

## Margaret Sanger – Our Founder

A trailblazer in the fight for reproductive rights, Margaret Sanger’s history is layered and complex

Our founder, Margaret Sanger, was a woman of heroic accomplishments, and like all heroes, she was also complex and imperfect. It is undeniable that Margaret Sanger’s lifelong struggle helped 20th century women gain the right to decide when and whether to have a child – a right that had been suppressed worldwide for at least 5,000 years (Boulding, 1992). Anticipating the most recent turn of the millennium, *LIFE* magazine declared that Margaret Sanger was one of the 100 most important Americans of the 20th century (*LIFE*, 1990) – along with Jane Addams, Rachel Carson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Albert Einstein, Henry Ford, Betty Friedan, Martin Luther King Jr., Alfred Kinsey, Margaret Mead, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jonas Salk, and Malcolm X<sup>1</sup> (Le Brun, 1990).



Motivated by a deeply held compassion for the women and children whose homes she visited around the world, Sanger believed that universal access to birth control would:

- Reduce the need for abortion – a common and dangerous method of family planning in her time;
- Save women’s and children’s lives;
- Strengthen the nuclear family;
- Lift families out of poverty;
- Increase the good health and well-being of all individuals, families, and their communities; and
- Help women gain their legal and civil rights.

Sanger was a true visionary. In her lifetime, she convinced Americans and people around the world that they have basic human rights:

- A woman has a right to control her body;
- Everyone should be able to decide when or whether to have a child;
- Every child should be wanted and loved; and
- Women and all people are entitled to sexual pleasure and fulfillment.

<sup>1</sup> In the hope of building new alliances, former President Guttmacher organized an informational meeting between the director of the Harlem clinic and Malcolm X in 1962 (Lepore, 2013, 131)

Sanger's battle for family planning was unrelenting, unyielding, and totally focused. Her crusade made it legal to publish and distribute information about sex, sexuality, and birth control. It:

- created access to birth control for, as she saw it, poor women, women of color, and immigrant women;
- spearheaded the development of contemporary safe, effective, and affordable oral birth control pills and other hormonal methods;
- became an early 20th century model for nonviolent civil disobedience, empowering the American civil rights, women's rights, anti-war, gay rights, and AIDS-action movements (King, 2008[1966], 6, 7); and
- helped promote new ideas about volunteerism and grassroots organizing in the U.S.

While she was a woman of heroic accomplishments, Margaret Sanger had some beliefs, practices, and associations that we acknowledge, denounce, and work to rectify today. Her life story provides a portrait that is bold, fascinating, formidable, human, complicated, and flawed.

## Sanger's Early Years

Margaret Higgins was born in 1879, in Corning, NY, in a time when women were expected to bear many children (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 22, 39) – even if it made them sick and old before their time, and even if it killed them (Reed, 1978, 40- 41). Six years earlier, the U.S. Congress had passed a law named after Anthony Comstock, a self-appointed anti-vice crusader from New York. Like the New York Comstock law of 1869, this new congressional statute made it illegal to publish and distribute information across state lines about sex, reproduction, or birth control anywhere in the U.S. on the grounds that they were obscene. By the end of the decade, nearly every state in the union had also passed its own "Comstock laws" (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 67-68).

Like millions of Americans of the day, Sanger's father, Michael, and her mother, Anne, had more children than they could afford to care for. Her family was often desperately poor and her mother often very ill. Sanger's father, a free thinker, taught her to defy authority. Her mother, a devout Catholic, taught her to accept it (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 39-40). Sanger was to take after her father (Bachrach, 1993, 14).

Sanger attended grade school at St. Mary's in Corning. She was ridiculed by other school children for wearing old and tattered clothing (Bachrach, 1993, 11), and she dreamed of ways to escape poverty (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 32). She couldn't have imagined that she would grow up to help families around the world escape poverty, too. When Sanger finished grade school, her older sisters, Mary and Nan, chipped in to send her to a private boarding school – Claverack College and Hudson River Institute in Hudson County, New York (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 30). But she had to leave that school to care for her mother. Exhausted from having 11 children and seven miscarriages (Whitelaw, 1994, 14), struggling with tuberculosis, Sanger's mother died in 1899 (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 30, 41).

In 1902, 22-year-old Sanger graduated as a practical nurse from White Plains Hospital in Westchester County, NY. It was a two-year program. She had planned to go on for a third year to become a registered nurse, but her plans changed. That spring she met the architect and painter, William Sanger. They were married that August (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 47-48). Within a year, two events occurred that set the stage for the dramatic struggle between Sanger and the government that would last her lifetime – Englishman Havelock Ellis published his landmark *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (Ellis, 1942 [1903]) and President Theodore Roosevelt made the eugenicist declaration that it was "race suicide" for white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon women to use birth control (Roosevelt, 1905, 4).

## An Emerging Activist

In 1911, the Sangers were deeply moved by the horrors of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire. One hundred and forty-six immigrant seamstresses had died in the first 15 minutes of the fire. Their exits had been locked by their employers to prevent them from taking breaks. The Sangers became active members of the workers' rights movement. They organized, and they marched. And they joined the socialist party (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 57), becoming friends with Emma Goldman, Sanger's early mentor in women's and reproductive rights. The Sangers embraced the three basic tenets of the labor movement:

- Workers have the right to form unions;
- Women who work the same jobs as men should get the same pay as men; and
- All people deserve a decent standard of living (Whitelaw, 20).

