

CHOICE/LESS 405: Their Bodies, Their Boats, Their Play

Veronica Hawkins: My full name is Veronica Hawkins. I've been going to BYC, the Broadway Youth Center, to get free STD testing since I was probably 15 years old. So, I was going in for my regular free checkup. I saw there's a bunch of fliers everywhere. I always like to read what's going on, who they're providing services to.

On the table, it just said, "Do you have a story about your abortion? Do you want to share that story? Are you between the ages of 15 and 24?" At the time, I was 24. I said, "Yeah, I'd love to share this story," because it was still very fresh, only a few months old.

So, I went into ICAH for my interview and I had an audio recording. About a month or two later, they let me know that it definitely made the play and they wanted to write a script. They wanted me to come in and see how everything was going and work with the actors, and it's been great ever since.

Nik Zaleski: Everybody clear? If you have a script in front of you, you know what you're reading?

Alright everybody, let's dig in and enjoy hearing for the very first time ever, "This Boat Called My Body".

Veronica Hawkins: I shared how I felt sick, I had morning sickness and I didn't understand what it was, and then I went to go get a pregnancy test and I took it in a Jewel-Osco bathroom because I needed to know right away.

Danny: Oh my god I'm sorry. I left literally as soon as I got your text, but then I couldn't figure out if you meant this Jewel or the one on Halsted. Jane what's going on? What's wrong?

Jane: I think I really screwed up.

Danny: What?

Jane: I really ... Danny I'm pregnant.

Stage directions: Stunned silence.

Danny: Oh okay. Okay oh my god. Okay. How do you feel? You're pregnant, good thing? Bad thing?

Stage directions: Danny looks at Jane's face and body language.

Danny: Okay bad thing. Oh my god. You're pregnant. Back the fuck off we're having a crisis in here. Not a crisis, this is fine.

Jenn Stanley: For Rewire.News I'm Jenn Stanley and this is CHOICE/LESS. If you're just joining us this is the final episode in a series so please go back and listen from the beginning. Earlier this season we met Tiffany Pryor. She is the executive director of the Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, more commonly known as ICAH. ICAH helps young people access information and services about sexual and reproductive health. One of their focus areas happens to be the primary topic of this series, parental notification of abortion laws.

Tiffany Pryor: We've been working on parental notice for years and we'll be debuting our play this spring around it. This is a way to really center and amplify the stories of youth who are under 18, even though the play we've collected stories for folks up to 22. We're really focusing on what it means for a young person who's of high school age who wants to access abortion services because it's just something that is left out of the conversation all too often, and we ... That's our expertise. And so we're using that as part of the play.

Jenn Stanley: Art plays an important role in ICAH'S activism. And their theater wing is called FYI: For Youth Inquiry. FYI historically goes into schools and uses theater to teach comprehensive sex ed. Their work is participatory, and through play they tackle the really hard stuff we've been talking about all season: sexual assault and consent, coming out to unsupportive family. Previously their plays have been exclusively for schools or other educational purposes, and this is the first time they've created a play for the public. It's about teen abortion and it was written by six playwrights, including Nik Zaleski, an artistic consultant for ICA.

Nik: My name is Nik Zaleski. I use she and her pronouns and I am the co-writer and co-director of "This Boat Called My Body." Last year as a part of our strategic planning process Tiffany Pryor and I really sat down and started to think what would it mean to tie our performance work really directly to the organizing work as well. And might that mean that we actually need a public facing sort of strategy that could always be rooted in what is the hardest issue area that we are biting off as an organization.

And last year we felt like that issue area was repealing parental notification for abortion which felt like it was just so far off into the future. How can we use cultural tools to manage the hardest cultural problems that we are fighting as an organization.

Jenn Stanley: So they collected stories from people who had abortions in Illinois, both before and after the law went into effect. Aaryanna Garris is one of the storytellers.

Aaryanna Garris: They sort of invited me in and I did a whole hour long interview with them. They had a very specific set of questions that they wanted answers to. What brought you to the place that had you making this decision? Who were the people that you used as a support network? What kind of ... What did that support look like? And then also a lot of, were you made to inform a parent? What situation ... What questions were asked of you in that room? What kinds of things ... What did that look like? And where did you go? What resources did you utilize?

