

words of choice

DYNAMIC PRO-CHOICE THEATER

Discussion Guide

How to Use Words of Choice

The feature presentation in *Words of Choice* -- a collection of dramatic and comic "shorts" by a dozen writers and performed by three actors -- lasts one hour. The DVD also has 3 additional shorts, interviews with audience members and writer Cindy Cooper, and a web link.

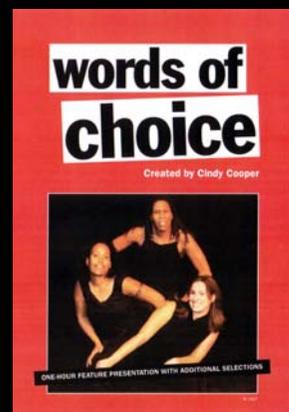
Words of Choice is most beneficial when joined with a discussion. A screening of the DVD is an opportunity for people to reflect upon their own thoughts and opinions on the issues addressed. *Words of Choice* is an exceptional tool for activists, educators, students and theater groups, or for anyone seeking to broaden discussions of reproductive freedom and examine it from a new and unique perspective.

Words of Choice can be used by any of the following groups: clinics, congregations, counseling centers, educators, faith-based study groups, GLBTQ groups, medical students, pro-choice advocates, sororities and theater groups. Potential uses for a *Words of Choice* screening include:

- Activist trainings
- College classrooms
- Drama therapy
- Fundraisers
- House parties
- Lobbying

At each screening, it is helpful to photocopy and pass around "The Facts Behind the Stories," a two-page factsheet which provides background information on each *Words of Choice* segment. This document can be downloaded from the Words of Choice website, www.wordsofchoice.org.

Words of Choice is a collection of powerful and passionate stories from the heart which touches upon many choice issues: emergency contraception, sexual assault, unintended pregnancy, abstinence education and bans on safe abortion procedures. The information below is meant to serve as an introduction to these issues. Resources for further exploration follow.



Words of Choice

Created by Cindy Cooper
Co-adapted with Suzanne Bennett
Directed for stage by Joan Lipkin
Directed for film by Linda Haskins

Performed by:
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Jacqueline Masei
Kimberly C. Mason

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DYNAMIC PRO-CHOICE THEATER

Dear Friends,

I began *Words of Choice* because I saw a gap in the way that newspapers and media talked about “hot button” issues like contraception, abortion, pregnancy and sexuality, and the way people experience these matters in their daily lives.



I remember talking to friends about personal issues they were facing. None of their stories fit into an easy slot. Their lives were brimming with complex emotions, histories and needs; their tales were unique, even as they walked through passages shared by many others.

But when I read the day’s paper, the only story that touched their concerns was about politics, and came down to who stood for what slogan. It was as if their lives were invisible. Real people’s stories, with all the humor, poignancy and range of feeling, were distant whispers. I wondered how people -- or lawmakers -- could possibly develop informed opinions with such limited discourse. *Words of Choice* is the result.

I wanted to break open the conversations on choice issues. I collected selections from many wonderful writers, and arranged, excerpted, organized them. *Words of Choice* came alive on stages as a theatrical presentation and across the country ensembles of actors share these stories, filled with laughter, sadness and irony. Discussions after each show expand the dialogue.

This DVD adaptation of *Words of Choice* allowed us to go one step further. We added historic photographs and included interviews from audience members (and me). This Discussion Guide, carefully developed, adds fresh and creative approaches for additional reflection.

To me, “choice” encompasses the decision of whether and when to bear children and the ability to raise children in a safe and healthy environment. Freedom is precious, and none more so than reproductive freedom. I hope *Words of Choice* and this guide will engage your hearts and your heads, your imagination and your minds.

We’d love to hear your responses. You can email us at wordsofchoice@mindspring.com.

Best regards,
Cindy Cooper
Creator, Words of Choice
New York City

DVD Feature Presentation:

Introduction

by Justice Harry Blackmun

My Good Friend Roe

by Sherica White

A Father’s Story (excerpt)

from *The Choices We Made* by Angela Bonavoglia

You’re On Your Own

by Michael David Quinn

She Said – Before 1973 (excerpt)

by Judith Arcana

Approximating Mother (excerpt)

by Kathleen Tolan

Remembering

by Emilie Townes

Kathy/Parallel Lives (excerpts)

by Angela Bonavoglia and Kathy Najimy

What I Said to Congress

from testimony on a proposed abortion ban

SCHIPS

by Cindy Cooper

To Hell and Back

by Emily Lyons, R.N. (www.EmilyLyons.com)

Taco Bell Launch (excerpt)

from *The Onion*

Blessed (excerpt)

by Alix Olson

Additional Selections:

Joey (excerpt)

by Joan Lipkin

They Say (excerpt)

from *The War on Choice* by Gloria Feldt

Tru Luv

by Cindy Cooper

Interview with Cindy Cooper

Playwright and Producer

Audience Interviews:

Jana Mackey (NOW, Kansas); Marci Francisco (Kansas State Senator); Sylvie J. Rueff and Barbara Duke (Pro-Choice Activists).

