

FEMINIST VISIONS

HONORING THE FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF BIRTH CONTROL

by Phyllis Holman Weisbard

THE DEFENDERS: A HISTORY OF THE BIRTH CONTROL MOVEMENT IN WISCONSIN. 93 mins. Directed by Emily Rumsey & Dawnee Dodson. Executive Producer: Deborah Hobbins. Trilobyte Pictures Productions (<http://trilobytepictures.com/>) for Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, 2006. DVD purchase: \$25.00.

Women may no longer strap weasel testicles to their thighs to prevent pregnancy, as *The Defenders* notes they resorted to in the Middle Ages, but their access to full reproductive health services has not come easily and continues to require vigorous defending. That is the theme of this new DVD commissioned by Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin in commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the organization's founding in 1935. Though focused on, and related by, the dedicated staff and supporters of Wisconsin's Planned Parenthood (PP) affiliate, the story told in *The Defenders* is set in a broader historical context through commentary by historians Linda Gordon (New York University, formerly of University of Wisconsin–Madison) and Judith Houck (University of Wisconsin–Madison). They stress that women have always tried to prevent pregnancies and to induce miscarriages in problematic situations, as fraught with danger as their self-inflicted methods were. Houck says that birth control and abortion were of a piece in the nineteenth century, when abortion was no crime as long as it occurred early, essentially before “quickening.” Gordon discusses how the situation changed with the passage of the federal Comstock Act in 1873, followed by “Little Comstock” laws in the states that lumped birth control information and devices in with obscene material, making them illegal to sell, send through the mail, have in one's

possessions, or give away. The Wisconsin statute was the last of the Little Comstocks to be repealed, which the video shows only happened in 1976 after more than a decade of lobbying by PP advocates and the efforts of their principal ally in the State Assembly, Fred Risser, who authored the bill. The film discusses the founding of the American Birth Control League, the precursor of PP, by Margaret Sanger in 1921, and of the likeminded Maternal Health Center in Milwaukee by obstetrician Florence Edith McCann just fifteen years later. In the 1940s, the League and its affiliated centers around the country adopted the term “planned parenthood,” which they thought sounded more neutral than “birth control.”

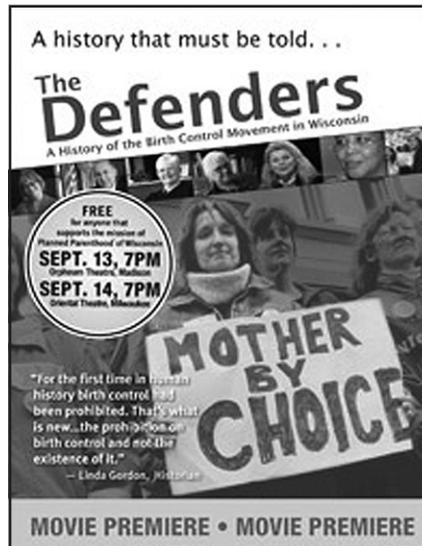
Wisconsin PP really took off after Margaret Miller was hired as its first executive director in 1964. Under her fifteen-year stewardship, the organization grew from one tiny clinic to a network of clinics throughout the state, unified in a statewide office based in Milwaukee. Clips from a 1994 interview with Miller, who died in 2003, are one of the touchstones of the film, demonstrating how critical it is for organizations to preserve their history through documenting their leaders. Many former PP nurses, counselors, and board members were interviewed for *The Defenders*. Footage of them speaking engagingly in their present-

day personas is interspersed with still photographs of their younger selves at work, in meetings, and at rallies. Fran Way, for example, speaks with pride of the nurse practitioner training program started in 1972, of which she was the first director, which became a model for other clinics nationwide. Under the general supervision of a medical doctor, trained nurse practitioners thereafter performed examinations and many of the other tasks that were formerly the exclusive domain of physicians. It was also Way who provided a simple solution to the problem that under Wisconsin law at the time, birth control could not be dispensed to unmarried people. She suggested to Margaret Miller that they not inquire about marital status, since such inquiry was not required by law, and with Miller's agreement, the clinic stopped asking.

Before state anti-abortion laws were overturned by the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), the video reminds viewers, it was possible for some women to get “therapeutic” abortions if they were deemed necessary by psychiatrists. In reality, this avenue was mainly available to women of means; they also had the wherewithal to seek out relatively competent underground abortionists in Wisconsin and out-of-state. It was therefore poor women for whom pregnancy terminations were most dangerous. Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin offered referral informa-

tion to such women. Bonnie Bockl Joseph relates how she started Problem Pregnancy Counseling Service for abortion counseling and referral as a separate entity from Planned Parenthood when, under threat of a lawsuit, it became too suspect to offer the counseling in the clinic. A particularly gripping moment in the video comes when Bea Kabler tells how she learned, long after she became a devoted Planned Parenthood nurse and advocate, that her own mother's death, when Bea was still a child, had been the result of a botched abortion.

Other highlights of *The Defenders* are interviews with supporter and Marquette University theology professor Daniel Maguire, S.T.D. (author of *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions*, Oxford University Press, 2003); with a vibrant African American teen peer counselor, and with a young, unmarried patient who was supported by PP in her choice to carry a pregnancy through to birth; the scenes of Milwaukee Clinic Protection Coalition (MCPC) members escorting and defending patients coming to the PP clinic during the summer of 1992, when Milwaukee was the target of a national anti-choice campaign; and the January 2004 opening in Mad-



ison of a comprehensive health clinic in a building wholly owned by PP.

The film is expert from a technical perspective. Though not originally intended for a classroom audience, it works well from both historical and contemporary activist perspectives. At 93 minutes, it's a bit long for a college class session, however. Nevertheless, I would recommend it over an available 26-minute version (*Film Party: The Defenders: A Vision. A Mission. A Legacy*) that is more appropriate for its intended fundraising purpose. Instructors will also need to supplement by covering the important federal Supreme Court decisions *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), which invalidated

the prohibition of providing contraceptive information and devices to married persons, and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* (1972), which extended the right to receive birth control information and devices to unmarried people, neither of which is mentioned in *The Defenders*. (Gordon mentions *Roe v. Wade*, but mainly to emphasize that abortion is regulated on a state-by-state basis.) Also, the only hint shown of internal dissension within Wisconsin PP comes over the decision to offer abortion services, and there may be more to be pointed out in a classroom setting about internal struggles within this and other organizations.

As mentioned above, Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin developed a model training program for nurse practitioners. Likewise, its video *The Defenders* can serve as a model for PPs in other states that want to honor their leaders and to remind the public of the forgotten history of birth control and the critical need to keep all reproductive health services safe, legal, affordable, and available to all.

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