

WHEN ABORTION WAS ILLEGAL (FILM 1 OF THE TRILOGY, "CHOICE: THEN AND NOW")

Time	Speaker	Text
0:00:16	LANA	I was seventeen years old. I was married. And ten months after I was married I had a baby girl. She was very ill, very jaundiced, and the doctor told me, the OB-GYN who had delivered her told me that if I ever had another child, I would die. Three months later, I was pregnant again. And I was absolutely terrified. So I went back to him and I said, "Am I pregnant?" And he said, "Yes." He said, "I told you not to get pregnant." And I said, "But you didn't tell me how not to."
0:00:56	BETTY	I thought we were pretty close. I mean, we had talked about getting married, we had talked about babies, we had talked about what we would name a child. And when I got pregnant, and said "I'm pregnant," everything changed. It was like, "Well, whose is it?" And that was such a shock to me that the relationship ended.
0:01:33	ROSALIE	There was this whole kind of thing that we had to keep it an absolute secret and it was a humiliating strange kind of experience. And so I decided I should have an abortion. I didn't know what it would be, I didn't really understand the implications in the fact that it was illegal. So I said--well it was just like, it would make this problem go away.
0:02:17	NARRATOR	Until the mid 1800's, abortions were legal and available in the United States. Both the state and the church permitted abortions if they occurred before quickening, when the mother first perceived fetal movement. In 1847, the newly formed American Medical Association began a campaign to professionalize medicine by outlawing what it called quackery. Included in its ban were midwives and herbalists, who had provided abortion and maternity care in their communities for centuries. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Victorian society began to condemn women seeking abortions as selfish, immoral and shirking the duty of motherhood. Protestant and Catholic churches joined the medical establishment in expressing their condemnation. Meanwhile, legislation restricting abortion continued to spread, and by the turn of the century, both birth control and abortion were illegal in most states. If a woman needed medical treatment after a botched abortion, she faced a humiliating and dangerous situation. Even though infected and bleeding, she was often required to testify against her husband or lover and the abortionist before she could receive medical care.

0:03:47	Maria Hecht	I, Maria Hecht, believing I am about to die, make this my ante-mortem statement. I became acquainted with John Shockwiler. I had sexual intercourse with him, and in the month of May, I noticed that I was pregnant...
0:04:17	Cora Alice Grimes	I, Cora Alice Grimes, about to die, make this statement. On the second day of July, 1896, James Dunn, a retail merchant, gave me a packet of calomel. I took two doses of the calomel....
0:04:33	Berlettie Parker	I, Berlettie Parker, am about to die. I went to visit Dr. Polian...
0:04:40	NARRATOR	Well into the twentieth century, a climate of fear prevailed.
0:04:45	DR. ARMSTRONG	I went to medical school in New York City in the 50's, when abortions were illegal, and every day the city hospital that my medical school staffed would have twenty or thirty women come in infected, bleeding, and dying from abortions they had induced themselves, and the coat-hanger trick was used, or they had a friend that had a catheter, and they'd leave the catheter in until--for a day or two, and she was bleeding and cramping, and they'd come in... And that's not an exaggeration, I think it was true in any major city area in this country in the 50's.
0:05:27	MARY	When we got them we received them like with a temperature of 105. Bleeding, totally, totally infected. We had some die in shock. Because they did not tell the truth and they was afraid to tell the truth as to what had happened. Because they knew it was illegal, and they felt like we were only getting the information to report them to the police. It's like, turn me in, that I aborted myself. It was just plain housewives, who felt like, I can't afford another child.

