

Medill Reports Chicago



CHICAGO MEN STAND UP FOR WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

FEBRUARY 18, 2016

By Enrica Nicoli Aldini

They will never experience an unintended pregnancy or seek an abortion or confront the hurdles often associated with the choice to do so. However, a group of politically-engaged men in Chicago believe they have a lot to say and do in the fight for women's rights. They are coming together with the organization Men4Choice to engage, educate and activate men in expanding and protecting women's reproductive rights.

"We are very conscious of the fact that men have a role to play," said Oren Jacobson, Men4Choice co-founder and executive director. "There's a lot more at stake in reproductive choice that men tend to believe. This is an issue that affects the women in our lives. If we're not willing to stand up

for them, shame on us.”

Jacobson, a 33-year-old real-estate consultant in Chicago, emphasized that although reproductive choice issues do not affect men directly, they must be involved. There’s a lot for them to learn, and it is critical that they be sensitive in approaching the issue.

“It’s important to recognize that our position is that of allies, followers, partners,” Jacobson said. That’s why Men4Choice has an all-female advisory board with full veto power “to guide us and make sure that we approach the issue in the right way,” he said.

Andi Friedman, abortion rights activist and board member of Personal PAC, an Illinois-based non-partisan committee for reproductive rights, serves on the seven-member female board. “We are there so that these men can run ideas by us before going forward, and to make sure we’re all on the same page,” she said.

After hearing Friedman speak at an event for New Leaders Council, a nonprofit that trains progressive political activists where she was a fellow in 2015, Jacobson decided he wanted to take a more active stand for women’s rights.

“I was shocked by how little I knew about the legislation governing abortion,” Jacobson said. He thought that if a man like him, who has been actively and regularly engaged in a host of political causes, knew so little about the scores of bills limiting access to abortion and the number of women who are affected by those bills, chances that other men had any awareness about the cause would remain slim.

“Oren came to me and asked, ‘How could I not have known?’ ‘What can I do?’” Friedman said. She went on to introduce him to Terry Cosgrove, head of Personal PAC, who has long been at the forefront of pro-choice activism. With Cosgrove, Jacobson started mobilizing other men in Chicago, reaching out to politically-engaged friends, acquaintances and local elected officials. Ten founding members took up the first organizational efforts and last November, 50 men came together over a happy hour that officially launched Men4Choice.

“Their enthusiasm was striking,” Friedman said. “It was great to see this group of men who are excited to have a place in which they can have a conversation on reproductive freedom, without feeling like they are infringing on someone else’s space.”

Illinois Senator Daniel Biss (D-9th) is one of the local elected officials who decided to support and engage with Men4Choice. Biss is adamant that men have an obligation to stand up for women’s rights. For a fight for justice and equality to be successful, he said, it is important that the group taking up the cause be diverse, and not limited to those directly affected by the issue.

“It’s a responsibility for us men not to treat issues of reproductive choice like it’s someone else’s

problem,” Biss said. His latest legislative efforts in Illinois include sponsoring a Health Care Right of Conscience Bill that would expand health care access options for women in the state.

On why they are pro-choice, the members of Men4Choice are unanimous. “I don’t think the government should be involved in women’s own medical decisions,” said Oliver Serafini, co-founding member of the organization. “Which is ironic, because it sounds like a conservative thing to say, that the government should not be involved in people’s lives. But it’s just so paternalistic to propose to restrict access to abortion. Only women can get pregnant, and these types of proposals only hurt their medical reality.”

Biss said the government is “inappropriately intrusive” in women’s issues. “The question is who has the responsibility to make medical choices for a woman,” the senator said. “She has it.”

For Jacobson, it is unacceptable that overwhelmingly male legislators should have the ability to tell women what they can and cannot do. “If I were in someone else’s shoes, would I want the ability to make my own decisions?” he asked. “These legislators don’t know that a plurality of women who choose to make a choice, do that in their families’ best interest.”

Jacobson said Men4Choice is planning to expand beyond its original core group of politically-engaged supporters to reach and activate more men outside the local political circle. For 2016, the organization plans to host political rallies and create an educational forum on reproductive rights, especially as the nation prepares to elect a new president, whose policies will likely have an impact on reproductive freedom. As a longer-term goal, the organization intends to direct its educational efforts toward local college campuses.

Serafini said the main outreach tool in this first formative phase for the organization will be social media. “We are planning to create lots of digital content and lean primarily on that,” said the 34-year-old Chicago native. Facebook was Men4Choice’s first outlet “to get the men’s eyes on the issue,” he said. The group’s page currently has more than 1,000 followers.

No matter who, why and how many members, the guys at Men4Choice care that their role in the fight for women’s reproductive rights be made clear from the start.

“We’re trying to be sensitive to the reality of the cause and making sure that we’re engaging in a way that matters for anyone who is not directly impacted,” Jacobson said. “Our role is that of unconditional support. We’re followers, not leaders. We can only lead other men to follow.”

The enthusiasm among this “small group of guys,” as Jacobson refers to Men4Choice, is palpable.

“I think the future is bright for us,” Serafini said.

Photo at top: Men4Choice founding members Ben Head (first from left) and Nathaniel Meadow (second from right)

came out in support of reproductive choice at a Planned Parenthood Roe v. Wade Celebration Fundraiser on the Near West Side in January. They are pictured here with State Sen. Daniel Biss (second from left), 8th Congressional District Democratic candidate Raja Krishnamoorthi (center) and State Rep. Will Guzzardi (first from right). (Oliver Serafini/Men4Choice)

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