

North American 'Lactivists' hold nurse-ins against Applebee's, United States, 2007

- ([mainly or initiated by women](#)) [1]

Timing

September 8th
2007

to:

September 9th
2007

Location and Goals

Country:

United States

Location City/State/Province:

Lexington, KY

Location Description:

The location of the Applebee's where Brooke Ryan received degrading treatment by Applebee's employees in response to her breastfeeding her child in public.

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

After receiving discriminative treatment after attempting to breastfeed her son at Applebee's, Brooke Ryan organized several events including a nurse-in, demanding a public apology from Applebee's and training for its employees about the right of breastfeeding mothers in public.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 022. Protest disrobings>Women publicly nursed their babies in front of Applebee's.
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support>Lactivists gathered in front of Applebee's

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Segment Length:

8 hours

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Breastfeeding supporters
- feminists
- mothers
- women's groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Brooke Ryan

Partners:

Senator Tom Buford

Involvement of social elites:

Senator Tom Buford

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Brooke Ryan
- Lactivists
- Senator Tom Buford
- feminists
- mothers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

8 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Applebee's

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

none.

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:
No repressive violence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

This campaign was a complete success. Applebee's issued a statement following the nurse-out saying "This situation provided an opportunity for us to work with our associates to ensure we're making nursing mothers feel welcome....we will also accommodate other guests who would be more comfortable moving to another area of the restaurant."

In the state of Kentucky, specific breastfeeding laws exist in order to protect women while breastfeeding their babies. Section 211.755 mandates that "a mother may breastfeed her baby or express breast milk in any location, public or private, where the mother is otherwise authorized to be." Furthermore, women seen in the act of breastfeeding will not be considered for "indecent exposure, sexual conduct, lewd touching, or obscenity."

Despite these laws, on 14 June September 2007, Brooke Ryan, a mother of eight, experienced degrading treatment while breastfeeding at a local Applebee's in Lexington, KY. While discreetly nursing her seven-month-old son in a private booth at the back of the restaurant, an Applebee's employee requested that she cover herself with a blanket due to indecent exposure. However, Ryan protested, claiming that her son wouldn't nurse under a blanket because it was too hot and uncomfortable. She also provided the employee with a copy of the law that protects mothers that are breastfeeding in public places. Despite this, the Applebee's manager responded that a customer had complained about her 'indecent exposure' and requested that she cover herself or leave, stating that the customer's satisfaction was more important to Applebee's than her right to breastfeed. Not wanting to cause more of a scene, a humiliated Ryan obliged and nursed her child in her car in the parking lot.

Following the incident, Ryan pursued legal action in order to ensure that Applebee's understood that she and other mothers had the right to breastfeed in public under Kentucky state law. However, instead of apologizing for the incident, Applebee's issued an official statement pronouncing that they "would consider keeping blankets in the restaurant so that breast-feeding women could cover themselves." Furthermore, Mike Scanlon, President of Thomas & King (the company that operates Applebee's in Central Kentucky), accused Ryan of having an 'agenda' and raised questions about why she was carrying a copy of the statute.

Applebee's lack of remorse and refusal to acknowledge their failure to comply with a state law led to a public backlash against the restaurant. Senator Tom Buford, the Republican senator of Kentucky who spearheaded the passage of Section 211.755, called Applebee's treatment of Ryan an overstep of its boundaries and a violation of the law. Instead of pursuing monetary compensation, Ryan, with an endorsement from Senator Buford, retracted her lawsuit against Applebee's and began planning for a public nurse-in in front of the Applebee's where she had been asked to cover herself. In an exchange with Senator Buford, Ryan noted that she hoped for a public apology from Applebee's and training for its employees about the right of breastfeeding mothers in

public. In order to draw attention to the event, Ryan made fliers and spread them around Lexington and through blog posts on the Internet. The advertisements noted how “mothers should never be asked to move, hide, cover up, or leave” and called on readers to spread the message. Lactivists organized similar nurse-in protests around the country through feminist discussion groups and in a matter of weeks, almost 100 nurse-ins were planned to be held in front of Applebee’s in 44 states.

On 8 September 2007, hundreds of people gathered in front of their local Applebee’s to protest the restaurant chain’s conduct toward mothers nursing inside their restaurant. Almost 200 people gathered for a nurse-in in front of the Lexington Applebee’s where Brooke Ryan was asked to cover herself. Mothers publicly nursed their babies while others held pro-breastfeeding signs, such as “Eat at Mom’s.” Cars driving past the busy intersection honked at the demonstrators as a sign of support while the restaurant managers reportedly responded in a positive manner, holding discussions with their employees about the situation. Rev. Cynthia Cain, a participant in the nurse-in, commented, “It’s not just about the mom’s right, it’s about the baby’s right to eat.” One mother protesting in Phoenix, Arizona exclaimed that Applebee’s should provide blankets for patrons who are offended by nursing moms so that they can cover their faces.

The nurse-ins garnered significant nation-wide news coverage as many were shocked at the humiliating treatment given to Ryan. Furthermore, the prospect of groups of women publicly uncovering their breasts in order to nurse their babies attracted media coverage.

Following the nurse-ins around the country, Applebee’s shifted their corporate response, releasing the following statement the next day on 9 September 2007: “Our goal as restaurant operators is to provide a great dining experience for all our guests. This situation has provided an opportunity for us to work with our associates to ensure that we’re making nursing mothers feel welcome...we will also accommodate other guests who would be more comfortable moving to another area of the restaurant.”

Research Notes

Influences:

The Applebee's Lactivist movements was influenced by similar cases of mothers receiving degrading treatment while breastfeeding their babies. (1) This particular campaign started by Brooke Ryan inspired nurse-ins across the country. Furthermore, the nurse-in brought key issues on breastfeeding in public to the national spotlight. (2)

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