Jenn Stanley: Veronica Hawkins from the top of the show was also one of the storytellers.

Veronica Hawkins: When I was going through the abortion situation I didn't tell a lot of people. I told maybe one or two people. I did everything by myself. And so to be able to tell people what was going through my mind and how isolated I made myself, it gives people information without having to talk to anybody as well. They can go to a play and get information that they need from all these stories that are put together without having to be ostracized.

Jenn Stanley: What kind of things did you share with them?

Veronica: Taking pregnancy tests in weird places, and having weird information thrown at you at a weird public place, and how to handle it afterwards. How to go back to work and pretend like everything's normal. How to not involve a significant other if you don't want them to be involved and still take care of yourself and feel like you're strong and independent.

Jenn Stanley: Some of the storytellers were present for the first read of the play last winter and were able to tell the playwrights and actors what they thought of the way their experiences were portrayed.

Nik Zaleski: Thanks for listening, now we get to share our responses to the listening. And so the first thing that we start with in the critical response process is just statements of meaning, things that resonated for you, things that you remember from what you just heard.

Veronica Hawkins: When they said you don't need care, you need this. You don't need care, you need a doctor, you need an appointment. And it made me think about how I wish that some people would show me care, but if they did start caring about me, or I let them care about me because I let them know, then I would probably go through with the full nine months and everything. But if me not letting people care okay I need to get this morning sickness to stop and I need to ... How am I gonna get to my appointment on Saturday and not let people know that I'm going to an appointment? "What are you doing on Saturday?" "I'm going shopping." I don't know.

I need to get all my stuff done within the 10 weeks so I don't have to have a surgery. So the whole ... Afterwards I was like, "I need somebody to care about me." But no I didn't need care because that would've influenced a different decision. That's why I pushed people away, I didn't tell people. Because if they cared then I'd feel supported or strong to have the baby.

Nik Zaleski: Yeah that's super, super helpful. Yeah and makes me think about privacy and the place of privacy and sticking to the plan and setting the course, being a part of that sequence actually.

Veronica Hawkins: So when the friend was there and being like, "Whoa dude everything's okay, everything's gonna work out, we're gonna fix it." I was like no, that's not how my friends would've reacted. They would've bene like, "Let's keep the baby, oh

my god you're having a baby, da da da" And I would've been like, "no..." So the involvement of the friend was not accurate for me.

Jenn Stanley: Did you feel like a lot of the other stuff felt really accurate to your experience? Like they were using your story for a lot of it?

Veronica Hawkins: Yeah I definitely felt like they were using my story for a lot of it. The food dance in the grocery store definitely was part of my story. The donuts and the Cheetos and what not.

Jenn Stanley: Last spring when they were done with writing process and getting close to the performances, Nick invited the other five playwrights to her home to celebrate, and they invited me along so I could ask a few questions.

Nik Zaleski: We are in my living room sitting around Hot Cheetos and donuts celebrating the fact that we have finished a final rehearsal draft of the play and celebrating the labor of the last six months in doing so.

Jenn Stanley: Christabel Donker, one of the playwrights, explained some of the difficulties of collaborating with five other playwrights while trying to stay true to the storyteller's accounts.

Christabel Donker: I think it was one of the most challenging things for us honestly. In that we all wanted to inject our special storytelling thing into it or have our own opinions of whatever was going on in the situation. But I think it was something that really checked us when we were able to go back to the transcripts and say, "Okay is this something that is actually authentic to the story or is it something that we're kind of ... a little bit of our own propaganda," if you will. So I think centering those stories was the most important thing.

Jenn Stanley: Jessamyn Fitzpatrick is another one of the playwrights.

Jessamyn Fitzpatrick: And I think also a conversation that we ended up having, sort of multiple times, was just monitoring the tone in the sense of how much to include perspectives that are anti-choice. Because those ... They're everywhere in the transcripts, whether it's as explicit as, "I showed up to get my abortion and there were protestors outside and they pulled me and my partner over and started talking." Those things, they're so prevalent in the transcripts. And so wanting to be true to that, but then also not wanting to create an environment where audience members, many of whom are abortion seekers, some of whom we know are going to be the storytellers that contributed to this, are not being invited into a space where it's just like oh let's just wade through the shit of all of these horrific messages that have been thrown at so many people for so long about this.

