



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Manitoba fights for women's reproductive rights, 1983-1986

Time period notes: Henry Morgentaler's civil disobedience in Manitoba began to slow late in 1986 when his request for a license was denied. The legal breakthrough came in 1988 when the Supreme court decided that the abortion law was against women's rights.

5 May

1983

1986

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: Winnipeg, Manitoba

Goals:

To make abortion legal in Canada and allow women to exercise choice.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Performed illegal abortions

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Performed illegal abortions

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Performed illegal abortions

Methods in 4th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Performed illegal abortions

Methods in 5th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Performed illegal abortions

Methods in 6th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws › Performed illegal abortions

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Notes on Methods:

Henry Morgentaler believed the law against abortions was illegitimate, therefore he practiced civil disobedience by performing illegal operations.

Pro-choice members protested by rallies and marches but the timing is not known.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Pro-choice Activists
- religious groups
- women's groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Henry Morgentaler

Partners:

Dr. Robert Scott, Lynn Crocker (clinic staff); Canadians for Choice, Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada, Pro-Choice Action Network

Involvement of social elites:

not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada
- Canadians for Choice
- Pro-Choice Action Network

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 6 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Government of Canada, Pro-life activists

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Protesting and blockading outside of clinics

Campaigner violence:

not known

Repressive Violence:

Three raids on the clinics in Winnipeg resulting in arrests.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Henry Morgentaler was born in Poland of 1923 and lived to change the world of women's rights in Canada. He was a Holocaust survivor who lost both his parents in concentration camps and spent his own time there until 1945. After moving to Canada in 1950, he began to study medicine at the University of Montreal, and soon opened his practice in 1955.

In the 1960-1980's a number of people urged the legalization of abortion by holding demonstrations. They believed that the law against abortion was a breach of the fundamental right women had to make a choice.

Morgentaler performed illegal abortions across eastern Canada, mainly in Toronto, Montreal, and St. John's. The first clinic was opened in Montreal of 1968; this is when he began to protest against the law regarding abortions. While in 1973, Morgentaler performed an abortion on live television in order to demonstrate his passion for the cause. In 1975, he stayed in a Montreal prison for about 10 months for defying the law, until he had a heart attack and was released for health reasons.

Henry Morgentaler was influenced by the slogan 'every child a wanted child' which came along-side his time spent in concentration camps. Growing up he felt that his own mother did not love him as much as she should have. This brought him to the decision to perform abortions to make sure that every child would be loved by their mothers.

Morgentaler opened his Manitoba campaign on 5 May 1983, when he opened his first clinic in Winnipeg. The clinic was often surrounded by protestors from the pro-life side of the debate. Many times they blocked the doors to the clinic, attempting to stop Morgentaler and other workers from continuing their practice. The police stormed the clinic and arrested Dr. Henry Morgentaler, Dr. Robert Scott, and head nurse Lynn Crocker; they were charged with procuring miscarriages.

The clinic was stormed a few times more in 1985, bringing the total charges on Morgentaler to 7 in Manitoba alone. He appeared in front of the Supreme Court of Canada on account of the charges in Manitoba as well as abortions performed in Toronto.

In 1986, the Manitoba College of Physicians and Surgeons denied Morgentaler's request for a license to practice in the province. They stated that abortions were to be practiced only in verified hospitals and his clinic was not one of these locations.

Although this ruling did not give him the legal entity to perform operations, he ignored this and continued to provide illegal, but

safe, abortions. Later that year his practice slowed in Manitoba, while he continued to defend himself in court.

In 1988 the Canadian the Supreme Court ruled that the abortion law was no longer acceptable, conflicting with the fundamental charter of rights and freedoms. This can be considered a victory for the many who worked for women's reproductive rights in Canada. Morgentaler's Manitoba civil disobedience campaign did, however, bring the issue to a head and arguably made it impossible for the Supreme Court to avoid the issue any longer.

Research Notes

Influences:

Henry Morgentaler was influenced by the slogan 'every child a wanted child' which came along side his time spent in concentration camps. Growing up he felt that his own mother did not love him as much as she should have. This brought him to the decision to perform abortions to make sure that every child would be loved by their mothers. (1)

The work that Morgentaler contributed to in Canada sparked the still ongoing debate in Canada. Specific actions are not known however the debate as whole will seem to never end. (2)

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

Morgenthaler's campaign sparked the ongoing debate between pro-choice/life activists.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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