

CHOICE/LESS 401: How Did You Keep That a Secret?

Jenn Stanley: I recently spoke to one of Rewire.News' managing editors, Kat Jercich, about an experience we share. We both went to all-girls Catholic high schools.

So this one thing that we have in common, we all went to all-girls Catholic high schools.

Kat Jercich: Yes, we did. Mine was in Sacramento, California. Where was yours?

Jenn Stanley: Mine was in Wakefield, Massachusetts, but the school has since shut down since I was there actually.

Kat Jercich: Oh, no.

Jenn Stanley: You had mentioned before to me, you went to the same high school that Greta Gerwig went to.

Kat Jercich: She based her experiences in "Lady Bird" on her experiences at my high school, which is very weird. There's a scene in "Lady Bird" where ... did you see it? You saw it, right?

Jenn Stanley: I did. Yep.

Kat Jercich: That lady in the film ... I was watching it, and I was like, "Oh my god. I know who that is." Because they would bring this speaker in every four years to basically say that verbatim.

Clip Speaker 1: And at 15, this girl was pregnant. She decided that she was going to get an abortion. It made sense. It was the right thing to do.

Clip Speaker 2: Let me guess, she didn't get it.

Clip Speaker 1: She was sitting there waiting for the doctor to come in, and something deep in side of her said, "No."

Clip Speaker 2: Bingo.

Clip Speaker 1: Anyone want to guess who this woman is? The young lady right here.

Clip Speaker 2: You?

Clip Speaker 1: No. It was not me.

Clip Speaker 4: Your friend?

Clip Speaker 1: No. The girl in the story was my mother. I am that baby that she decided not to abort. That could have been me. That could have been my fate.

Kat Jercich: She came in when I was 14. I was a sophomore. I was nowhere near having any kind of sex, and I kind of thought of it pretty abstractly. I was like, "Oh, okay. Well, this doesn't really apply to me." But I do remember seeing girls like crying in the hallway after. At the time, I thought that they were maybe ashamed or something of having had premarital sex, but statistically at least some of those girls had abortions, right? I can't imagine what it would have been like to get an abortion and have to go to school. Also, you could be expelled for having an abortion.

Jenn Stanley: We didn't have a lecture like that at my school, but I kind of feel like they didn't even need one. They definitely had similar talks about adoption. There were several adopted people at school. I was one of them, and we were really held up as examples. And also, it was very cool to be Catholic where I went to school. So to be not only Catholic, but then to be held up as an example of the greatness of the Catholic Church. You know, that your mom didn't want to have an abortion because she was so Catholic. It's just such propaganda.

Kat Jercich: Yeah. I mean if that's what you're learning in your formative years, it makes total sense that you would ... I don't want to say ... "buy into" feels really harsh, but I guess that's kind of what I mean. That you would go along with that and feel it resonate with you.

Jenn Stanley: It was confusing, and it definitely had a profound effect on me. And in an indirect way, it was kind of the inspiration for this whole season. So this season is about teenagers, sex, and abortion, and what adults tell them, and what they don't tell them, and then what they expect from them. Right? So, this idea that teenagers and their parents are not really having healthy conversations about sex. Those conversations should be happening when they're children, yet many teenagers are forced to involve their parents in their abortion decisions.

Kat Jercich: That's a lot to unpack.

Jenn Stanley: Yeah. So it's been a journey, but here we are, at the beginning.

For Rewire.News, I'm Jenn Stanley, and this is season four of CHOICE/LESS.

After Trump was elected president, I got a message from a high school classmate. I'm calling her Jane to protect her privacy. I hadn't really heard much from Jane since we graduated high school back in 2005. We were friends, got along, but hung out in different groups. Now that meant something different where I went to high school because I graduated in a class with 34 girls, so we all knew each other pretty well. And for the most part, we got along. But like all high school relationships, they weren't perfect.

Here's Jane talking about her experience at our high school, Our Lady of Nazareth Academy in Wakefield, Massachusetts.

Jane: There was wonderful things about the school we went to. I do think it built relationships with each other, and it definitely ... In classes, it was easier to

speak out and stuff like that, but it was still a very conservative environment. I know me and still to this day my best friend were like the only two non-Catholic people. I think there was like one or two others, but we were like the ... We'd sit in the pews when everyone would get out of communion and stuff like that. You were definitely ostracized for even being like slightly not the, you know, Nazareth way.

