to enact an omnibus abortion restriction law that could not pass during the regular session. When hundreds of people flooded the Texas Capitol in protest, the state Republican legislators shut down public testimony, “the citizen’s filibuster,” calling the heart-wrenching abortion stories people were sharing “repetitive”*. State Senator Wendy Davis rose to national prominence by filibustering the vote for 11 hours, reading the abortion stories the legislature had silenced. “They didn't listen to the women of Texas," she said, before starting her filibuster. "But they'll have to listen to me." While the law eventually passed in a second special session, Texans were inspired to share their abortion stories more widely to speak out against the repressive abortion laws being passed.

“I didn’t go into it thinking that I would talk about [the abortions], but as I read a story from the many letters that I read on the Senate floor that day, there was one that could have been my story,” Davis said in an interview. “It struck me so deeply, and I had an emotional response that I wasn’t expecting. And for a moment I considered whether I should share mine in the moment as well.”

Davis didn’t share her story then because she wanted the moment to be about the people of Texas who had shared their stories, rather than her own experience. “I didn’t want the day to be about me, and I was afraid it would become about me if I did that,” she [explained](#) to HuffPost Live. “I wanted to do what I was doing — be a voice for thousands of people who would be impacted by that bill and to give voice to folks who had been turned away from committee hearings, who had been told that their stories had become repetitive.”

One such Texan is We Testify storyteller Sam Romero, who not only felt inspired to share their abortion story after witnessing state Senator Davis’s filibuster, but went to work on Wendy Davis’ gubernatorial campaign. “My abortion was an experience I never thought I’d share with anyone. I kept a heavy secret because I was scared of the judgement it would bring. This fear went away after working in East Texas on the Wendy Davis Campaign.” By telling their abortion story, Sam continues to break down stigma around abortion in Texas so that people will understand the toll taken on Texans by oppressive laws, and so fewer people will feel the fear they felt after their abortion.

*Full quote: “The testimony has been impassioned, but it has become repetitive, so I am going to only allow another hour of testimony on this bill.” - Texas State Rep. Byron Cook (R) [to a crowd of protesters](#).

Sharing Your Own Story

Some legislators have had abortions and may consider sharing their own stories to defend abortion access, and illustrate how they understand the decision their constituents, and abortion patients across the country, are making. But how do you decide whether or not you want to share your own abortion story? Below are a few things to ponder as you assess whether you feel ready to share, and if sharing makes the most sense for you.

Assessing if You're Ready to Share

It is crucial that you assess whether you feel ready to share. Your abortion story is just that: *yours*. Just like your constituents, you must freely consent to sharing your story. You shouldn't feel pressured into it. Things to think about to assess your readiness:

- How far out from the abortion are you? Do you still have deep emotions about it when you think about it? There's no right or wrong answers to these questions, but it's important that you explore your feelings.
- Are there unresolved feelings about the abortion or the situation you were in when you sought care?
- Have you told your loved ones? Would you like to tell them privately first, before going public?
- Would you like to talk to your partner, if they were involved, before sharing?
- How will you feel if your opponents or constituents say unpleasant things towards or about you afterwards? How will you handle the response?
- Have you discussed sharing with your therapist, spiritual advisor, mentor, or counselor? What kind of support would you like to have as you share?
- How will you feel once your staff knows about this moment in your life? How will you handle their responses?

The Details: Public vs. Private

You aren't required to tell any part of your abortion story that you don't want to. It's essential that you take the time to think about what you do and don't want to share so you do not accidentally share something that you didn't mean to and cannot retract.

Activity: Take a piece of paper and draw three columns. For as long as you need, list out items that fit in the following columns

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- Things I would like to share now
 - Things I may want to share in the future, but not right now
 - Things I never want to share

Getting clear about what you want to share, and what you don't want to share will help you think deeply about your experience, what you're still emotionally connected to, and what you do not want the general public to know. You can revisit this list as you continue to share, because what you do and don't want to share will change over the years.

As a public figure, there may be people who are tempted to dig into your past and find specific details about your experience. You may want to limit the personal details to keep your private life private, and information about others in your story unidentifiable.

Framing Your Story in the Larger Issues Impacting Reproductive Justice

As you share your story, you may want to frame it within the larger issues of reproductive justice, and the values you hold for changing the state of healthcare, pregnancy resources, sexual health education, and poverty. Think about which institutions and social policies impacted your abortion experience, and how you'd like to create change so your constituents don't have to experience the same financial and logistical barriers you experience, or what support systems you and want to make available for others.