Post-Screening Discussion Questions

1. What is one new thing that you learned from *Words of Choice*? What concerns already familiar to you were brought to mind? Share answers with your neighbor and, if willing, the larger group.
2. One week from now, what do you think you will remember from *Words of Choice* and why?
3. In the final piece, "Blessed", writer Alix Olson vows to keep one hand on her head, one on her heart. What in *Words of Choice* touched your heart; what touched your head?



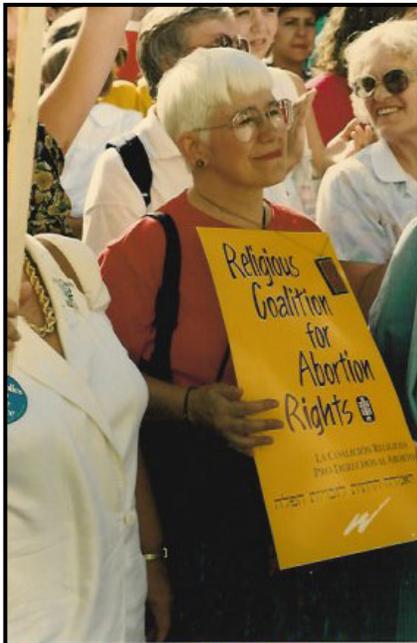
4. In "Remembering," Emilie Townes talks about the "sometimes-true," "half-true" and "true-true" -- lessons she assembled from the stories of women's lives. What myths or "old wives' tales" did you hear growing up? What myths and stories are young women and men hearing today? What tips do you have to distinguish the "half-true" from the "true-true"?
5. "She said – before 1973" was written by Judith Arcana, a volunteer with the Chicago-based Jane abortion counseling service that operated before *Roe v. Wade* overturned criminal bans on all abortion services. Several Jane members were arrested, and in countries around the world, such as Chile, women are still imprisoned for illegal abortions. If abortion were to become illegal again in the United States, what would women do?

6. The testimony featured in "What I Said to Congress" is about a proposal to ban a medical procedure. Who should decide on the appropriateness of a medical procedure...a doctor, medical association, the patient, legislators? What would it mean if someone needed this procedure and it were banned? What would a wealthy woman do? What would a poor woman do?

Exercises Outside The Classroom / Screening

1. *Roe v. Wade*

Words of Choice begins with a short excerpt from *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 legal decision written by Justice Harry Blackmun which recognized a right to privacy and prevented states from making abortion illegal in all circumstances. What does the text of the *Roe v. Wade* decision say? Find a copy of the decision online, or an excerpted version. (An excerpted version is available at: www.reproductiverights.org/pdf/roeprivacy.pdf.) Mark sections that are interesting or unexpected. Bring your selections to the class or group discussion. Read excerpts aloud and discuss.



2. *To Hell and Back: Emily Lyons, R.N.*

To Hell and Back is the text of a speech given by Emily Lyons to Planned Parenthood. Had you ever heard of Emily Lyons? Look up Emily Lyons on the Internet. What more do you learn? What else do you see? Why isn't her story more well-known? What was her husband's reaction? Why is there so much violence surrounding abortion, and why is it sometimes excused or ignored?

Editorial

LERNER PAPERS, 5/7/72

Legalize abortion

JUDY PILDES is one of those women strongly motivated to help others. Apparently she is not averse to disobeying rules or violating the law when she thinks that is the only way she can help.

Two years ago the North Sider was fired from Niles Township High School for breaking the rules and this week she was among seven women arrested for operating a low-cost abortion counseling and abortion service.

Police say women seeking the service were charged about \$100 each. While Mrs. Pildes has so far refused comment on the arrests, others familiar with the service say that many patients were charged less and some were charged nothing.

There is a need for such a low-cost service. The problem is that abortions are still illegal in Illinois. Wealthy women are able to obtain abortions either by flying to New York and other states with liberalized abortion laws or even, we understand, by paying high fees at prestigious Chicago area hospitals.