In the winter of 1911-12, Margaret rescued 119 children of workers from the violence of the textile mill strikes in Lawrence, MA (Sanger, 1938). The state's armed militia had been called out to keep 25,000 workers from organizing. About 50 percent of them were women. One woman was killed (Kornbluh, 1988, 1, 4). Sanger kept the children safe and sound and got them to temporary homes in New York City. She later spoke on their behalf at a congressional subcommittee in Washington, DC (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 75).

By 1912 (Sanger, 1938, 89), Margaret Sanger was also working as a visiting nurse on the Lower East Side of New York City. Many of the women she cared for were Jewish and Italian immigrants. Sanger would see 50 women at a time standing in line to get \$5 abortions because they had no access to birth control (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 62). She nursed women who were dangerously ill and at risk of death from attempts to give themselves abortions because they didn't have \$5 for the less dangerous alternative. The misery of these women reminded Sanger of her own childhood poverty, her mother's death from bearing

too many children, and her own struggle with tuberculosis – Sanger had caught it from her mother while caring for her during the last days of her life (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 47).

Sanger's experience as a nurse was galvanizing. It fortified what would become her lifelong commitment to help women escape the poverty, illnesses, and deaths that were caused by having too many pregnancies. She summed up the misery of all the women she nursed with her famous story about Mrs. Sadie Sachs. Mrs. Sachs had nearly died after a self-induced abortion. She asked her doctor how she and her husband, Jake, could avoid getting pregnant again. Sanger was horrified by the doctor's advice: "Tell Jack to sleep on the roof." Time passed. Sadie became pregnant again and tried to give herself another abortion. By the time Sanger got there, Sadie was in a coma. All Sanger could do was hold her hand as she died (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 63).

Profoundly stirred at Sadie's needless death, Sanger resolved to make the world safe for women. In her autobiography she said,

*"It was the dawn of a new day in my life. ... I went to bed knowing that no matter what it might cost ... I was resolved to seek out the root of evil, to do something to change the destiny of mothers, whose miseries were as vast as the sky" (Sanger, 1938, 92).*

## Taking Up the Banner for Sexual Health

Sanger vowed to find a way to do more than comfort women and their families as they died. She molded herself into an activist for social change with a goal for global transformation – every child wanted and loved, every woman in charge of her own destiny.

By the end of the year, she had published the first article of a series, “What Every Girl Should Know,” in *The Call*, a socialist monthly. She wrote frankly about how a woman’s body matures from girlhood through puberty. She wrote about women’s sexual and reproductive health. But she did not attempt to violate the federal and Comstock laws – she did not include information about contraception. She was censored anyway. In 1913, Anthony Comstock banned her column on the grounds that the words “syphilis” and “gonorrhoea” were obscene. When *The Call* next came off press, an empty box appeared in place of Sanger’s column. A headline in the box read: “What Every Girl Should Know – Nothing: by order of the U.S. Post Office” (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 65-66).

In the end, socialism disappointed her. Its leaders were not ready to rally to the idea that women have a right to decide when and whether to have children. Let down by her “comrades,” Sanger would eventually fall away from the doctrinaire socialist movement of her day. Her views evolved after World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the U.S. government’s increasingly anti-communist crusades. She moved from a class-based view of economics to one that was more centrist. She became a progressive who believed in reforming the capitalist system and building a strong social welfare state (Chesler, 2003, 2). But she would never forget the poor struggling American workers who were faced with too many mouths to feed. She would find a way to relieve their plight – on her own.

In 1914, Sanger decided to start her own paper. She called it *The Woman Rebel*. The masthead slogan of the first edition was “No gods. No masters” (Sanger, 1914, 1). She used her paper to defy the Comstock laws. She promised to publish all the information she could find about “birth control” – a phrase that she put into print for the first time (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 97). Defiance was the theme of her first edition. At the bottom of the back page was a little box. It read

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### *A Woman’s Duty*

*To look the whole world in the face with a go-to-hell look in the eyes; to have an ideal; to speak and act in defiance of convention* (Sanger, 1914, 8).

The federal government warned Sanger to stop publishing. She defied its warning, and she kept on writing, printing, and circulating copies of *The Woman Rebel* – through the U.S. mail. The government suppressed the March, May, and July issues and refused to let them be sent through the mail (Sanger 1938, 113). Sanger was arrested in August of 1914. The maximum sentence she faced was 45 years (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 99).

Three of the four charges she faced were for obscenity as defined by Comstock. The fourth was for inciting murder and assassination. She had published an article defending the assassination of tyrants, including contemporary American ones. And she had written an incendiary commentary in defense of violence taken in reprisal for the infamous massacre, at the behest of John D. Rockefeller, of 74 coal miners and their families, including 13 women and children, by the National Guard in Colorado (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 101-2).

Later in life, Sanger recalled her short-lived publication in this way,

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*“They tell me that *The Woman Rebel* was badly written; that it was crude; that it was emotional and hysterical; that it mixed issues; that it was defiant, and too radical. Well, to all of these indictments I plead guilty”* (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 140).

## Learning Her Craft

Sanger was given six weeks to prepare her defense. Instead, she wrote a little book on birth control, *Family Limitation* – in calculated defiance of Comstock (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 102).

