

Responsive Philanthropy

NCRP'S JOURNAL

MARCH 2021

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We Testify abortion storyteller Kenya Martin speaks
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Sharing abortion stories means investing in storytellers as leaders

By Renee Bracey Sherman

Abortion storytelling is labor. It's time philanthropy invest in it.

When I had my abortion in 2005, I was 19 years old, and I was sure I might be the 4th person ever to have an abortion – after my then-favorite rapper Lil' Kim, a close cousin and an ex-best friend.

Of course, that was not true, but that's

what it felt like as I walked up to the clinic unsure of what the future would hold.

I felt so lonely in the clinic, even as the clinic workers' smiles warmed every room I sat in for counseling and an ultrasound. I was certain in my decision, but that didn't change the fact that I still felt the need to hide it from my pro-choice family.

I was worried that they might judge me for becoming pregnant in the first place and begrudgingly support my decision to have an abortion. I wasn't willing to take a risk that I might not get

the exact unflinching support I needed at the moment, so I didn't tell any loved ones that I was having an abortion.

What I know now is that everything I was feeling stemmed from abortion stigma – defined as the shared understanding that abortion is morally wrong and socially unacceptable.

Abortion stigma is everywhere; it's the general messaging that abortion is bad, the decision should be kept a secret and it should be apologized for.

It shows up in the way in which politicians use *(continued on page 8)*



challenging grantmakers
to strengthen communities

Sharing abortion stories means investing in storytellers as leaders *(continued from page 1)*

euphemisms to avoid saying the word, to labeling those of us who have abortions as “fast girls” or “loose women.”

These signals are all over our society and tell those of us who have abortions that even if we decide to seek out care, we should do it in secret and never talk about it again.

But this isolation leads to loneliness and the feeling that we’re among the only people in our community, or even the world, who have abortions – as I felt for so many years.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ABORTION STORYTELLING

During the next 6 years, I only told a few people that I’d had an abortion. The more I shared my story, the more I’d hear “I had one, too,” in response.

As I met more people who’d had abortions, I realized how much commonality we had in our stories, yet they weren’t being shared widely nor were they represented in public discussions of abortion access.

Moreover, when experiences were brought into the conversation, they focused almost exclusively on young, white cisgender women who sought abortions in order to finish college studies.

While those women’s stories are vital, they only give us a glimpse into a narrow narrative that doesn’t necessarily reflect the experiences of most people who have abortions – the majority of whom are people of color, already parenting, living on low-incomes and navigating difficult financial, logistical and legal barriers to abortion care.

Our narratives deserve to be told, not just so we can find one another, but also because the exclusion of our experiences means the full truth about abortion is not being told.

Without our stories, the anti-abortion movement and those who want to restrict access to abortion care are

able to fill the void with caricatures of us, usually based on racist, sexist and xenophobic stereotypes long ingrained in our nation’s memory.

They talk of “taxpayer funding of abortions” to conjure the anti-Black “welfare queen” trope in hopes that the audience will forget that Medicaid insurance recipients also pay taxes and that no matter what, everyone deserves unfettered access to medical care.

They have a vested interest in keeping us silent so they can tell a different story, one that erases our humanity and encourages people to ignore empathy in favor of more restrictions, criminalization and white supremacist control of our families.

We cannot undo the harm of white supremacy without confronting the real experiences of the people it impacts.

ABORTION STORY TELLERS NEED SUPPORT

When I began sharing my abortion story, it was to counter the horrific messages that anti-abortion leaders were spreading about Black women like me who had abortions.

I wanted to talk about the complexities of becoming pregnant when I wasn’t ready to parent and the ways that the lack of sexual health education and racist and sexist stereotypes about young Black women impacted me.

But when I shared, I often found myself as the lone Black person sharing my story, which opened me to vicious threats and violent harassment. I questioned whether storytelling was a safe vehicle for change.

The reproductive health, rights and justice movement had not invested in protecting abortion storytellers to ensure that when they spoke out, their voices would be met with love, support and care.

Storytellers were asked to share their

stories at public testimonies and left to handle the backlash on their own.

We needed to see abortion storytellers as the leaders they are and invest in their future, health and well-being so that their storytelling experiences were good ones, not solely memories of harassment and threats.

The more we can support abortion storytellers – in public, with love, encouragement and accolades – the more we’re modeling what the treatment of people who have abortions should look like and more people will be willing to step into the sunlight with their truths. We had to create a new theory of change. And we did it through We Testify.

ELEVATING ABORTION STORYTELLING THROUGH WE TESTIFY

We Testify is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the leadership and representation of people who have abortions. We invest in abortion storytellers to elevate their voices and expertise, particularly:

- those of color.
- those from rural and conservative communities.
- those who are queer-identified.
- those with varying abilities and citizenship statuses.
- those who needed support when navigating barriers while accessing abortion care.

Through We Testify, people who’ve had abortions meet one another to build fellowship and solidarity around their shared experiences and learn about the challenges that others experienced in obtaining care.

The We Testify storytellers support each other as they speak out on abortion access issues, as well as other in-

intersecting reproductive justice issues such as incarceration, immigration, sex work, disability justice and more.

The bond of their cohorts creates the support and confidence they need to speak out and change the conversation about who has abortions and why.

The pressure to keep our abortions a secret is a weighing one that can only be lifted by openly sharing, being validated and knowing that others who have similar experiences are waiting in the wings to share their stories, too.

As part of We Testify, we deeply believe in reproductive justice, which is a human rights framework ensuring everyone is able to decide if, when and how to grow their family, and raise their families free from violence and coercion.

To operationalize this, We Testify storytellers are encouraged to not only share their abortion experiences but the systemic issues that set in play the various barriers or privileges that affected their experience.

The storytellers share our stories with a goal to let others know they're not alone and identify the systemic changes that could make access easier for those who need abortions in the future.

Through We Testify, abortion storytellers attend a retreat where they receive training to ensure they're able to share their stories as they want and in a way that feels most empowering to them.

They also receive training to protect themselves from targeted harassment, not perpetuate abortion stigma and communicate effectively with reporters and media.

PHILANTHROPY MUST SUPPORT ABORTION STORYTELLING

Because storytelling is labor, the We Testify storytellers are compensated for their engagement in the program.

Many are living on low-incomes, have experienced financial hardship as

a result of sharing their abortion stories with loved ones, or are trying to break into the social justice movement. Compensating them for their labor is core to our economic justice values.

But that can only continue if philanthropy values storytelling as a theory of change and storytellers as our next generation of leaders.

Storytellers have long been seen as messengers for fundraising events and presentations, but if we are to create true change in our communities, we have to see that they are leaders who can create a new vision for abortion access.

They've been closest to the pain, so they must be closest to the power. That can only happen if storytelling is invested in as a way of organizing and building the power of people who have abortions, and then seats at the table are created for us to sit in and imagine a different world.

Abortion storytellers have been breaking the silence for decades and are leading the way to envision what the future of justice we seek to create will be.

Their legacy is in the truths they tell about our nation's healthcare system and how people are treated when we're collectively told not to love out loud people who have abortions or honor them with the respectful care they deserve.

We'd be wise to not only listen to their wisdom but deeply invest in their leadership. Storytellers are our messengers for the future and will always remind us that someone we love has had an abortion. We have the tools to create a better system. It's time that we listen and invest. ■

Renee Bracey Sherman is the founder and executive director of We Testify.



We Testify Executive Director Renee Bracey Sherman hypes up the crowd as the rally emcee at the oral arguments for the June Medical Services v. Russo case at the U.S. Supreme Court, March 4, 2020. Photo credit: Center for Reproductive Rights.