The reason this inequity exists, and the reason these women were arrested, is that State's Atty. Edward Hanrahan obtained a stay (delay) in a court ruling that found Illinois' antiabortion law unconstitutional. Hanrahan is appealing the ruling to the U.S.

Some churches are opposed to it and others are for it. Yet the law makes it illegal, even for those whose religion permits it and those without religion, to obtain medical abortions locally.

Feminists argue that current abortion laws are maintained by chauvinistic men who either don't fully appreciate the problems or who wish to keep women in a subservient role.

We partly agree. There are as many fathers of unwanted children as there are mothers. They, too, have the right to avoid parenthood if they wish, and the current law discriminates against men with equal injustice.

The arrests of the seven women underscores the need for removing the archaic abortion laws from the books. The best way to do this is not state by state, which just causes more economic inequity, but on a nationwide basis. We think abortion laws are unconstitutional, and we hope the U.S. Supreme Court so rules this term.

Should it not, Congress should legalize abortions. We respect those who, for religious or other reasons, oppose legalized abortion. We do not advocate abortion.

We do advocate allowing each woman to decide for herself, and enabling poor women as well as rich women to have licensed doctors terminate their pregnancies.

Group Exercises

1. Analyzing Rhetoric (10 minutes)

“You’re on Your Own” points out irony in the “pro-life” perspective. Brainstorm on what words and phrases are used by the “Religious Right.” Write these on a big chart as they are called out. Do the same for the “pro-choice” perspective. Compare the two sets of words and phrases. How are they different? Do some appeal more than others? Why or why not?

2. Writing a Monologue (15 minutes)

“Approximating Mother” by Kathleen Tolan is the story of a teenage girl who is six months pregnant. Write a monologue from the perspective of one of the characters in the piece.

Imagine you are one of the following:

- Jen, the pregnant girl
- Brena, the girl’s friend
- Sylvia, the counselor
- A character who is on the periphery of the story (Jen’s mother, the potential adopting parent, the baby’s father)

Visualize the person you have chosen and write a short description of who she (or he) is. How does she look? What is her daily life? From the perspective of that person, write a short monologue (a speech made by one person speaking his or her thoughts aloud). What is this person thinking, but might not reveal to others? Use your imagination freely. Write for 4-5 minutes. Volunteers can read their monologues to the group or have someone else do so.

3. Spoken Word Exercise (5 minutes)

This easy exercise will create a spoken word piece with input from everyone in the room. “Spoken word” is a performance style in which lyrics, poetry or stories are spoken creatively rather than sung. Hand out index cards. Each person writes on one, in ten words or less, what “reproductive freedom” means to her. Collect the cards and arrange them on a table. Ask one person to read out loud each of the cards in a flowing sequence. Now rearrange the cards and ask another volunteer to read them to the group. What do they tell you about reproductive freedom?

Helpful Facts and Statistics

- More than one in three American women have an abortion at some point in their lives.
- 280,000 teens under the age of 18 become pregnant each year in the U.S.
- There are 6 million pregnancies in the U.S. annually; half of these are unintended.
- Approximately 1.3 million women in the U.S. have abortions every year.
- Almost 9 of 10 sexually active women use some type of contraception.
- Emergency contraception (the “morning-after pill”) prevents pregnancy in 89% of cases.

Source: www.guttmacher.org/in-the-know

Group Exercises (continued)

4. Group Poetry Exercise (10 minutes)

Before the exercise, a discussion leader cuts out 25 to 30 words from magazines (examples: women, body, choice). Divide the room into groups of five or six. Ask each group to choose 10-12 words. Instruct the groups to create a poem related to reproductive freedom by arranging the words with input from everyone in the group. Extra words may be added, if necessary. Once the poem is complete, the group must decide how to present the poem to the room. For example, each person could read a section of the poem or each person could read the poem once through. Encourage the groups to be as creative as they'd like with their poem and presentations.

5. Unintended Pregnancy Exercise (15 minutes)

Divide the room into three groups. Assign each group one of the following characters:

- A single woman, age 25
- A married woman, age 40, with one child
- A teenage girl, age 16, living with her parents

Ask each group to spend a few minutes imagining details about the woman assigned, such as her name, where she lives, her income-level, occupation, religion and position on abortion. One person should write down this information. Announce to the groups that each woman is unexpectedly pregnant. Ask them to answer the following questions:

- What are the questions she should consider regarding her pregnancy? Draw up a list.
- Who or what else will have an impact on her decision whether or not to continue the pregnancy?
- To whom can she turn for help and support?
- Report back to the larger group on your answers to these questions and what was unexpected.