*Family Limitation* described, with illustrations, the common forms of birth control available, although illegally, to women with more means than Sadie Sachs had had – condoms, chemical spermicides, douches, plugs, sponges, suppositories, withdrawal, and the new rubber diaphragm that was gaining popularity in countries like Holland, where contraception was legal (Sanger, 1916). Upper-class women heard about these methods in whispers from their doctors, their friends, and on their European travels. Sanger believed that poor women, like her Sadie, had a right to know about them, too. Women wanted to know. They may not have had \$5.00 for a dangerous abortion, but they were able to scrape together 25¢. With just a quarter, they could get a copy of *Family Limitation* and the information they needed to help them avoid unintended pregnancy. Soon published in 13 different languages, *Family Limitation* eventually sold 10 million copies and became the Bible of the early birth control movement (Bachrach, 1993, 35).

When the time came to face charges for publishing *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger's lawyer recommended that she plead guilty. Fearing that she would be given harsh penalties like those that were being handed down against her anarchist and socialist friends of the day, she decided to flee the country.

Her decision to become a fugitive of justice was a difficult one. Her increasing obsession with her work had estranged her from her husband, William, and she now had three children – Grant, Peggy, and Stuart (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 94, 103). But, as she wrote from Canada, on her escape to England:

“Dear Peggy, how my heart goes out to you. I could weep from loneliness for you – just to touch your soft chubby hands – but work is to be done, dear – work to make your fate easier – and those who come after you” (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 104).

In England, where the battle for the right to talk openly about birth control had already been won, Sanger supported herself with the royalties she received from *Family Limitation*. She got a flat near the British Museum where she made her home, day and night, studying the history of family planning. She learned that throughout recorded history, and not only on the Lower East Side of New York, it was common for women to resort to abortion, infant abandonment, and even infanticide to protect themselves and their families. She read everything she could find on birth control and sexuality and immersed herself in the writings of Thomas Malthus, John Stuart Mill, and Robert Owen (Sanger, 1938, 124–125). And she met with Havelock Ellis, who became her mentor – and her lover (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 120).

One of the world's first and foremost sexologists, Ellis promoted tolerance for sexual diversity and worked to reform repressive sex laws in England. He tried to convince society that sexual exploration by infants and adolescents, masturbation (Ellis, 1903, Part One – Auto-Eroticism, 238–9, 282–3), and homosexuality were all natural behaviors (Ellis, 1903, Part Four – Sexual Inversion, 355–6). Like Sanger, he believed that birth control was the key to sexual liberation (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 123).

While in Europe, Sanger also visited the Netherlands. She tried to meet with Dr. Aletta Jacobs, who had founded a nationwide network of birth control clinics there. Dr. Jacobs, however, refused to meet with Sanger because she was not a medical doctor, but Dr. Johannes Rutgers – Jacob's second-in-command,

who was very impressed with *Family Limitation*, took Sanger under his wing and explained to her the Dutch system – run by doctors and nurses, a model that she would later adapt for the United States (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 145).

## Campaigning for Birth Control

While Margaret Sanger was learning about human sexuality, sexual rights, and how birth control was provided in Europe, her estranged husband, William, was arrested by Anthony Comstock himself. In the privacy of his own home, William had handed a copy of *Family Limitation* to an undercover government agent posing as one of Margaret's needy friends. Comstock also participated in the prosecution of the case against William Sanger (Sanger; 1938; 176–177), and amidst much public outrage, William was found guilty. Asked to choose between paying a \$150 fine and going to jail for 30 days, William considered the effect on public opinion and chose jail. Two weeks later, Anthony Comstock died of pneumonia (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 127).

With her husband in jail, Comstock dead, and public opinion running strongly in her favor, Sanger decided to return home. She arrived in New York to great acclaim in October 1915 (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 128). But she was soon to find herself quite distressed as she looked for allies to rally to her defense.

In her absence, Sanger's former associates, Mary Ware Dennett, Clara Stillman, and Anita Block had taken charge of her files and subscription lists and formed the National Birth Control League. Now that she had returned, they told her that they had decided that they, and their organization, could not support or defend her methods of direct action, confrontation, and law breaking (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 130; Sanger 1938, 180).

But Sanger soon heard much more devastating news. On November 6, her four-year-old daughter, Peggy,

died of pneumonia – a loss Sanger was to mourn for the remainder of her life (Chesler; 1992; 133–134). During the winter of 1915, Margaret Sanger and her campaign for birth control became celebrated in the American press. Despite her grief over Peggy, Sanger launched a cross-country, whistle-stop tour to advocate for family planning. Sanger's fervor to spread and mainstream birth control led her to speak to any group interested in learning how to plan their reproduction. She spoke to groups from the Urban League (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 296; MSPP #28, 2001, 1), to the Junior League (Sanger, 1938, 420), and even to a women's auxiliary of the Ku Klux Klan in 1926 (Sanger 1938, 366).

**NOTE:** *In the 1920's, the KKK was a mainstream movement and was considered a legitimate anti-immigration organization with a wide membership that included many state and local officials. At that time, it defined its enemies as Blacks, Catholics and Jews. Planned Parenthood today denounces Sanger's address to the Ku Klux Klan.*

Wherever she spoke, women interested in the issues of free speech, feminism, and family planning established birth control advocacy organizations of their own – many of their volunteer-driven, grassroots organizations were the foundations for the Planned Parenthood affiliates and health centers of today. On February 16, 1916, Sanger, now the darling of journalists from coast to coast, appeared in court to hear that the charges against her for publishing and distributing *The Woman Rebel* had been dropped (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 140–41).

