



PLANNED PARENTHOOD

interview with Pascale Bernard, *Vice President of External Affairs, Planned Parenthood of New York City*

photographs by Adam Fithers

RAVENOUS ZINE What inspired you to pursue your career path in social work and now at Planned Parenthood?

PASCALE BERNARD I come from an immigrant family. My mother emigrated from Haiti in 1960. She was a single mom of three who worked her way up from being a secretary to running the division of a community college where she was director of foreign student admissions. Her experiences as an immigrant always lived with her. On Thanksgiving and other holidays, our table was full with people from everywhere.

We lived in Boston in a big New England house with seven bedrooms and invariably, at any given time, at least one bedroom was occupied by someone who needed a place to stay. I come from a family that strongly believes in service to others and community service. The best way for me to help was to go into social work. I went to The School of Social Work at Fordham University. A wonderful

program. In my first year I did a lot of work where I felt like I was helping individuals, but I was sending them back into the same stressful world. I realized that if my choice was to change the individual or change the system, I was going to change the system. That was defining in my trajectory.

Working here at Planned Parenthood is my dream job. When I was at Fordham, I was a full-time graduate student with no health insurance. I have a pre-existing condition, endometriosis, and I had to go to the gynecologist every six months. Unfortunately we didn't have The Affordable Care Act at the time. I had a lot of bleeding and pain and I didn't know where to go. I ended up going to Planned Parenthood here in the city on Third Avenue and I got a prescription for birth control to regulate my cycle. It cost me 10-15 dollars. I was living on loans, my grandmother was feeding me, and the last thing I could afford to do was see a doctor. Planned Parenthood provided care no matter what. So I

think about the other young women out there who are in similar conditions to mine.

I am the one in four women who has had an abortion. The advocacy and political work of Planned Parenthood to keep abortions safe and legal allowed me to go on to college and have a successful career. It saved my fertility and I now have two amazing children and the resources to provide for them. Planned Parenthood and the work that it does has touched my life.

professor and I would always tell my students it's like in *Star Wars*: The Empire always strikes back. When you're pushing against power it always pushes back.

Under the Obama administration we were happy, it felt wonderful to have him in office. To a certain extent, reproductive rights were taken for granted. We now see power pushing back in these dangerous attacks on reproductive health care. You can never rest, you have to keep working, you

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RZ What would you say you've taken from your past work that you're now using here at Planned Parenthood?

PB One principal takeaway is to treat everyone with dignity and respect and to honor their humanity. There are times when we interact with people we view them one-dimensionally. I learned to accept people for who they are in their authentic selves, that's a huge lesson. The other lesson learned is that your power should be conceded to no one. You can't walk in and expect your rights to be handed to you. You need to constantly advocate for them as well as protect and preserve them. I was an adjunct

have to keep pushing, you have to keep trying to make things better. It's never perfect but we can't let perfect be the enemy of good. We just have to keep working at it.

RZ What does the term 'reproductive freedom' mean to you and your work at Planned Parenthood? How does the organization help to provide that freedom for patients and communities?

PB Reproductive freedom is more than just being pro-choice. It's really about having freedom over your body. One of the ways that the state controls people is through their bodies. So reproductive freedom means having



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control over if you have children, when you have children, and how you have children. It's about respecting your gender identity: who you love, how you love, when you love. It's also about having ownership of your body and being able to say "No, stop, I don't like that, I'm not comfortable with that. Don't do it." Reproductive freedom is about people respecting the decisions that you make for yourself.

At Planned Parenthood of New York City, reproductive freedom is really about helping our patients make the best informed

ful protests and events held in DC and on college campuses through the Planned Parenthood Action Network. What advice do you have for those who want to get together and do the work and for people who gather, on a more intimate scale? How can we collectivize and unite in order to do this activism work?

PB Call your local Planned Parenthood and tell them you want to be involved and they will connect you to the right person. We have opportunities for all people to take part in rallies and protests, but also on a local level there are so many things that can be done.

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decisions for themselves, whether that is with reproductive care, terminating a pregnancy, continuing a pregnancy, adoption, or with their gender identity expression. We endeavor to create a space for our patients, many of whom become activists, to be able to push against the system as it relates to reproductive justice. We provide opportunities for them to partner with us and to use their voice to elevate their personal stories as well as the work that we do here at PPNYC.

RZ We've seen large scale peace-

A lot of people say that we [in New York] are a Progressive state, and in a lot of ways we are, but when you look at how the state is treating women and women's bodies, there's definitely room for people to get more active. If someone is interested, the best way to get involved is to gather a group of friends. We can facilitate a workshop in your neighborhood. We want to meet your community and we will come to you.

We have activist counsels, made up of passionate men and women who believe in reproductive



health and justice, and believe in pushing back against the patriarchal rhetoric that is out there. They meet once a month, and cover different issues and activities. We bussed activists to DC during the Kavanaugh hearings to protest and help give voice to survivors. We have monthly volunteer nights. We have patient activists and our youth peer educators. Even for teenagers there's still a way to get involved. They learn about age-appropriate medically-accurate sex health education.

There are opportunities for people to write op-eds in their

ready to meet people where they are and determine what works best in their communities. Different strategies work in different areas and different spaces.

RZ One of Planned Parenthood's goals is to provide an honest, supportive, non-judgmental space to ask questions and make informed decisions about patient's health and wellbeing. With so many conditions related to women's and reproductive health historically receiving little attention/under-researched/misunderstood, what kind of guidance and research does Planned Parenthood advocate?

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neighborhood papers or sponsor a night with their friends where they talk about the work of Planned Parenthood. There are different ways for people to get involved with us. We welcome involvement in all five boroughs of NYC, and we have Planned Parenthood affiliates across the country.

Our organizing team is amazing. They are passionate, driven, and

PB We don't understand the depths that people will go to take away our rights. It is incumbent on all of us to fight for those rights. We have to not only fight for this generation but we have to fight for generations after us. As people look into what they can do to help— they can volunteer in a community center and teach civics. Because schools are not teaching civics anymore, and people don't know what their

rights are anymore. If you don't understand what your rights are, how can you fight for them? Right?

We have to educate everybody that a woman's right to her body is important, it should be protected, and it should be cherished. No one gets to decide what happens and doesn't happen to another person's body. Who she shares it with and who she doesn't. How many people she may want to share it with, without being shamed for it. I think it's really important. When we talk about patriarchy, sexism, racism, homophobia and transphobia, we can't assign the work to fight for the rights just to those

WHEN YOU SEE AN INJUSTICE, SPEAK UP. IF YOU'RE GONNA BE AN ALLY, BE AN ALLY.

specific groups. It's not the sole responsibility of people of color to handle racism, it's not the sole responsibility of LGBTQ people to fight for their rights. It's our collective responsibility. Women alone are not going to get rid of sexism. Black people and people of color alone are not going to get rid of racism.

If you're an ally, educate yourself, be present and don't be silent in the face of injustice. Speak up, not just when it's comfortable, speak when it's not comfortable! That's when things shift. Not when people are sitting around in their own bubbles with the same opinions and the same views. We want you to call it out when you're in the locker room and someone says something sexist. That's when you talk about it. Stand up for trans people not just when you're at the pride parade, but when you're in a situation when you see an injustice and it's time to speak up. If you're gonna be an ally, be an ally.

Learn more about PPNYC by visiting www.ppnyc.org and following on social media @PPNYCAction

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