Take a moment to think about your goals for sharing and the messages you want listeners to hear and take away from your story. Below are some questions to prompt you.

Impact of Sharing

- How do you want to be impacted by sharing your story?
- What do you want people to know about you? What is beyond your abortion story?
- What feels easier and more natural to share? What feels more difficult to share?
- What are the dominant narratives about abortion and people who have abortions that you want to push back on?
- Why do you feel it's important for you to share your story as a state legislator?

Our Identities

- How do you feel the cultural environment and messages you received about abortion impacted your experience, both positive and negative?
- Are there messages you learned about abortion in your family? How did they impact your experience?

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- Who is the first person you remember meeting or knowing about who had an abortion? How did that make you feel?
 - Are there racial, ethnic, gender identity, class, sexuality, immigrant, ability, religious, or other identities that impacted your abortion experience?
 - How did your geographic location or community political climate impact your abortion experience?
 - How does your privilege and oppression operate within your story?
 - What intersections of your identity do you want to talk about when sharing your story?
 - What do you know now about your abortion experience that you would tell a younger version of yourself?

Barriers to Access

- Were there barriers you faced? How did you navigate them?
- How did you pay for your abortion? If you had insurance, were you able to use it, why or why not? Did you have to borrow money from someone or call an abortion fund? How did that experience make you feel?
- Was there someone who helped you navigate barriers? How did they help you? What stands out about that person to you?
- Was there a barrier that you were able to bypass because of your privilege? How did that impact your abortion experience?
- What support did you or didn't you have during your abortion? How do you think that impacted you?
- Did you experience stigma, either from others or internally?
- How did the barriers you faced inspire you to become a legislator or push for more access to reproductive health care and abortion?

Avoid Perpetuating Stigma

People choose to have an abortion for a number of different reasons, all of them valid. It's important that as you share your abortion story that you don't stigmatize people who may have chosen different options, didn't have access to the same resources, or had a different experience. If you had an abortion as a young person, avoid making generalizing statements about young people's fitness to have a child—there are millions of teenage and young parents who are doing the best they can, and we need to make sure everyone, no matter their age or income, has the support they need to raise their children. Was your abortion the result of a health indication? If so, avoid creating a dichotomy between “good abortions” and “bad abortions”, those that are deemed “elective”. Focus on using “I” statements so you speak only about your personal abortion experience, rather than extrapolating it to everyone's experience. Abortion experiences are as diverse as the people who have them.

Preparing Your Family, Loved Ones, and Staff

Before you share publicly, you may want to let your family, close friends, staffers, and other loved ones know. They'll be able to better support you, and you may want to take the time to answer any questions they have about your decision. Additionally, it's important to remind them that since this will be in the public eye, they may see people commenting about it on social media, article comment sections, or during your next campaign. This will better help them prepare to hear negative things about you, someone they love and care for deeply.

Privacy Protection and Potential Backlash

On occasion, anti-abortion activists have directed backlash and harassment at legislators who have shared their abortion stories. In the case of former Nevada state Assemblymember Lucy Flores, she received death threats after sharing her abortion story during a hearing. Backlash is unpredictable but being prepared is always helpful. With your staff, create a plan on what to do with any harassing messages or threats—how to assess the legitimacy of the threat, which authorities to notify, and how to archive the message. You can set up Google Alerts and Talkwalker Alerts to monitor your name and any other activity online. Additionally, you may want to work with your staffers to have as much of your private information scrubbed from data broker sites as possible, that way your personal information, as well as that of your loved ones, is not as easy to find.

When Someone Shares Back

One of the most rewarding parts of sharing your abortion story is when someone else shares theirs back. It's a powerful connection and moment of deep vulnerability. To prepare for this moment, you may want to have resources at the ready. The person may ask for suggestions of places they can share their abortion story, for suggestions of talk lines they can call, or clinic resources. It's important to remember that the person may feel a deep connection with you, and ask you for support that you're unable to give them—having resources ready ensures you're able to offer support, without taking it on personally. Check out the resources section for options to share.

Case Study: Georgia State Representative Renitta Shannon

Georgia State Representative Renitta Shannon was elected in November 2016. Living in Georgia, she saw how abortion access had been decimated, but now, as a newly elected official, she knew she had the opportunity to step up and change the tide. In January 2018, ahead of the 45th Anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, Representative Shannon decided to share her abortion story as part of the launch of the State Innovation Exchange's Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council, a cohort of more than 274 state legislators from around the country working to protect and advance reproductive rights, health, and justice. "Abortion is only ever talked about when conservatives are trying to strip away rights," she told [Cosmopolitan.com](#) at the time. "It's almost like nobody wants to talk about abortion until it's time to defend it." Rep. Shannon shared her abortion story [in a video](#), as did Colorado State Representative [Dafna Michealson Jenet](#). Rep. Shannon also wrote a testimonial that was published in *Elite Daily*. The full piece is below.