Jenn Stanley:

And Jane didn't really identify with the Nazareth way. She went to public schools growing up, but many of our classmates came from religious elementary schools or in some cases were taught at home, and Nazareth was very focused on Catholicism. We went to church, had religious ceremonies. Our choirs all sang religious music. It was more than I was used to even being raised in the faith, and Jane wasn't raised Catholic at all. Her family's values didn't really align with what we were being taught. But Jane was bullied in middle school. She describes that time as horrible, and she just needed to get out of her public school system. So she and her parents thought it would be best to go somewhere different, and Nazareth actually had a really good reputation for being a supportive environment for young women, and it was in a lot of ways. So, she was able to overlook the fact that some of the school's policies and practices might not be in line with her own personal ethics.

Jane:

I do remember. In high school, I had always grown up in a family that was very pro-choice and very open about talking about abortion. That women should be able to choose, and that they should have safe access to those choices. So, when I went to a Catholic school, not being Catholic, I knew the views would be a lot more conservative than what I'd grown up with. But I do remember religion class a lot and how our teacher was very against it. I do remember her saying that it was like an abomination.

Jenn Stanley:

Right. Many of the teachers were very anti-abortion. And the ones who weren't were careful not to voice their opinions. And that leads me to why I brought Jane on the show today. Freshman year of high school, she and I got into an argument about abortion in biology class. She was pro-choice, and I ... Well, it was complicated. Let me explain. I'm pro-choice. I've always been pro-choice in that I've always lived in a country where abortion was legal, and I've always thought that was right. But when I was a kid, when I was 14 being raised in a Catholic family going to Catholic high school and often being told that the reason I was alive and given a chance at life was that my birth mother was Catholic, and that she wouldn't have an abortion.

Being adopted is hard, and I'm just speaking from my own experience when I say that no amount of love or good intentions really reconciles how painful and complicated it can be to be adopted, especially the way the adoption system currently works. And I'd say I had the best possible circumstance. I love my parents. I get along with them. I have my sister. I have a great family, but it's still complicated.

My birth mother was a teenager. I don't know her, but the story I was told is that she was Catholic, and that's why she chose life. And it was important to my birth mother that I be raised in the faith. Being Catholic was not unusual. I'm from a Boston suburb. It's super Catholic there, and we weren't the most serious about religion. I went to CCD, which is the Catholic version of Sunday school, and we went to church sometimes, always on holidays and the days you get stuff like Ash Wednesday or Palm Sunday. Our priest called Catholics like us C&D Catholics, for Christmas and Easter. So, like Jane, our high school was still more religious than I was used to, only my experience was different.

I had gone to public school as well, and my adoption was pretty much a secret, not explicitly so, but people didn't know. And when they found out, a lot of the kids in school were pretty terrible about it, so it always felt like a shameful secret. But when I went to Catholic school, suddenly my adoption wasn't shameful. It was something to be proud of. The narrative I was fed was similar to the anti-abortion lecture in "Lady Bird," basically that my birth mother was a sinner, but she was redeemed by doing the most selfless thing you could do, place a child for adoption. That maybe she couldn't raise me, but she also couldn't choose to kill me.

That's a powerful thing to put in the mind of a 14 year old who knows nothing about sex. I had never even kissed anyone romantically before, but I already feared sex thinking it ended one of two horrible ways: in having to stay pregnant and give up a baby as punishment for having sex, or in becoming a murderer. As a 14 year old, I was no match against Catholic propaganda, but obviously things have changed.

So, when Jane reached out to me after the 2016 presidential election, she wanted to talk to me about my reporting and writing on human rights issues, particularly abortion. And I was really glad she did because I think of Jane often as someone who had their head right about these issues which took me longer to learn. So, I told her that I'd been thinking a lot about her and an argument we had in biology class freshman year. She was passionately defending abortion saying adoption can be really hard, that adoptees are known to have problems. I got really defensive, said, "I have no problems. I'm great. And if my mother had chosen abortion, I'd be dead."

Jane didn't remember us having this conversation, but she did remember that our biology teacher couldn't talk about abortion in class. So, back in high school in that class, Jane asked the teacher where she stands. And she answers that she has to end the conversation now. She says she could get fired for what she would say next. So, I think of that day often in my work, and I was surprised that Jane didn't remember this conversation that had haunted me so much for my own stance, and for the things that I said, and more importantly, the way that I said them. But she didn't remember us arguing about abortion at all. As I found out from that conversation, she had a lot of her own stuff going on too.

Jane: So, yes, I know that I had very strong opinions about it, but I also did get pregnant at 15 years old and had to go through an abortion in this Catholic school girl environment where it was pushed that, you know, I had done something wrong, and I should have kept it, and given it up for adoption. Although I think that is a wonderful choice, I know personally for me it wasn't the right choice. I had started having sex at a really young age, 14 or 15 years old. And I remember in health class was probably the only experience I got to talking about sex in eighth grade. It was right before I had lost my virginity, and so I didn't know anything about birth control or even condoms. It was a very abstinence centered discussion in health class, so when I started having sex, I did not take any precautions.