## Going to Jail

Although Comstock was dead, the laws that bore his name were very much alive. Sanger decided to challenge them once again. She had received a \$50 contribution from a woman who had heard her lecture in California. She used it to open a clinic



in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, NY – the first birth control clinic in America. Planned Parenthood proudly traces its origins to the events of that day – October 16, 1916 (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 149- 50).

The opening was announced in tri-lingual handbills – English, Italian, and Yiddish. The flyers urged women to come to Sanger’s clinic and learn how to avoid abortion by using birth control. Mothers with babies in their arms and in baby buggies lined up outside the doors before the clinic opened on the first day. Sanger and her staff – her sister, Ethel Byrne, a registered nurse; Fania Mindell, who spoke the three languages; and a social worker, Elizabeth Stuyvesant – were paid 10¢ for each consultation (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 150).

The clinic remained open only 10 days. One of the women they had advised was an undercover police agent. Sanger, Byrne, and Mindell were arrested and jailed. When Byrne launched a hunger strike, public indignation was brought to a boil (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 151-3). It burst when Sanger was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to 30 days in the Queens County Penitentiary – where she made sure to teach her fellow inmates about birth control (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 158).

While she was in prison, support for Sanger swelled enormously once again – not only in the New York press, but in communities across the country. By the time she was released, Sanger was a bona fide national celebrity with immense fundraising capabilities to serve the cause she so loved. (Sanger appealed her conviction and in 1918, won a major legal victory. Doctors, but not nurses, would now be allowed to prescribe birth control when medically indicated – the model she adopted as she built the modern family planning movement (Chesler; 1992; 159-60).)

## Wrestling with Population Control Issues

Sanger led the reproductive rights movement through

rapid advances in the years that followed her days in prison. In 1917, with Dennett and others, she founded *The Birth Control Review*, the first scientific journal devoted to the subject of birth control (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 165, 167). She herself edited *The Review* until 1929 (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 239). In her editorials for *The Review*, Sanger also tried to forge an alliance with another American movement – eugenics.

In the early 20th century, eugenics – the “science” of improving society through planned breeding – was a theory accepted by most American scientists and physicians. Eugenics was embraced across the political spectrum, from conservatives to socialists – so much was it embraced that it was taught in universities.

As their most basic belief, eugenicists held that careful “breeding” could improve the human race by limiting population growth and by reducing the frequency of undesirable genetic attributes, such as hereditary diseases. At their most malicious, eugenicists held that forced breeding or sterilization could either increase or decrease certain ethnic populations. In the 1920s, many eugenicists (who were largely white) applied their theory in racist fashion, falsely assuming that many ethnic groups were biologically inferior. Sanger was very clear that she would bear no confusion on that point in 1934 when she wrote:

“I admire the courage of a government that takes a stand on sterilization of the unfit and second, my admiration is subject to the interpretation of the word ‘unfit.’ If by ‘unfit’ is meant the physical or mental defects of a human being, that is an admirable gesture, but if ‘unfit’ refers to races or religions, then that is another matter, which I frankly deplore” (Katz, 1995, 47).

Sanger’s relationship with the eugenics movement was nuanced. Throughout most of her writing,

Sanger made her belief clear that the word “voluntary” was key to the pursuit of all eugenic ideals. She fundamentally believed that voluntary family planning was not only the essential first step toward equal rights for women, it was also essential for any attempt to slow rapid population growth or to reduce diseases and disabilities that were considered hereditary and untreatable during her lifetime. Although in some of her writing she held a strong prejudice against, and even exempted the mentally incompetent, from her strong belief in female autonomy, she otherwise refused, throughout her life, to give ground on her conviction that every woman had a right to make her own choices – especially about having children (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 343).

A good example of Sanger’s early attempts to reason with the leaders of the eugenics movement – and of her disappointment with them – is found in an article she wrote for *The Birth Control Review* in February 1919.

*“The eugenicist ... believes that a woman should bear as many healthy children as possible as a duty to the state. We hold that the world is already over-populated. Eugenists imply or insist that a woman’s first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state.*

*We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother. To this end we insist that information in regard to scientific*

*contraceptives be made open to all. ...*

*... Only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment” (Sanger, 1919, 11).*

She further argued this case in many of her dozen or so books, but particularly in *The Pivot of Civilization* (1922; MSPP #32, 2002/3, 2).

Still, Sanger endorsed the 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision, written by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in which the Supreme Court ruled that compulsory sterilization of the “unfit” was allowable under the Constitution. This decision enabled states to sterilize citizens deemed unfit without their consent and sometimes even without their knowledge. (A majority of states adopted involuntary sterilization policies, leading to over 60,000 sterilizations by 1967) (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 485). Planned Parenthood acknowledges this major flaw in Sanger’s views.

**NOTE:** *We denounce her endorsement of the Buck v. Bell decision as well as her involvement with the American eugenics movement and her adherence to some of its principles and values.*

Ultimately, Sanger was to become disappointed in the leaders of the American eugenics movement for their refusal to support every woman’s basic human right to self-determination. It wasn’t until the 1930s that U.S. eugenicists, shocked by the Nazi agenda, endorsed universal, voluntary birth control (Chesler; 1992; 217, 343).

