

## The Jane Collective (1969–1973)

The Jane Collective was an underground organization that provided illegal abortion services in Chicago, Illinois, from 1969 until abortions became legal in 1973. Formally called the Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, the Jane Collective was a member organization and working group within Chicago Women's Liberation Union that challenged the Illinois state legislature by providing abortions before they were legal in the US. The organization, commonly referred to as Jane, was founded by women's liberation activists in Chicago in 1969 to reduce the number of unsafe and expensive abortions being performed by unqualified providers. It is estimated that from 1969 to 1973 the Jane Collective provided nearly twelve thousand abortions. The Jane Collective was a healthcare initiative and a political education project that provided abortion and reproductive healthcare solutions to thousands of women and brought attention to the many unsafe illegal abortions done in Chicago.

In the years leading up to *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, obtaining an abortion in the US was often expensive, unregulated, and unsafe. Those that provided illegal abortions often had no medical training and used dangerous and unsanitary techniques that could cause severe medical complications, including infections and death. Other illegal abortion providers included trained physicians and midwives who risked losing their medical licenses. Getting an abortion by a trained healthcare professional was very expensive and often arranged secretly. Members of the Jane Collective included physicians, midwives, and individuals with no medical background.

The Jane Collective began as a referral service for students seeking abortions at the University of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois. In 1965, Heather Booth, a university student involved in the civil rights movement, had a friend in need of an abortion. Booth found a doctor to perform the abortion for her friend. After her friend's abortion, Booth continued to refer other students in need of abortions to the physician. Soon, Booth was overwhelmed with numerous requests.

Along with Booth, another anonymous founder of Jane, whom historian Laura Kaplan refers to as Jenny, played a role in the founding of the organization. Jenny had sought an abortion during the late 1960s. At the time, because abortion was illegal, the only way to have a legal abortion was to obtain doctor and hospital permission, granted through a hospital's therapeutic abortion committee. If the abortion was deemed necessary for therapeutic reasons because the pregnancy endangered the woman's life, then the woman could undergo the procedure. However, that was extremely rare. According to historian Kaplan, Jenny struggled to get permission for her abortion even though she had cancer and the pregnancy would endanger her health. Eventually, Jenny was granted permission for an abortion. However, in an interview Jenny stated that she was displeased with the lack of women involved in her abortion process and the fact that male physicians and hospital boards controlled her reproductive rights.

In 1967 several women, including Booth and Jenny, created a group called the Service, which provided abortions to women of all races, ages, and social classes without requiring them to provide an explanation for their requests. The group was composed of mostly homemakers living in the Hyde Park area of Chicago, as well as students at the University of Chicago. The Service evolved into the Jane Collective over the course of several months, becoming a formal referral service. Originally, the abortion providers working for the Jane Collective were all individuals who claimed to be physicians. While some had formal medical training, members discovered that many of them were not professionally trained in medicine and because of that, activist members of the Jane Collective began educating themselves on how to perform abortions.

To provide more abortions to more women, members of the Jane Collective were trained by a gynecologist on abortion techniques. Several historians refer to a specific gynecologist who risked his medical license to continue do post-operative checkups with the patients of the Jane Collective. The doctor had trained at Cook County Hospital in Cook County, Illinois, where he was frequently faced with female patients suffering the consequences of back alley abortions with dangerous complications. The methods they were taught included the dilation and curettage method for early abortions, which involved the use of placenta and fetus extraction using a curette. Likewise, Jane Collective members were taught the super coil method, which caused a woman who was in a later state of pregnancy to miscarry. According to Reagan, the members of the Jane Collective formed an alternative female healthcare system and slowly gained control over the quality and prices of criminal abortion in Chicago by offering less expensive abortions with no judgement.

By 1969, the Jane Collective was formally known as the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, a citywide coalition that offered a variety of services. The Union advertised healthcare and abortion services through underground publications and school newspapers and most women heard about the abortion services through word of mouth. When the Union received phone calls from women seeking help for an unwanted pregnancy, members gave the caller a local phone number and told them to ask for Jane. After leaving a message, a Jane Collective representative would contact the woman. The Jane Collective would take the woman's medical history and make arrangements for the woman to meet with an abortion counselor who would give her more details on having an abortion through the agency.

When one visited the Jane Collective for a scheduled abortion, Jane Collective members instructed women to meet at the Front, a code name for one of the two apartments the Jane Collective operated. The Front served as the waiting room, where family, friends, and significant others could watch TV and enjoy cookies provided by the organization. The members of the Jane Collective also provided childcare services for mothers who could not arrange for anyone to care for their young children while they had their abortion.

At the Front, members prepared the woman for her abortion by taking her temperature, explaining the procedure, and providing antibiotics to prevent bacterial infections. Additionally, members provided the patients with pamphlets containing information on what actions they should take if they experienced complications with the abortion. After meeting at the Front, members of the Jane Collective transported women in cars to an apartment at a different location where they underwent an abortion. At the second apartment, the women were given local anesthetic and had their abortions while a counselor comforted the woman and held her hand during the procedure.

Throughout its four years of operation, the Jane Collective provided health care, counseling, and abortion services to thousands of women in Chicago. According to Reagan, between 1969 to 1973, the Jane Collective provided nearly twelve thousand abortions. Additionally, the members of the Jane Collective created a charity fund to help low income women afford abortions. That charity eventually became the Chicago Abortion Fund. According to Reagan, the Jane Collective also provided means for women to become empowered and take control of their own bodies. During consultation appointments, Jane Collective members had their patients use hand held mirrors to examine their cervixes and members provided patients with self-examination techniques so they could better understand their bodies and reproductive anatomy. Reagan states that instead of distancing themselves from their patients as many male doctors did, Jane Collective members communicated with their patients as equals or as sisters.

Despite the popularity of the Jane Collective, some women were concerned with the level of care provided by the Collective. According to Reagan, those women were skeptical of their standard of care for their abortion services and the casualness of the organization. Additionally, according to Reagan, some women would have preferred medical offices and white coat uniforms to reassure them that they were getting good medical care. Others saw the Jane Collective as a counterculture operation that established a health care system run by feminists and rejected male authority over women's reproductive health matters. According to historian Kaplan, the Jane Collective eliminated the profit in illegal abortion by lowering prices and making abortion more accessible to all women. Likewise, Kaplan argues that the organization let women control unwanted pregnancy and eliminated the judgment of male physicians.

While in operation, Jane Collective members warned their members of the high police surveillance of abortion crimes and in the four years of operation, the group's offices were only raided once by the police in 1973. When raiding the Jane Collective's offices, according to reporter Ron Grossman, police wanted to arrest the doctor behind the illegal abortions and could not understand that the members of the Jane Collective performed the abortions themselves. No patients were arrested, but seven members of Jane were arrested, known as the Jane Seven. The Jane Seven were indicted by a grand jury in 1973, however their case did not go to trial because the same year, the Supreme Court legalized abortions in *Roe v. Wade*. After the legalization of abortion in 1973, the Jane Collective disbanded.

## Sources

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