0:06:14	LANA	<p>I couldn't have that baby, because if I did, and I died, who would take care of the little baby I had? And so I asked the young women where I worked, I worked at a Walgreen drugstore, and I asked them if there was somebody who could help me do something. You didn't say the word abortion in those days. And they knew what I wanted. And they sent me to a woman, and she told me that she would do it for fifty dollars. This was in 1939, and fifty dollars was a lot of money. And I worked hard, and I sold everything I had that I could get a few pennies for, and I eventually got my fifty dollars, and I went out to see this woman. And she put, I think it was a strip of slippery elm bark, and she inserted this up my uterus. And she said, now you go home, and that will swell up, and you will have pain, and you will probably have some temperature, but you will have a miscarriage. Two days later I had a screaming fever, and I was in such pain...and so I went back out to see this woman. And she lived in a shack. And she met me at the door, and she said, "I told you not to come back." And I said, "I have nowhere else to go." And so she cleaned me up. And I was so frightened, and I was in tears, and she put her arms around me like that, and she just held me up to her chest for a minute and she said, "Honey, did you think it was so easy to be a woman?" I'll never forget that...never forget the kindness of that woman even under those terrible circumstances. And so, she said, "This time you go," she gave me some aspirin, she said, "Don't you ever come back again." And that was the last I saw of her. And I had a roaring fever for about three or four days, and then I got better. And I went back to see my doctor, when I got the money for the visit, and I told him. I said, "I had something done." And he said, "Well, I figured a smart kid like you would figure a way out of it." And I looked at him then, and I thought, how could he? How could he? This was a man trained and licensed, and he turned me away, and I had to go out and find this woman to do this... And it was to save my very own life.</p>
0:08:42	ROSALIE	<p>The day came, and they took me to a motel, several miles from Boise. It was a dirty motel. And I was alone with this woman, and I remember what she looked like really well. She was... She was dirty, too. And, uh, not friendly, really. Divorced from the proceedings. And she gave me a cervical puncture. And I remember the steel tool, you know. And then she told me to go, and that there would be blood, but it would be all right, and... But the fact is that I didn't abort, and uh, I just bled a lot, and it was incredibly painful, and I got a bad infection. And they started looking for a doctor, because I just kept bleeding and bleeding, and uh, not aborting. And finally they found a doctor. He gave me some medication to make me abort. And I aborted at home, so that if he were caught, he would be able to prove that the process had been initiated before he became involved. And he explained that to me. That he wanted to be able to help other women who found themselves in my position. And that the only way he could protect himself was that. And so that was I... I had to do that alone.</p>

0:10:23	BETTY	I didn't tell anyone except the father. And when I saw his reaction, I didn't tell anyone else. I just thought well, this is my problem and I'll have to deal with it. And the only thing I could do was to get an abortion. Because to have a baby without a husband just was not done. I just went to the telephone directory, and I looked up obstetricians, gynecologists, and I looked for a gynecologist that didn't advertise as an obstetrician, and I thought maybe he would be most sympathetic. And it turned out he was.
0:11:18	TERRY	There were many physicians who were supportive of abortion, who felt it should be available and provided safely for women. But they were afraid to do them themselves. Sometimes the fear was because they didn't want to be found out or would be censured. But very often, their fear was, and rightly I think, that as soon as word got out that they were willing to do abortions, they would be flooded with requests. One of the doctors who started off thinking he would do a few abortions, and who found himself getting referrals of women from all over the United States, was Dr. Curtis Boyd. In 1965, he began to do abortions for women referred to him by ministers. Over the course of the next eight years, he did thousands of abortions.
0:12:28	DR. BOYD	I began to realize how difficult it was for women to obtain the service, how desperately women needed it and wanted it, and to what lengths they would go to obtain it, even to readily risking their life. People talk about it as though women didn't know that. That didn't matter. Women risked their life every day to get an abortion somewhere in this country. Many of them did. Without hesitation.
0:12:56	EVELYN	I just really literally walked up and down the streets. I was by myself, and I would go from one place to another, and they would all be in the same situation. They would say, "Nobody's there," "I don't know what you're taking about," and "Oh, they've moved away..." Finally, one day, I heard of a place. Nobody answered the phone, but I got in the car and I went there, and I knocked on the door, sort of after hours, like evening, early evening... I was the only one there... He did not give me anything, there was no anesthesia at all. And it was very painful and I had no idea it was supposed to be painful. I thought maybe he had done something terrible -- he was doing something terrible to me. And so it was a frightening experience. That was frightening.
0:13:43	NARRATOR	Throughout the years of criminal abortion, an aura of danger surrounded unwanted pregnancies. Women drank toxic substances. Unscrupulous practitioners administered caustic douches of Lysol and Clorox. Reports of rape and other sexual abuse by abortionists were common.