## Standing Alone

The Catholic leadership and civil authorities in major cities in the U.S. made every effort they could to silence Sanger. In 1921, for example, she organized the first American Birth Control Conference, which



was held in New York City. During the conference, Sanger and Mary Winsor were arrested for attempting to address a mass meeting on birth control at the Town Hall Club. The arrests, which took place at the instigation of the Catholic archdiocese, provoked public protests that Sanger and Winsor were being denied their constitutional rights (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 200-201).

Public opinion swelled once more in her favor, and Sanger won the loyalty and financial backing of a growing number of educated women and men attracted to the birth control movement by the lectures she delivered around the world (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 205). In 1922, as Sanger emerged as the leader of the international birth control movement, she also founded the American Birth Control League. An ambitious new organization, the league's mission went beyond simply legalizing birth control. It embraced such global issues as slowing world population growth, bringing about disarmament, and ending world famine (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 223). Sanger was stepping into a gap left open by her old rival, Mary Ware Dennett. Dennett's National Birth Control League had disbanded in 1919 after she left it to found the Voluntary Parenthood League (VPL). Dennett identified three crucial goals for the VPL. The first was to change birth control laws through legislative process. The second was to establish birth control services without relying on medical professionals, who Sanger saw as critical gatekeepers for a national birth control program. The VPL also rejected Sanger's belief that birth control should be woman-controlled. It believed that men should be considered equal partners in contraceptive decision making (Chen, 1996, 212-14).

The Voluntary Parenthood League sputtered out of existence in 1927 without legislative accomplishment, but with a huge stock of unsold books about birth control laws, which nobody wanted to read (Chen,

1996, 244). Like Emma Goldman, Dennett eventually left the reproductive rights movement. Two decades before, Goldman had gone to Europe to do what she could to keep the impending World War from happening (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 236). Now, Dennett would return to her first love, arts and crafts. In a somewhat strange turn of events a few years later, Dennett, who so disdained Sanger's lawbreaking, was tried for obscenity herself. Though later found innocent on appeal, she was convicted in 1929 for publishing, in 1918, the highly successful pamphlet, "The Sex Side of Life – An Explanation for Young People" (Chen, 1996, 239, 281, 290).

In 1923, Sanger opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau on Fifth Avenue in New York (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 226). The staff was led by Dr. Hannah Stone. The research bureau dispensed contraceptives to women under licensed medical supervision and studied the effect of contraception upon women's health in order to broaden interpretation of the Comstock law and allow women to contracept for health reasons (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 279). (Existing laws allowed men to use condoms to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infection – but not for contraception (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 149).)

In 1928, Sanger's second husband, J. Noah Slee, who was profoundly devoted to her work, began to smuggle diaphragms – so-called "thimbles" – into the U.S. for her. The diaphragms arrived in Three-In-One Oil Company product shipments from Canada. (Slee later became the first legal manufacturer of diaphragms in the U.S.) (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 255) The smuggling of contraceptives eventually led, 10 years later, to *U.S. v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries* – one of Sanger's most significant legal victories for the reproductive rights movement (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 375).

## Holding Her Ground

Sanger's written prenuptial agreement with Slee was very unconventional for the time. She demanded that they live in separate residences in New York City; that they not have keys to the other's residence, that she keep her professional name, and that she would have her freedom to live as she liked, in all ways (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 248). Nevertheless, Slee was steadfast in his support of her. One example of his affection for Sanger had to do with the book she published 1928. It was a heartrending collection of letters she received from women who desperately pleaded for birth control information because they were in very dire situations of poverty and illness. The book was called *Motherhood in Bondage*. As powerful as it was, *Motherhood in Bondage* never found a readership and sales were poor. To spare her feelings, Slee bought up the unsold stock to make it appear to Sanger that her book was selling (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 267).

In 1929, Sanger was a figure of national and international acclaim, but she still met entrenched, highly organized, and relentlessly stubborn opposition. In Boston, for example, the Catholic hierarchy had authorities prevent her from speaking. In response, Sanger had Harvard historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, read her speech for her while she herself appeared on the stage with her mouth gagged. The press loved it, but though Sanger had the press on her side, the law – and the church – still opposed her (Chesler, 1992, 219).

That very year, the New York City police raided the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau. Physicians and nurses were arrested, and the clinic's supplies and confidential records were seized. But, just as it does today, the invasion in the confidential relationship between a doctor and a patient aroused protest and resulted in strong support from the medical profession and from community leaders. All the defendants were discharged, and the birth control issue became front-page news,

once again, throughout the country (Chesler, 1992, 283). Also in the same year, Sanger found time to create the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control to fight for the overturn of federal Comstock statutes (Chesler, 1992, 316).

The Catholic Church and the New York Police Department were not the only organizations to disapprove of Sanger and her work. In 1933, Nazi eugenicists in Germany showed their disdain for Sanger's pro-choice, egalitarian views by dramatically burning copies of her books, including *The Birth Control Review*, along with those by her mentor, Havelock Ellis, and those of his rival, Sigmund Freud. All were torn from the library shelves of the Institute for Sexual Science, which was founded and directed by Magnus Hirschfeld, Germany's leading sexologist. Thousands of books were ceremoniously ripped apart and tossed into a raging bonfire, made infamous by the movie-house newsreels of the day (MSPP #32, 2002/3, 2).