Christabel Donker: I mean ideally I really hate the law. I really do. Because I think it's a way of putting ... It's a way, again, of adults putting their own opinions on young people. And whatever you feel is right to do and it's like everybody has an individual life, and an individual story, an individual home.

Jenn Stanley: But as we've discussed before in this series, a lot of people don't even know these laws exist. So a few weeks before the play premiered, ICAH staff members took their youth activists canvassing throughout Chicago. They asked people their thoughts on parental notification, tried to raise awareness of the issue, and get enough signatures to take their petition to lawmakers and push for a repeal.

I met up with some of them when they were out in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood just blocks away from where the play would be performed. So in addition to raising awareness about parental notification, they were also trying to spread the word about their upcoming play.

Jereh L. Drake: You can have a flier. Want a flier?

Speaker: That's the sauce.

Jereh L Drake: There's multiple fliers.

Speaker: Thank you.

Jereh L Drake: Yeah, pass them out.

Jenn Stanley: That's Jereh L Drake, ICAH'S movement building organizer.

Jereh L Drake: And the thing about this flier is one side is about the boat play, and the boat play, "This Boat Called My Body", is a new play from the FYI performance company featuring youth abortion stories. And so it's thinking about what are troubled waters that young people navigate when seeking abortions. Know that if someone asks you about "This Boat Called My Body," it's a play about talking about the stigma, trying to destigmatize abortion.

Jenn Stanley: "This Boat Called MY Body" is going to be performed in one of Chicago's public parks, and while the audience is encouraged to buy tickets, everyone who's in the park that day will see and hear this play about teen abortion, children, adults, pro-choice, anti-choice, anyone who walks by. Tiffany and Nik have thought a lot about this. They want the play to be open to the public and inspire a conversation, they also don't want to re-traumatize storytellers or other audience members if there is a strong anti-abortion presence. But if they wanna have any chance at a repeal, they need people to know about the issue.

Sophia Perez is one of ICAH's youth activists. She's a 19 year old student from Chicago, Illinois and she was out canvassing that day in Bridgeport.

Sophia Perez: As I recently had a meeting with Representative Mah who is the representative for Bridgeport, and she was very much in support of what we are doing now. So I think also getting that confirmation from the community is really important because we ... They've done studies on this neighborhood for their opinions about abortion, and you know there's a lot of older people here, there's also a

lot of older immigrant families here, so a lot of them are kind of not really for it and not really for young pregnancies either.

Alyssa Vera Ramos: So I think that's all really good information too for all of y'all who will be talking to people today.

Jenn Stanley: Alyssa Vera Ramos is ICAH'S arts justice organizer and the artistic director of their theater troupe, FYI.

Alyssa Vera Ramos: Just like to be aware right. I'm like we're really doing some great work today by even having these conversations at all and bringing it to people's attention. And maybe we'll experience some of that, and that's okay.

Jenn Stanley: I asked the playwrights what they hoped people would take away from the play. Here's what Nik has to say.

Nik Zaleski: How the communication really rests on a parent's ability to trust youth, to trust the young people in their lives. And to trust that while they're discovering things and making mistakes and experiencing their full spectrum of sexuality and hormones and all of the mess and complication that comes with that, that they are equipped with the tools, from the parents ideally, to make the right decisions for them.

Jenn Stanley: Again, ICAH's executive director Tiffany Pryor.

Tiffany Pryor: It doesn't need to be these two things are working against each other in that we're saying, "Parents shouldn't have rights." That's not what we're saying. We're saying that young people deserve and should have access to this information. And if that is something that is difficult for you to talk about, let's work together to figure out how we can talk about that together.

Jenn Stanley: And ICAH believes that youth have a right to this information, and they have a right to make decisions about their own bodies.

Tiffany Pryor: When we start these conversations younger, we're able to make informed decisions about our bodies. We're able to have communication look differently or feel differently, or be the way that we want it to be instead of some telling us how it should be.

Jenn Stanley: Which is why ICAH wants this play to be so public. They want everyone to have access to this information. Despite teens being legally required to notify their parents about their abortions in 38 states, there's no road map for how these talks should go. The folks at ICAH hope this will serve as a powerful conversation starter.