0:14:06	DR. HODGSON	At that time, shotgun marriages were in vogue. And, there were all these youngsters getting married, which never--I assumed saw that that never solved anything. It only made the matters worse. The marriages never lasted, the children suffered, and it was a miserable situation. And then we went through the period when we were sending girls to homes for the unwed mothers that were all over the country, and they were expected to work part time, and give up their child for adoption. And those were--that was a very sad situation, because you would see a young woman come in, if she was a school girl she would have to go off, leave home, and everyone knew why... and her life was really wrecked. Socially and academically, and everything else. And it was the young that really got to me, seeing some of these youngsters, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, their mothers would bring them in, and it was just a horrible thing.
0:15:15	NARRATOR	As public awareness grew about the consequences of illegal abortion, lawmakers and clergy joined with the medical establishment in pressing for reforms. In states where therapeutic abortions were permitted, some doctors were lenient so they could provide more women with safe abortions.
0:15:35	DR. PAULSEN	I heard about these two coeds at Stanford who went to Tijuana and obtained illegal abortions. The first was a girl who came back with a fulminating septicemia and who subsequently died. The second came back and had a severe infection of her reproductive organs, and it was necessary to do a hysterectomy, which rendered her sterile, of course. At the same time, there was in existence in California a law which allowed for medical support with an abortion on non-medical grounds, namely through a psychiatric channel. We would use these channels in order to enable the girl or woman to get a therapeutic abortion. Why did I do this? It was outrage at the way in which women were being treated. Whether there was the reaction of the boyfriend, or fiancé, or husband, some of these responses were grotesque. Some men told the women that "If I had known you were so stupid, I wouldn't have gone with you in the first place." Others told the girl that it's her problem, she's got the baby, he didn't have anything to do with it. A good number of them just took off. Just had no response whatsoever. So where do women who are desperate get help?

0:17:19	EVELYN	It did make me recognize that there were many of us out there, who were looking desperately for someplace to solve the problem. And, so, I began to listen. I began to hear when anybody said that they... You tune in, you know, you get sensitive to it, and you begin to hear things that give you a clue, and you pursue it a little bit and find out that somebody did have an abortion. And I just got the names of the doctors, and I would just give the names. A young woman would call on the phone, someone I didn't know, and would ask for help. And they were feeling so desperate that they were calling strangers. I was aware that what I was doing was illegal. I guess I think what was going to happen to them was worse than the possibility of what might happen to me.
0:18:17	NARRATOR	People who themselves had had to search for an abortion, understood the difficulty in finding one. When Russ was nineteen, he and his girlfriend realized she was pregnant.
0:18:31	RUSS	I was terrified at the prospect of being a father. And, I went to my assistant track coach, a young guy, very friendly, so then I told him. And, um, he said find out more about it, what do you want to do, and so forth, and I began to ask around about possibilities of her getting an abortion. And I talked to her about it, and she didn't want to be a mother, either. First off, there was some misbegotten effort, I don't know where it originated or how it happened, to get some kind of pills that would induce an abortion, and they didn't work. Finally I get a name of someone actually in town, in Los Angeles, who's willing to do this, and get a price. And my assistant coach gave me the money.
0:19:27	NARRATOR	Years after his own experience, Russ had a chance to help someone else.
0:19:33	RUSS	I was approached by a senior professor, a woman, who had a student, a freshman, and she was pregnant. Did I, by any chance, have any information on where she might get an abortion. Well, it's interesting. I didn't, hesitate. I got a name of someone, highly confident that this was a... this was a good clinic in Tijuana. And she got the abortion. Well, I saw her, about two years ago. And she came up to me and she thanked me. That was nice. It felt a little bit like saving a life.
0:20:38	NARRATOR	Lola Huth was the lead dancer of the Jose Limon Dance Company. She was married and the mother of a baby girl when she died from a self-induced abortion.
0:20:50	FREDDIE	At the time of my sister's death, I was told she died in childbirth, but that didn't make any sense. Than I was told it was a miscarriage, that she bled to death. The story came to me in bits and pieces over many years.