But Sanger was not easily intimidated. In 1935, she traveled to rural India in a failed attempt to dissuade Mohandas K. Gandhi from his abstinence-only stance on family planning. (Ironically, in 1952, India would become the first nation in the world to adopt family planning as part of its development program (Chesler, 1992, 364, 424, ¶ 2)).

It was in 1936 that Sanger was able to make a serious dent in the laws that stood in the way of the reproductive rights movement, and, after two decades of activism, she helped it achieve one of its greatest victories. Judge Augustus Hand, writing for the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in the case of *U.S. v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries*, ordered a sweeping liberalization of federal Comstock laws as applied to the importing of contraceptive devices. Judge Hand's decision, while it stopped short of finding the Comstock laws unconstitutional, found that birth control could be no longer classified as obscene, given contemporary data on the harm

done by unintended pregnancy and the benefits of contraception (Chesler, 1992, 372–373). (The youthful attorney, Harriet Pilpel, who assisted Morris Ernst in developing evidence for Sanger, would later become first general counsel for Planned Parenthood Federation of America (Chesler; 1992; 302; 435)).

It had been Sanger herself who instigated *One Package* by leaking information to the postal authorities about her request to have contraceptive pessaries shipped by her allies in Japan to her in the U.S. Sanger also found a donor to put up the money for the costs of the litigation (Chesler, 1992, 372–3).

In response to Judge Hand’s decision, and thinking that its objective to overturn federal Comstock laws had been realized, the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control disbanded (Chesler, 1992, 380). But its goal was not to be reached in Sanger’s lifetime. In the end, the *One Package* decision applied only to New York, Connecticut, and Vermont (Chesler, 1992, 375). It would take nearly 30 more years for the U.S. Supreme Court to find, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, that married couples throughout the country had a right to obtain contraceptives from licensed physicians. And it wasn’t until 1970 that the last of the Comstock laws were struck down. But in the years immediately following *One Package*, the ideas that made Sanger controversial ceased to be shocking and became entrenched in American public life (Chesler, 1992, 375–6).

## Responding to Black America

Finally, in 1937, the American Medical Association officially recognized birth control as an integral part of medical practice and education (Chesler, 1992, 374). And that year, North Carolina became the first state to recognize birth control as a public health measure and to provide contraceptive services to indigent mothers through its public health program.

Six other southern states soon followed suit (Reed, 1978, 254). But this victory was stained by racism and eugenicist manipulation, which became apparent to Sanger after she launched one of the final major projects of her career (MSPP #28, 2001, 3, 5).

In the mid-1930s, Sanger was inspired by President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and incorporated its new enthusiasm for social planning into her own agenda – encouraging family planning through voluntary, publicly funded contraception, and state support of children born to poor families (MSPP #28, 2001, 1).

Though applauded, wined, and dined by the social elites of her time, Sanger never forgot those who were marginalized through racial health inequities. In 1930, Sanger successfully opened a family planning clinic in Harlem, New York City, that was supported by black leaders like W.E.B Du Bois; Mary McLeod Bethune, the founder of the National Council of Negro Women (Joyce, 2010, 1); and Malcolm X (Lepore, 2013, 131). She hired an African American physician and an African American social worker to provide services. The clinic was endorsed by the city’s leading African American newspaper, *The Amsterdam News*, as well as by the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Urban League. Unlike now, during that period, opinion about birth control in the African American community was divided between those like Du Bois, who supported family planning, and Black nationalists like Marcus Garvey, who, along with African American fundamentalists, disagreed with any methods of limitation on family size (Chesler, 1993, 295–6).

A few years later, Sanger also established birth control clinics in the rural, poor South to serve largely African American women, and to find methods that would be cheaper and easier than the diaphragm for poor women to use (MSPP #28, 2001, 1).

In 1939, the American Birth Control League merged with the Clinical Research Bureau to become the Birth Control Federation of America (Chesler, 1992, 39). One of its first major undertakings was called the Negro Project, a pejorative sounding name to the contemporary mind but a commonly used term at the time, that was envisioned by Sanger. The historical record is clear about what Sanger had in mind. In her own words, Sanger believed that “poor African Americans of the South” were

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*“... a group notoriously underprivileged and handicapped to a large measure by a ‘caste’ system that operates as an added weight upon their efforts to get a fair share of the better things in life. To give them the means of helping themselves is perhaps the richest gift of all. We believe birth control knowledge brought to this group, is the most direct, constructive aid that can be given them to improve their immediate situation” (MSPP #28, 2001, 1).*

Sanger believed that, through the Negro Project, she would help African Americans gain better access to safe contraception and maintain birth control services in their community, just as they had in Harlem nearly a decade earlier. And she put together an advisory committee, including the leading African Americans who had supported her efforts in Harlem. The project also had the endorsement of Eleanor Roosevelt and the principal African American supporters of the New Deal – including Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council on Negro Women. But the Negro Project became something very different from what Sanger first envisioned.

After securing the funding to launch the project, Sanger lost control of it. She had proposed that the money be used to train a successful African American doctor and an equally successful African American minister to travel for a year through as many southern cities as possible, preaching the benefits of birth control. Sanger believed it was essential to gain support in black communities before trying to establish clinics. And later, as she had learned in Harlem, it would be equally critical to staff the birth control centers with African American clinicians.