I remember it was Easter at freshman year, and I hadn't gotten my period. I knew. I was very regular. This was ... definitely something was up. So, I took the test and found out I was pregnant. I was horrified. Didn't want to tell my parents. We had talked about it, abortion, before. But I don't know, for some reason I was way too scared to tell them.

Jenn Stanley: Do you think they knew you were having sex?

Jane: Yes. Yeah, definitely. And I do actually remember, because I got morning sickness. A lot.

I remember throwing up before school, and mom was like, "No! God, why would you ever think that." Of course, I was. Luckily, I had an older sister who was able to take me and actually pay for it, so I wouldn't have to go through insurance. The state of Massachusetts didn't allow you to have an abortion without parental consent, but New Hampshire did, so I drove to New Hampshire, and that's where I ended up going to get it, in Concord, New Hampshire.

Jenn Stanley: By the time of this recording, 38 states currently require teens to involve a parent in their abortion decisions. Some of those states require consent, others just notification. At the time of Jane's abortion, New Hampshire did not require parental notification, but it does today. So a 14 year old in Jane's exact situation would have to travel hours to get to a clinic now either in Maine, Vermont, or Connecticut.

Did you know? So you're pregnant. At 15, I knew nothing about the law, or anything about the world at all at 15.

Jane: Nope. Ditto.

Jenn Stanley: What was that process like? How did you even know?

Jane: The internet. Thank God. I looked into clinics, and then I saw reading on the websites for Massachusetts that you had to be 18 unless you wanted to tell your parents. I was like, "Okay." And then I found some blogs that had said there are other states that will let you do it and stuff like that. So I looked into it, and New

Hampshire happened to be one of those states. It was close enough, and I actually was able to have somebody be able to transport me and take me, so I lucked out in that way.

Jenn Stanley: Unlike the clinic she looked at in Massachusetts, the closest clinic she could find in New Hampshire did not offer general anesthesia, so she had to be awake, which she didn't like.

Jane: I think the most traumatizing thing for me about it the first time was being awake and actually having to like hear the noises of everything that's going on. But yeah, it was so uncomfortable, even just the procedure itself, being awake for it. My sister was holding my hand. I just remember she was like crying, and I'm like, "Oh my god. Should I be more upset about it?" I just never really thought it was a child, so I just kind of went with like, "This just isn't the right time. It was never going to be a person, at least not in this way, so."

Jenn Stanley: Did you ever ask your sister why she was crying or talk to her about that?

Jane: Yeah. She had also gone through an abortion before, and she just felt horrible that I had to be, one, awake when it was happening. And just like how young I was. And the whole situation in general. I didn't have necessarily my parent's support, but I'd always been the kind of person who was like, "No. I don't need my parents for anything. I'll do it all myself."

Jenn Stanley: What was your relationship with your older sister like?

Jane: She was like another mom almost. She was five years older than me. I had a really hard time in middle school, which was part of the reason why I went to this all-girl's school to begin with. I was really bullied and everyone was just like horrible to me. So, she was always there to help me and support me through that because she also had a horrible time at our public school. So yeah, I just ... Thank goodness I had such a close relationship with her, or I don't know what I would have done.

Jenn Stanley: What was it like being 14, and living at your parent's house, and keeping this ... How did you keep that a secret?

Jane: I don't know. I kind of think my parents probably knew to a certain extent, and then were ... kind of didn't want to know. Because like I said, I was getting sick every morning, like pretty consecutively too. And then I would hide that, and I'd like get sick in my room before I'd go and brush my teeth. The worst was the car rides, because I drove to school with somebody else from our school, and they were really religious. We're listening to like the rosary every morning, and I'm like trying not to vomit from my out-of-wedlock baby.

Jenn Stanley: Oh god.

Jane: So it was just constant like, "Shame, shame, shame, shame."

Jenn Stanley: Oh, man.

Jane: So, I really don't know how they didn't find out. Me and my parents had a very strange relationship when I was that age anyways.

Jenn Stanley: Jane says that for as open as her parents were about their political views and their support for gay rights and abortion rights, they never really had a sex talk with her.

Jane: I didn't even get a sex talk from my parents. I remember my mom picked me up from my boyfriend's house freshman year in high school. It was like really late or whatever, and she had to like come to the door to pick me up because I didn't hear them honking. She was like, "Get ... " I remember getting yelled at on the way home, like, "You better not be having sex." And that was pretty much the extent.

Jenn Stanley: Were you having sex?

Jane: Oh, I definitely was. I definitely was. I should have had that talk years, years before.

Jenn Stanley: And if her parents weren't comfortable speaking with her about it then, how could Jane bring up abortion with them?