0:21:13	NARRATOR	Even though she was using an IUD for birth control, Lola became pregnant. A doctor told her that the IUD would probably cause the baby to be deformed, but that removing it might cause a miscarriage. Lola weighed the risks carefully, and decided to have the IUD removed.
0:21:34	FREDDIE	She went back for the scheduled appointment, and he said, "I'm sorry, I have consulted with colleagues, and I can not do anything that could implicate me in an illegal act. Right now the whole abortion issue is very, very hot, um... and very controversial, and I just can't implicate myself. And she said, "Well, then I am inclined to believe I will do it myself." And he said "All right, well I tell you what to do, I'll tell you how to do it, and when you're in the process of miscarriage, you can call me, you can go to the hospital, and then I'll be able to help you without jeopardizing my own position." So that was her plan.
0:22:17	NARRATOR	When removing the IUD didn't cause a miscarriage, Lola became desperate. She sought a way to end the pregnancy herself.
0:22:26	FREDDIE	She purchased a couple of tubes, plastic tubes, and what she was told to do was insert these tubes into the cervix, and blow air into the cervix, and that would cause her to abort. So she filed a sharp point, and had punctured a vein, and got air into her bloodstream.
0:22:54	ROSALIE	When we realized I was pregnant again, I told my mother. She asked me if I wanted another abortion, and I said no. I couldn't stand the idea of doing that again.
0:22:13	NARRATOR	Rosalie had been raped by an older man. She was afraid that another illegal abortion would lead to the same medical complications as before. So she decided to go to a home for unwed mothers, and then give the baby up for adoption.

0:22:31	ROSALIE	Everyone told me that if I had any sense, I wouldn't look at the baby, I would just let them take it away and I would never look at the baby, but I did, I let them bring the baby to me and I held the baby, and that was a terrible mistake. And then I owed some money, for my board and room and medical, and so I stayed for a while and I worked in the nursery to work the money off. And that was a very bad mistake because I was just around babies all the time. And I wanted to keep the baby, and I actually held the baby before they took it oh, god... And anybody who would think that'd be a great way to solve the problem is just... I mean, you take a child who doesn't even know her own mind, a seventeen year old young woman, and ask her to carry a baby in her body till --for nine months, and then give birth to it and then just give it away, like it's --like it's nothing...
0:25:00	BETTY	It's very difficult, even after forty years, to admit to doing something that was against the law, that was illegal. It sort of puts you in the position of having a criminal past. And although you might not feel that what you did was in any way criminal, there's still the stigma to it. But... it's a relief to be able to talk about it after all these years and say, hey, I was human.
0:25:36	DR. BOYD	I knew that I could lose my medical license, I knew that I could go to prison. And just as I had to ... to trust these women, who came to me, not to bring charges against me which could put me in prison, they had to trust me, to give them good medical care and service and not harm them. And that was a scary thing in those days, because you didn't always know who you were going to, you didn't know what the outcome was...was going to be. It was frightening for women to come from great distances to a little town in east Texas, to some unknown doctor... They came by bus, by train, by car, and they had to trust that they were going to leave there...um... intact and alive.
0:26:34	LANA	A woman that's unhappily pregnant will risk her life to stop that particular pregnancy. And then, later in her life, when conditions have changed, she will happily risk her life to have a child. This is the same woman.
0:26:52	FREDDIE	And I was saying to my mother, you know, we have to talk about this. It's important. We can't...when you're in conversation with people, you tell them your daughter died giving herself an abortion. We have to all start telling these stories. You know, that it isn't just some anonymous person nobody knows who's had an abortion but people right next to us in our community, in our lives. And some of them don't survive.