Rep. Renitta Shannon On Her Abortion & What Politicians Are Doing To Protect Rights via [Elite Daily](#), May 2018

My story is not unique — it is the story of many black women across this country. I grew up in a very religious household; my dad was a pastor. My parents were loving and supportive and they did an amazing job raising me and my sister. But the only thing they ever told us about our bodies was, "whatever you do, just don't get pregnant." We had to figure our bodies out for ourselves.

In my senior year of college, I found out I was pregnant. I knew immediately that I didn't want to become a parent at that point in my life, and I chose to terminate my pregnancy. I don't regret this choice, and many women make this same choice: One in four American women have an abortion at some point in their lives, according to a 2017 analysis by the Guttmacher Institute.

My abortion experience taught me that the needs of black women are broad and deep when it comes to reproductive freedom. Today, according to research from the National Women's Law Center, black women are overrepresented in the low-wage workforce of jobs that pay less than \$11 per hour — filling a vital role for the economy without ample pay. Income should not strip us of the right to plan when to start families. The maternal death rate for black women across the country is horrifying. Black women are three times more likely than white women to die in labor and up to one year after giving birth according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). According to a 2018 report by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, some of the highest maternal mortality rates for all women are in states like my own, Georgia, where lawmakers have refused to expand Medicaid. We must decide as Americans that women's lives are worth saving at all costs.

After my abortion, I went on to graduate college and pursued a career in business development. I decided to run for office to fight for policies that truly support women, working people, and people of color. I won my first election the same night as Donald Trump, and I was sworn in to the Georgia House of Representatives in 2017.

Since then, the president and ultra-conservatives across the nation have pushed extreme viewpoints — viewpoints that turn into legislation that impacts people's lives by virtue of their power. This includes the administration's work to restrict access to birth control and women's reproductive services both through general legislation and in the cases of individual girls, as well as the president's refusal to denounce white supremacists and the rise in hate crimes that has been correlated with his election.

Conservatives in state legislatures across the country are also pushing extreme and unconstitutional restrictions on abortion, in a clear effort to lay the groundwork to reverse Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision that established abortion as a constitutional right. This includes the recent ban signed into law in Iowa, now the nation's most restrictive abortion ban. Like many American women, I watched in disgust as Trump vowed to appoint Supreme Court Justices that would reverse Roe v. Wade, and I've watched as state lawmakers across the country have passed more than 400 new restrictions on reproductive rights since 2010.

In Georgia, 58 percent of women live in counties with no access to an abortion clinic, according to a study from the Guttmacher Institute. Georgia has a majority anti-choice government, with only a few open advocates for a woman's right to choose. Georgia subjects women seeking an abortion to mandatory biased counseling as well as mandatory 24-hour delays. Georgia restricts low-income women's access to abortion in almost all cases.

I'm not just watching. I'm fighting back. Because not only am I a woman who is part of the nearly one in four women who will decide to have an abortion at some point in their lives; I'm also a state legislator who was elected to serve the people in my community. I've promised to fight for the dignity we deserve to be able to make our own decisions. As a bisexual black woman, I know firsthand that the right to control my body is a basic and essential human right that intersects with many important issues, and should be protected regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, immigration status, or what zip code you live in.

While my story is not unique, my position in office is. I am currently one of 275 black, female state legislators across the country and I have promised those I represent to use the privilege of my public office to advance reproductive justice. I am now on the front lines, fighting back against anti-abortion politicians who seek to impose their extremist views and roll back women's rights. The Georgia legislature has passed restriction after restriction on reproductive rights while failing to take action on the many health care needs Georgia residents face.

We have to be bolder and better. We must advance policies that improve the health outcomes of Georgians — like expanding Medicaid, implementing co-pay free birth control, expanding access to paid family and medical leave, and requiring reasonable pregnancy accommodations in the workplace. We must recognize that reproductive freedom is tied to economic equality. A person's ability to access contraception, abortion services, prenatal care, and other reproductive health services has for too long been diminished or blocked based on income, race, immigration status, age, sexuality, gender, or where they live.

That's why I have joined forces with state legislators like myself from across the country as part of the new Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council. This cohort of legislators resists efforts to restrict reproductive freedom and instead envision a future in which all Americans can make our own decisions about our reproductive health, pregnancy, and parenting, free from political interference. We have promised to fight boldly and unapologetically for policies that respect and protect women's lives.