I'll admit, I expected there to be some negative reaction to this play. I thought families who were casually in the park that day might walk away, try to shield their children, but actually that wasn't the case. The audience started filing in. It took place in a water filled quarry on an raft, that's where the stage was. And

they used the space all around. The audience at in front of the raft. For the most part there was water between the audience and the main stage.

- Nik Zaleski: And then we're just so, so thrilled that you're all in the audience and with us on this beautiful Thursday evening.
- Quenna Lene: Enjoy, welcome. "This Boat Called My Body."
- Jenn Stanley: The generator went out so the play was not mic'ed as intended. Please bear with the sound. I know it might be a little bit distracting, but I think it's worth it.
- Jane: This isn't like ... I'm gonna be a pediatrician. I'm gonna walk across that graduation stage after I finish junior year and then senior year and look my principal square in the eyes when she congratulates me. I'm not getting my diploma online.
- Chorus of White Men: You have to tell your parents Jane.
- Jane: What my parent?
- Danny: I'm sorry to ask but is it Malcolm's?
- Malcom: We hooked up what like three times?
- Nurse: The doctor will see you in two and a half minutes.
- Chorus of White Men: Your chemistry homework Jane, it's late. You're late.
- Mother: You're what?
- Jane: I'm having-
- Voices: Jane.
- Danny: Are you okay?
- Voices: Jane, jane.
- Jane: I'm having an abortion.
- Jenn Stanley: Passersby seemed interested in the play, stopped to listen for a bit. There was a woman fishing with a young girl between the audience and the dock where the play was being performed and they seemed totally unfazed. I'll be honest, this isn't what I was expecting. I thought families with young children would be quick to rush out of the park, that there would be some kind of protest from local anti-choice organizations, but none of that happened. Actually in my time covering the play, the only heckling I heard was actually in support of Jane.

You see, there's a scene in the play after Jane decides to have an abortion where she's harangued by a so-called chorus of white men meant to reflect the

anti-abortion sentiment that exists in varying degrees across the country. At one point they yell down to Jane from the top of the quarry.

Chorus of White Men: Paging Jane.

Jane: Who are they?

Chorus of White Men: Your doctor, your father, your husband, your pastor, this is hard Jane, it's so hard. We're just being honest. This is tough. I'm off work, the risks.

Speaker: I remember that one.

Chorus of White Men: Depressions, infections, clot, bleeding, breast cancer, dangerous pregnancies.

Danny: Literally not even true.

Chorus of White Men: PAS, post abortion syndrome. It's terrible. You get depressed, you get suicidal, it's just like PTSD for women.

Jane: So just PTSD?

Jenn Stanley: During the tech rehearsal there was a woman on top of the quarry not far from the chorus of white men and she thought they were harassing a woman in the park, that they were some kind of anti-choice protestors or something. And so she starts yelling back and the cast has to yell back to her. "It's just a play, it's just a play." And she laughs and apologizes.

The general vibe surrounding the play was really positive overall. The audience participated, they helped Jane find information when she needed it, and at the end of the play audience members joined Jane, helped her take water out of a canoe that's sitting on the dock. They put it in the water and Jane gets in and rows off to get her abortion.

Voices: You got this Jane. [crosstalk 00:19:33]

Jenn Stanley: Then the actors left onstage told abortion stories that ICAH collected from other so called Janes.

Speaker: They make you like you're ready for it. They give you a gown and they put you in a small room. And I'm claustrophobic. So while I was in this little room there was a mirror in there. And I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and I broke down. I was like "Fuck how did I get here? How did this happen?" I'm Jane and I love other Janes.

Speaker: I love Jane. Anybody else Jane? Do you guys love Jane?

Speaker: Does anybody know a Jane?

Speaker: I know a Jane.[crosstalk 00:20:25]

Speaker: I love Jane.

Speaker: I love Jane.

Actors singing: (singing) We have been here, we have been here before. Time and time and time and time again. And we'll be here time and time and time and time again. If we don't stop.

If we don't act.

If we don't change.

If we don't-

Time and time and time and time again.

We gotta stop.

We gotta act.

We gotta change.

We gotta speak. Time and time and time and time again.

