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The Jane Collective was an underground organization [3] that provided illegal abortion [4] services in Chicago, Illinois, from 1969 until abortions became legal in 1973. Formally called the Abortion Counseling Service of Women’s Liberation, the Jane Collective was a member organization [3] and working group within Chicago Women’s Liberation Union that challenged the Illinois state legislature by providing abortions before they were legal in the US. The organization [3], commonly referred to as Jane, was founded by women’s liberation activists in Chicago in 1969 to reduce the number of unsafe and expensive abortions being performed by unqualified providers. It is estimated that from 1969 to 1973 the Jane Collective provided nearly twelve thousand abortions. The Jane Collective was a healthcare initiative and a political education project that provided abortion [4] and reproductive healthcare solutions to thousands of women and brought attention to the many unsafe illegal abortions done in Chicago.

In the years leading up to Roe v. Wade [5], the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion [4], obtaining an abortion [4] in the US was often expensive, unregulated, and unsafe. Those that provided illegal abortions often had no medical training and used dangerous and unsanitary techniques that could cause severe medical complications, including infections and death. Other illegal abortion [4] providers included trained physicians and midwives who risked losing their medical licenses. Getting an abortion [4] by a trained healthcare professional was very expensive and often arranged secretly. Members of the Jane Collective included physicians, midwives, and individuals with no medical background.

The Jane Collective began as a referral service for students seeking abortions at the University of Chicago [6] in Chicago, Illinois. In 1965, Heather Booth, a university student involved in the civil rights movement, had a friend in need of an abortion [4]. Booth found a doctor to perform the abortion [4] for her friend. After her friend’s abortion [4], Booth continued to refer other students in need of abortions to the physician. Soon, Booth was overwhelmed with numerous requests.

Along with Booth, another anonymous founder of Jane, whom historian Laura Kaplan refers to as Jenny, played a role in the founding of the organization [3]. Jenny had sought an abortion [4] during the late 1960s. At the time, because abortion [4] was illegal, the only way to have a legal abortion [4] was to obtain doctor and hospital permission, granted through a hospital’s therapeutic abortion [4] committee. If the abortion [4] was deemed necessary for therapeutic reasons because the pregnancy [7] endangered the woman’s life, then the woman could undergo the procedure. However, that was extremely rare. According to historian Kaplan, Jenny struggled to get permission for her abortion [4] even though she had cancer and the pregnancy [7] would endanger her health. Eventually, Jenny was granted permission for an abortion [4]. However, in an interview Jenny stated that she was displeased with the lack of women involved in her abortion [4] process and the fact that male physicians and hospital boards controlled her reproductive rights [8].

In 1967 several women, including Booth and Jenny, created a group called the Service, which provided abortions to women of all races, ages, and social classes without requiring them to provide an explanation for their requests. The group was composed of mostly homemakers living in the Hyde Park area of Chicago, as well as students at the University of Chicago [6]. The Service evolved into the Jane Collective over the course of several months, becoming a formal referral service. Originally, the abortion [4] providers working for the Jane Collective were all individuals who claimed to be physicians. While some had formal medical training, members discovered that many of them were not professionally trained in medicine and because of that, activist members of the Jane Collective began educating themselves on how to perform abortions.

To provide more abortions to more women, members of the Jane Collective were trained by a gynecologist on abortion [4] techniques. Several historians refer to a specific gynecologist who risked his medical license to continue to provide post-operative checkups with the patients of the Jane Collective. The doctor had trained at Cook County Hospital in Cook County, Illinois, where he was frequently faced with female patients suffering the consequences of back alley abortions with dangerous complications. The methods they were taught included the dilation and curettage method for early abortions, which involved the use of placenta [9] and fetus [10] extraction using a curette. Likewise, Jane Collective members were taught the super coil method, which caused a woman who was in a later state of pregnancy [11] to miscarry. According to Reagan, the members of the Jane Collective formed an alternative female healthcare system and slowly gained control over the quality and prices of criminal abortion [9] in Chicago by offering less expensive abortions with no judgement.

By 1969, the Jane Collective was formally known as the Abortion Counseling Service of the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union,
Sources


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