I'm telling my story because it's time we have an honest discussion about reproductive freedom. Without an honest discussion, we will never advance policies that truly support women, working people, and people of color.

Closing

Conventional wisdom about politics has been upended in many ways in the past few years. One such component of traditional political thinking that deserves to be relegated to history is that abortion is somehow so divisive and partisan that we will forever be locked in an entrenched political mindset.

The truth is, the continued legality of abortion maintains a bedrock of both American values and progressive values. [About one in four Americans](#) will have an abortion in their life, crossing political parties and philosophies, religion, income levels, race, and more. According to Data for Progress, there is no state in the country where support for banning abortion reaches even 25 percent, while [Pew continues to report](#) that nearly 7 in 10 Americans support the continuation of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

A new era in American politics allows for new thinking and new approaches to governing. Incorporating, learning from, and understanding the lessons for policymakers inherent in every single abortion story that is shared can help us move forward.

People who've had abortions are turning the tide in this country, particularly as access is being decimated, and their stories are key to shifting the hearts and minds of policymakers and voters. As a legislator, your voice is crucial to support them in leading the conversation, or becoming a beacon of change by sharing your own story. It might feel awkward, or challenging, on top of all the other issues you are an advocate for, but the ability to decide if, when, and how to become a parent, and the ability to raise a family with resources and free from violence, is essential to every single one of your constituents. When they see you speaking out, they'll feel confident to join you, and that's when change happens. Remember, everyone loves someone who had an abortion. And they vote.

Abortion Storytelling Resources

State Innovation Exchange (SiX)

stateinnovation.org

The State Innovation Exchange (SiX) is a national resource and strategy center that supports state legislators in advancing and defending progressive policies across the country. With a long-term vision of building progressive power and infrastructure at the state level, we have built a network of more than 3,000 elected officials who represent all 50 states.

SiX's [Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council](#) launched in January 2018 to convene and cultivate the hundreds of state legislators working in statehouses every day to protect and advance reproductive freedom. With more than 270 members so far, RFLC members gain access to training, educational, and press opportunities. State legislators can contact ReproductiveRights@stateinnovation.org for more information or [sign up here](#).

National Network of Abortion Funds

abortionfunds.org

The National Network of Abortion Funds builds power with members to remove financial and logistical barriers to abortion access by centering people who have abortions and organizing at the intersections of racial, economic, and reproductive justice.

We envision a world where every reproductive decision, including abortion, takes place in thriving communities that are safe, peaceful, and affordable. We envision a world where all people have the power and resources to care for and affirm their bodies, identities, and health for themselves and their families—in all areas of their lives. As we shift the conversation about abortion, it will become a real option, accessible without shame or judgment.

We Testify

wetestify.org

We Testify, a leadership program of the National Network of the Abortion Funds, is dedicated to increasing the spectrum of abortion storytellers in the public sphere and shifting the way the media understands the context and complexity of accessing abortion care. We Testify seeks to build the power and leadership of abortion storytellers, particularly those of color, those from rural and conservative communities, those who are queer identified, those with varying abilities and citizenship statuses, and those who needed support when navigating barriers while accessing abortion care

1 in 3 Campaign

1in3campaign.org

The 1 in 3 Campaign is a grassroots movement to start a new conversation about abortion—telling our stories, on our own terms. Together, we can end the stigma and shame women are made to feel about abortion. As we share our stories we begin to build a culture of compassion, empathy, and support for access to basic health care. It's time for us to come out in support of each other and in support of access to legal and safe abortion care in our communities.

My Abortion. My Life.

myabortionmylife.org

My Abortion, My Life is changing the conversation about abortion by creating safe spaces for nuanced and respectful conversation about abortion experiences—and providing resources and tools to help get those conversations started. From public advertising that sparks a conversation on the bus, to intimate house parties where stories are shared and perspectives are shifted... we are engaging the community in a completely different kind of dialogue than we hear on the nightly news. It's about opening space in our relationships so that others can share. It's about listening and really hearing. It's about helping all of us who have been silenced by stigma to find our voice, to speak about our own experiences, and to develop support for and trust in others. If you're ready to help change the conversation, then My Abortion, My Life can help you get started.

No Choice: Bill Moyers.

billmoyers.com/story/no-choice/

A new video series, NO CHOICE, reminds us just what the United States was like before abortion was legal. Here, women share their personal stories. They're speaking up to combat the stigma that still surrounds their choice, to remind people of the way things used to be and to bring awareness to the barriers that still exist, especially for poor women and women of color.