But the leadership at the new federation followed the advice of Robert Seibels, chairman of the Committee on Maternal Welfare of the South Carolina Medical Association. Seibels considered Sanger and her workers to be “dried-up female fanatics” who had no business telling doctors what to do. He argued against spending money on efforts to gain support in black communities in the ways Sanger envisioned. Under his direction, the money Sanger raised was used to encourage black women to go to clinics where white doctors dispensed contraceptives and gave follow-up exams. Relatively few women chose this alternative, and many of those who did dropped out of the program. In the end, the Negro Project was carried out in ways that were basically indifferent to the needs of the community and smacked of racism, devolving to something like the paternalistic “sexual hygiene” caravans of white clinicians that occasionally swept through the region. Sanger was deeply stung by the course of these events (MSPP #28, 2001, 1-5).

**Trust Black Women** has done extensive research and analysis of Sanger’s outreach to the African American community. For further reading please visit [www.trustblackwomen.org](http://www.trustblackwomen.org).

## A Second Chance

National Negro Advisory Council of Planned Parenthood Federation of America (1942)  
COURTESY OF TRUST BLACK WOMEN

<b>Mary McLeod Bethune</b>	Founder of the National Council of Negro Women, Washington, DC	<b>Charles S. Johnson, PhD</b>	Director, Dept. of Social Science, Fisk University, TN
<b>Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.</b>	Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, NY	<b>Eugene Kinckle Jones</b>	National Urban League, NY
<b>Walter G. Alexander, MD</b>	Past-Resident, National Medical Association, Orange, NJ	<b>John W. Lawlah, MD</b>	Dean of Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC
<b>Claude A. Barnett</b>	Director, Associated Negro Press, Chicago, IL	<b>Walter Maddux, MD</b>	Slossfield Health Center, Birmingham, AL
<b>Michael J. Bent, MD</b>	Meharry Medical School, Nashville, TN	<b>Peter Marshall Murray, MD</b>	Publications Committee, Journal of the National Medical Association, NY
<b>M.O. Housfield, MD</b>	Director for Negro Health, Rosenwald Fund, Chicago, IL	<b>Frederick D. Patterson</b>	President, Tuskegee Institute, AL
<b>E.R. Carney</b>	President, National Hospital Association, Detroit, MI	<b>Ira DeA. Reid</b>	Dept. of Sociology, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA
<b>William M. Cooper</b>	Director of Extension, Hampton Institute, VA	<b>Emmett Scott</b>	Secretary, Southern Education Foundation, Washington, DC
<b>Frank R. Crosswaith</b>	Chairman, Negro Labor Committee, New York	<b>Bishop David H. Sims</b>	African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, PA
<b>Paul B. Cornely, MD</b>	Assoc. Prof. of Preventive Medicine, Howard University, Washington, DC	<b>Mrs. Mabel E. Staupers, RN</b>	Executive Secretary, National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, NY
<b>John W. Davis</b>	President, West Virginia State College, WV	<b>Mrs. Mary Church Terrell</b>	Honorary President, National Association of Colored Women, Washington, DC
<b>Albert W. Dent</b>	President, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA	<b>Jesso O. Thomas</b>	National Urban League, NY
<b>W.E.B. Du Bois, PhD</b>	Dept. of Sociology, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA	<b>Channing H. Tobias</b>	National Council, Y.W.C.A., NY
<b>Crystal Bird Fauset</b>	Philadelphia, PA	<b>Forrester B. Washington</b>	Director, Atlanta University School of Social Work, Atlanta, GA
<b>Dorothy Boulding Ferebee, MD</b>	President, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Washington, DC	<b>John West</b>	Medical Director, Provident Hospital, Chicago, IL
<b>A.L. Holsey</b>	Secretary, National Negro Business League, Tuskegee, AL	<b>Walter White</b>	Secretary, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, New York, NY
<b>Mrs. John Hope</b>	New York, NY	<b>J. Finley Wilson</b>	Grand Ruler of I.B.P.O.E., Washington, DC
<b>Charles D. Hubert, DD</b>	Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA	<b>Max Yergan</b>	President, National Negro Congress, New York, NY

From 1940–43, Sanger had better success with the Division of Negro Service, an education project that had an advisory council of more than 100 eminent African American leaders. Under the direction of Florence Rose, the Division of Negro Services set up exhibits, instigated community and national press, and inundated black organizations across the country with family planning literature (An Appeal for Action; MSPP #28, 2001, 4) published by the newly incorporated Planned Parenthood Federation of America (1942) (Chesler, 1992, 393).

Rose also hired a black doctor, Mae McCarroll, to teach other black doctors about birth control and to lobby medical groups. Pleased at this turn of events, Sanger wrote to Albert Lasker, who, with his wife Mary, had provided funding for the Negro Project and for Planned Parenthood's Division of Negro Services;

*"I believe that the Negro question is coming definitely to the fore in America, not only because of the War, but in anticipation of the place the Negro will occupy after the peace. I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birth rate, to reduce their birth, infant and maternal death rate, to maintain better standards of health and living for those already born, and to create better opportunities for those who will be born (MSPP #28, 2001, 4).*

Sanger made her hopes for all people of color clear in an article she wrote in 1944 called "Population – Everybody's Business" for *Tomorrow* magazine:

*"We must protect tomorrow's Chinese baby and Hindu baby, English and Russian baby, Puerto Rican, Negro and white American babies who will stand side by side to heal*

*the scars of this conflict [World War II] and to bring a promise of a better future. ... Never before in history have we realized how important it is to all of us that each of these children be born strong and with a prospect of growing into useful and decent adulthood" (Katz, 1995, 46).*

## One More Major Milestone – The Pill

During the late '30s and early '40's, Sanger began to "retire" from the forefront of the family planning movement – she had moved to Tucson, AZ, in 1937 to be more comfortable in her struggle with tuberculosis (Chesler, 1992, 381). Until her death in 1966 (Chesler, 1992, 467), however, she continued to exert significant influence on the reproductive rights movement and lent her personal support to the projects she considered most urgent. In 1952, for example, Sanger and Lady Rama Rau of India co-chaired the first meeting of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. Some 500 family planning advocates attended, representing delegations from more than a dozen countries around the globe (Chesler, 1992, 423).