Jenn Stanley: I asked the playwrights what they hoped people would take away from "This Boat Called My Body."

Jessamyn Fitzpatrick: Language is being used to obscure something that is actually doing harm, and the laws work that way all the time, like obfuscating through like well it sounds nice. All these organizations that have the word family in it right, it's like that word has gotten away from us. It's like oh family that sounds so lovely, parental notification. We have these associations of well that's just to help young people because I think as a society we just don't wanna look at the harm that older folks can and do do. I think good communication is also inherently not coerced communication about anything ever.

Jenn Stanley: Young people are subject to the world that adults create for them, but they're also demanding more from us. And if they aren't already, they'll soon be voting. It's a common trope that previous generations seem to look down at younger generations, and the media is often quick to perpetuate these stereotypes. Millennials are broke because they eat too much avocado toast, college students get raped because they drink too much or dress too provocatively. But it's the older folks who create the society that younger people navigate. Children rely on their parents, their teachers, and their lawmakers to keep them safe, to teach them, to affirm them.

When I was younger I needed it to be okay to be sad that I'd probably never get to meet the person who gave birth to me. Instead, a lot of adults used me as a reason to shame people that were in a similar position as my birth mother. I had

to unlearn negative attitudes about sex and women who have sex for non-procreative reasons. And my classmate Jane, she needed the space to become an adult before she could have a child of her own.

Back in biology class when we had that argument about abortion, we were trying to make sense of a world that the adults in our lives weren't preparing us for. But as we heard in this series, many young people are stepping up and saying, "Enough is enough." And ICAH's executive director Tiffany Pryor says, this is nothing new. And it's time for lawmakers, educators, and parents to listen.

Tiffany Pryor:

Youth have always been on the front lines of organizing and activism and shifting policies, and so yeah I think that's the space that we are in and that's the space that we will continue to be in as more people understand that young people do have a voice, that we don't need to be telling them how to think or how to feel. That they're actually the ones who are having these honest and hard conversations and pushing other people to do the very same thing.

And so centering youth leadership is looking at stuff like that and being like how can I be an accomplice to that? Because youth are and have been leading the way, and that's part of why I also love ICAH just because we say that that's what youth leadership looks like. This is what it looks like to lean on the expertise of young people who are actually experiencing these issues firsthand, and not an adult saying, "This is how we need to be addressing it." And so I'm very happy that people are now paying attention. I also am like, "Yup we knew that, and it's not brand new and good for you." So yeah.

Jenn Stanley:

But is there a lot of hope in this work?

Tiffany Pryor:

Yeah I mean I ... geez Jenn. Yeah I think that's why we continue to show up to do the work. I get my hope a lot from when young people are in our space and when they are doing their organizing around these campaigns, and it's hard for them and they're also saying it's necessary. And so that to me is kind of the blessing in this work, and I have to believe, I do believe that that's what's going to change there landscape here, especially in Illinois.

But I'm getting choked up because I'm just thinking about all of the ways that they show up to this work and how beautiful it really is and how much change they actually are making. And celebrating those successes, whatever that looks like, it doesn't always have to be policy, it doesn't always have to be law. It doesn't always have to be these larger scale things, it could just be a young person is feeling differently about themselves. And that's cool.

Actors singing:

Sea glass was sharp glass but grew soft through years and years and years and years. Sea glass was sharp glass but grew soft through years and years and years and years.

Tumbling tumbling through troubled water.

Sea glass was sharp glass but grew soft.

Through tumbling through troubled waters.

Jenn Stanley:

Thank you so much for listening to this season. If you like CHOICE/LESS, then you have to check out our other shows. We have a lot of exiting stuff going on this month. We've got Boom! Lawyered which is hosted by our award-winning legal team of Imani Gandy and Jessica Mason Pieklo. They break down all of the important justice issues in and around the courts. But trust me when I say that Boom! Lawyered is not some stuffy legal analysis podcast. And I think their expertise is more important now than ever, so definitely check that out.

And then we've got The Breach. If you like CHOICE/LESS, if you like these in depth stories, on September 25th host Lindsay Beyerstein is going to drop a three part investigation on a law that's putting pregnant people in jail and almost no one knows about it. CHOICE/LESS listeners won't wanna miss this story coming soon on The Breach.

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