Jane: I think the hardest thing was that ... I mean your recovery time is like a few weeks, and having to do that without telling anybody was quite difficult. I definitely had some complications due to it. I had extreme clotting and stuff like that. It was just so uncomfortable. You have to wear this like diaper on you, and then like chunks of blood are coming out. And I'm a freshman, and I ... This is all new to me anyways. It was I'd say probably traumatizing, I guess, to a certain extent, and not knowing ... Like I thought I was dying. I'm like, "Oh my god. I'm going to die right here, in this bathroom.

Jenn Stanley: What was that like for you? To be scared about your health and not be able to tell your mom, like, "Hey, Mom. I'm scared."

Jane: I at least had my sister to talk to. I called the doctors as soon as that happened. They said it was relatively normal. And then I just faked sick for like a week, so I didn't have to go to school, and I didn't have my parents bothering me. I pretended to throw up in the bathroom every couple hours and stuff like that, and like put the heating pad on my head. I mean I was very good at that. So then at that point, I just hid in my bed for a week.

Jenn Stanley: Jane told me she was happy to share her story because she wished something like this show existed when she was a teenager. She would have felt less alone, had more of a defensive shield against the abortion shaming that was happening at our school. She says she's very open about her abortion experience, but she had to remain anonymous because she's a teacher, and she's afraid that being open about her abortion could cost her her job.

Jane: I teach health class now, which is so funny to me. But I teach about abortion even though it's not really supposed to be taught in school. I don't teach it as like a ... I just say like, "There are clinics out there." You kind of have to keep it very general like, "I'm not really supposed to ... " Like what our science teacher would tell us, "This is what they're making me say." I'll be like, "Well, this is what they're making me say, but there are options too. And if you want to further your knowledge, there are clinics." And then I make everybody look up what the closest free clinic is for them and stuff.

Jenn Stanley: The current standard in Massachusetts was adopted in 1999, and it allows districts to opt-out of sex ed all together or present an abstinence-heavy curriculum.

Jane: And different towns can adopt different policies on that, but a majority of towns in Massachusetts are still abstinence based.

Jenn Stanley: So there's no requirement to teach sex education in public schools in Massachusetts. There's also no way of knowing what the schools are teaching when they are teaching it. And while Jane claims that most towns in Massachusetts are only teaching an abstinence based sex education program, the Boston Globe recently reported that there's actually just no way of knowing. And while 60 percent of Massachusetts students have had sexual intercourse by the time they're seniors in high school, most of the respondents to the state's 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey said their parents never talk to them about sex.

Last winter, dozens of students marched to the State House in support of a comprehensive sex ed bill in Massachusetts. But despite evidence of the benefits of comprehensive sex ed, religious conservatives who oppose abortion, premarital sex, and LGBTQ rights are fighting hard to shut it down, which to me makes Jane's abortion story all the more important.

We had no sex ed in high school, and it was Catholic school, so the rules would be different. But Jane had very little sex ed at her public school too. And as we talked about before, her parents didn't teach her anything about sex either, and yet the state tried to mandate a conversation with them about her abortion decision. That's what we'll be exploring this season on CHOICE/LESS. If parents can't or won't even talk to their kids about sex, and they don't want the schools doing it either because it's just too taboo, then how can the state force a teen to talk to their parents about their abortion? While the media doesn't talk about teens and abortion, stories of teens who can't involve their parents in that decision are everywhere.

When civil rights lawyers in Illinois were looking to keep a parental involvement law from going into effect there, they used stories of minors seeking abortions in Massachusetts who couldn't involve their parents in their abortion decision, stories like Jane's, though Jane's is still kind of a best case scenario.

Jane: I could just go to New Hampshire, but if my sister didn't have a car or didn't have the money to pay for it, because without insurance it was like \$600. I was 15 years old. Trying to find \$600 dollars, 15 years old ... And then transportation and getting somebody to take you because you can't go alone.

Jenn Stanley: Many teens don't have as many options as she did, and they may face more difficult circumstances. For example, if those lawyers couldn't make their case in Illinois, there's no other surrounding state where teens can go to access abortion care, so anybody under 18 in Illinois would have to travel to New York to get to the nearest clinic where they could get an abortion without involving their parents. And as we know from recent history, things were going great for abortion rights around 2013, so everything was fine.

Just kidding.

This was the time when so much anti-abortion legislation was being passed throughout the country that the Guttmacher Institute declared the entire South and most of the Midwest extremely hostile to abortion, and young people are some of the most vulnerable to all of these laws. Yet they remain silenced by their families, their communities, and the media.

Speaker 6: Sometimes they would start to tell me their names, and I would interrupt and say, "No. I don't need to know your name. In this case, you're Jane Doe." And I would introduce myself and say, "This is how this is going to proceed."

Jenn Stanley: But more on that in the next episode.

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