Ever indomitable, and years after most people retire, Sanger achieved one of the greatest accomplishments of her career. In her 70s, Sanger drove the research and development of the most revolutionary medical breakthrough, after penicillin, of the 20th century – the pill.

The development of contemporary hormonal contraception – from the pill to today's contraceptive patch, ring, and shot – was Margaret Sanger's brainchild. She had won for women the right to use contraception. Now she would develop a method that was nearly 100 percent effective. Her search for an oral contraceptive began in earnest in 1951 (Chesler, 1992, 430). Her closest



collaborator was also an avid crusader for women's rights, Katharine Dexter McCormick, who had been a leader in the suffrage movement (Fields, 2003, 121) and had helped establish the League of Women Voters (Fields, 2003, 170). The second woman to graduate from MIT (Fields, 2003, 52), and a great friend of Sanger, McCormick used her knowledge of biochemistry and endocrinology to oversee and drive the research process for the development of the pill by Gregory Pincus, John Rock, and M.C. Chang at the Worcester Foundation of Experimental Biology (Fields; 2003; 261-3). McCormick also donated the lion's share of the financial resources – millions of dollars – needed for that research, enabling the fulfillment of the dream she shared with Sanger – making birth control safe, dependable, affordable, and woman-controlled (Chesler, 1992, 430).

Sanger's tenacious struggle, even as her health declined, brought about the advent of safe and effective oral contraception that changed the human sexual landscape, forever. It made the sexual revolution of the '60s safer for millions and established family planning as the cultural norm for the U.S. and in many other countries of the world.

On May 9, 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the sale of the first oral steroid pills for contraception (Lange, 2007). Approved for menstrual regulation in 1957, the pill was already being used by at least 500,000 women – who probably also enjoyed its contraceptive benefits (Asbel, 1995, 163-4). By 1965, one out of every four married women in America under 45 had used the pill. By 1967, nearly 13 million women in the world were using it. And by 1984 that number would reach 50-80 million (Asbell, 1995, 169). Today 100 million women use the pill (Population Reports, 2000, 1).

**NOTE:** *It's important to note that the history of the pill itself is problematic. Testing of the pill was conducted largely among women of color – many of whom did*

*not provide informed consent for this testing. A more thorough set of resources is being developed to provide in-depth information on the history of the pill – and the implications it had and continues to have on women of color.*

## Sanger's Legacy

Margaret Sanger – and her thousands of friends, allies, and followers around the globe – made the right to decide when and whether to have a child more accessible for many women. Like all leaders – Sanger had many flaws. She could be solipsistic in her personal life. In her professional life, she could be single-minded to a fault, territorial, fanatical, patronizing, and rhetorically overblown. She also extended some opinions that clearly expressed ableism and exclusion, and she did not always condemn opinions that she should have.

Today, many opponents of birth control and abortion rights assail Sanger as a demonic corrupter of moral values. Not content with targeting Sanger's very real flaws, they put words in her mouth that she never spoke, ascribe to her motivations she never pursued, and attribute to her opinions she never held, in order to discredit today's reproductive rights movement. Nearly 130 years after her birth and more than 40 years after her death, Planned Parenthood is proud to carry on Sanger's lifelong struggle to defend the basic human right to decide when or whether to have a child. A right the whole world holds dear.

The history of racism and ableism in America is an issue we must all address – including at Planned Parenthood. It is important that we understand our collective history and the legacy it leaves on those still impacted by an unjust system. We also believe that the way to move forward is to acknowledge Sanger's wrongdoings, encourage open conversations, and continue to address racism and ableism wherever they exist – outside or inside our organization.

Planned Parenthood is not alone in its recognition of Sanger’s enormous contribution. A year before Sanger died, Mrs. Coretta Scott King accepted PPFA’s Margaret Sanger Award on behalf of her husband, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. From Dr. King’s acceptance speech, Mrs. King read,

—  
*“There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger’s early efforts. ... Our sure beginning in the struggle for equality by non-violent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her” (King, 2008[1966], 6, 7).*

Biologist, historian, writer, and social critic H. G. Wells predicted that

—  
*“When the history of civilization is written, it will be a biological history and Margaret Sanger will be its heroine (1935) (Whitelaw, 1994, 99). The movement she started will grow to be, a hundred years from now, the most influential in the world (1953) (Segel, 2001, 53).*

The day Sanger died, September 6, 1966. Senator Ernest Gruening (D-AK) read the Congressional Record,

—  
*“... a great woman, a courageous and indomitable person who lived to see one of the remarkable revolutions of modern times – a revolution which her torch kindled ...”*

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