6. Interview and Storytelling Exercise (25 minutes)

"A Father's Story" is based on an interview in "The Choices We Made: Twenty-Five Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion" by Angela Bonavoglia. This book highlights how we can learn from each other's stories if we ask and offer to share them. Divide the room into pairs so that partners can interview each other about their sexuality education experiences. Partner A should ask the following questions and take notes on the answers: Where and when did you first learn about sex and sexuality? What kind of sex education was offered at your school, if any? What kinds of myths or misinformation did you believe when you were younger? Describe a specific incident or experience with as much detail as possible. After 5-7 minutes, switch roles so that Partner B asks the questions. Each person should then prepare a paragraph on her partner's experiences with attention to interesting details and quotes, if possible. Put the stories in the center of the table or in a bowl. Choose several stories and have volunteers read to the group.

What You Can Do

You may leave a screening of *Words of Choice* asking yourself what you can do in your community. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Get Informed - Visit a Planned Parenthood or local clinic. Speak with the volunteer coordinator to find out more about what they do. Research organizations in your community. What is their perspective on pregnancy, contraception and abortion? Contact people in your state legislature. Where do they stand on the issues you care about and what action have they taken? Inform others about what you have learned.
2. Support an abortion fund that helps low-income women in your community. The National Network of Abortion Funds (www.nnaf.org) provides a directory of members, as well as information on starting your own fund. Host a screening of *Words of Choice* as a fundraiser for your local abortion fund.
3. Survey the availability of emergency contraception in local hospitals and pharmacies. As of 2007, emergency contraception is required to be available for sale without a doctor's prescription at pharmacies in the United States for women age 18 and over. Ask your local pharmacies if Plan B (the name of the pill currently on the market) or another brand of emergency contraception is immediately available for purchase and what it costs. Make a list of pharmacies and post it on your website, MySpace or bulletin board.

Further Resources

On the Web:

NARAL Pro-Choice America: Choice Action Center
www.prochoiceamerica.org

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice: Steps to take to organize in your community and congregation
www.rcrc.org/getinvolved/organize.cfm

Back Up Your Birth Control – A campaign to help make emergency contraception (EC) more effective by making sure women know about it – and can get it in time. See their EC campus campaign and national day of activism. www.backupyourbirthcontrol.org

Choice USA – Tools for emerging pro-choice leaders including how to start a chapter, throw a party, request a training and take action.
www.choiceusa.org

Books and Guides:

The Choices We Made: Twenty-Five Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion
by Angela Bonavoglia

The Irish Journey - Women's Stories on Abortion
by the Irish Family Planning Association
www.ifpa.ie

Pregnant? Need Help? Pregnancy Options Workbook
www.gynpages.com/workbook

The War on Choice: The Right-Wing Attack on Women's Rights and How to Fight Back
by Gloria Feldt

Recommended to Inspire Your Creative Side:

The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life
by Twyla Tharp

WHAT IF? (Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers)
by Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter

Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within
by Natalie Goldberg

What You Can Do (continued)

4. Students and activists from a college in western Illinois interviewed people in their community about their reproductive choices after studying *Words of Choice*. They used the interviews to host a reading of local stories. Who in your community has stories waiting to be told? Edit the interviews and publish them in a 'zine. Do a reading at a local coffee house.

5. A group from Virginia organized a bus to the State capitol to oppose anti-abortion legislation after being inspired by a *Words of Choice* show. What issues are being debated in your state legislature? Organize a bus to your State capitol. Ask your state representative to meet informally on the issues you care about.

6. Use your creativity! *Words of Choice* developed out of Cindy Cooper's background as a playwright and journalist. How can you combine your creative side (art, music, writing or anything that helps you express yourself) with your interest in protecting and supporting reproductive freedom?



SUPPORT Words of Choice

Help take Words of Choice to colleges, universities and organizations and communities.

*Words of Choice, Inc. is a nonprofit 501c3 organization.
Donations are accepted via PayPal at www.wordsofchoice.org.*

*Words of Choice, Inc. is also a member of Fractured Atlas, a nonprofit service organization, which is authorized to accept donations on our behalf.
<https://www.fracturedatlas.org/site/contribute/donate/190>.*

Donations to 'Words of Choice, Inc.' are fully deductible to the extent permitted by law.

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