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Film Documents Birth Control Movement

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By Judith Davidoff The Capital Times

Sen. Fred Risser of Madison, the author of the repeal legislation, notes in the film that partisanship did not play a role in the issue at this time. "She's an active Republican and I'm an active Democrat," he says in the film, referring to Kabler. "On subject matters of Planned Parenthood, she and I agree completely and work together."

But times have changed. While there are still loyal Republican women who are bedrock supporters of Planned Parenthood -- Kabler and Ann Peckham, among others -- Republican majorities in both houses of the Legislature have taken aim at access to birth control and abortion.

(Planned Parenthood added abortion services at select clinics in 1992.)

Just in the past year Republican lawmakers sponsored bills that would have limited the access of minors to birth control, allowed pharmacists to refuse to dispense contraception and prohibited health services within the University of Wisconsin System from distributing birth control.

Hobbins says she hopes the documentary will inform people of these developments. "We are facing the greatest political challenges to reproductive health care since 1973, yet people are unaware of what is happening," Hobbins says.

The Supreme Court legalized abortion in the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision. But Hobbins says the main reason to make the film was to capture what might otherwise have been lost, because many of the women and men who made Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin possible are now gone. "It was a history that needed to be documented," Hobbins says.

'THE DEFENDERS'

Today: The 90-minute documentary about the history of the birth control movement will be shown free to the public at the Orpheum Theatre, 216 State St. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. and the film begins at 7.

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Following the lead of birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger, a progressive obstetrician named Dr. Florence Edith McCann opened the Maternal Health Center in Milwaukee in 1935. The small clinic would eventually become Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, a statewide organization that provides a multitude of reproductive and preventive health services to 70,000 women annually.

Last year, to honor the organization's 70th anniversary, Deborah Hobbins, regional vice president, commissioned a five-minute visual presentation of the group's history.

"The first person I spoke to was Bea Kabler," recalls filmmaker Emily Rumsey of Madison. Kabler played an instrumental role in overturning a birth control law in Wisconsin that prevented single women and unmarried couples from obtaining contraception. "It became very clear there was much more than a five-minute story to be told here."

The final product, a 90-minute documentary, will premiere tonight at 7 at the Orpheum Theatre. Produced and directed by Rumsey and Dawnee Dodson, "The Defenders: A history of the birth control movement in Wisconsin" will also be shown Thursday at the Oriental Theatre in Milwaukee.



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The organization plans to use the documentary to raise money at house parties and to raise awareness about threats to family planning services. Rumsey also has hopes it will hit the film festival scene. The film chronicles not just the founding and growth of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, but also the history of the birth control movement itself.

As historian Linda Gordon points out in the film, birth control is not a new phenomenon.

"Scholars have never found any society that didn't try to practice some sort of birth control," Gordon said in a phone interview from her home in New York City. "It was just too important to people's lives and people's livelihoods that they didn't exert some kind of control," added Gordon, a former professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who now teaches at New York University.

Cookbooks published in the United States regularly contained cures for common ailments as well as food recipes. In one 1844 cookbook there are recipes for treating ringworm, a hoarse voice and morning sickness. Also included was a "preventative lotion," a kind of douche designed to be used after sex to prevent pregnancy.

"All of these healing kinds of issues were treated as part of ordinary housewifery," Gordon said.

It wasn't until the mid-19th century that a campaign against contraception began. That movement culminated in the 1873 Comstock Law, which effectively outlawed any kind of birth control. By the end of the century, most states had specifically banned contraception, though a huge underground network for distributing birth control existed, Gordon said.

The pendulum began to swing back by the beginning of the 1900s, when a political movement to decriminalize birth control got off the ground. States began gradually to purge their anti-birth control laws from the books and in 1965 the Supreme Court, in *Griswold vs. Connecticut*, effectively legalized contraception for married couples.

Around the same time, Margaret Miller became the first executive director of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin.

"Margaret Miller was a true visionary for Planned Parenthood in Wisconsin," Hobbins says. "She started doing things no one else did. She was instrumental in getting anti-poverty funding for health care. A lot of other Planned Parenthood affiliates followed her lead in that."

"When she got her ideas into other people's heads, you were smitten by the cause," Kabler says of Miller in the film. Kabler, meanwhile, was part of a group of volunteers who helped get Wisconsin's version of the Comstock law repealed in 1976 -- 12 years after first trying.

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