



## PUTTING REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE ON THE MAP OF OUR LIVES

by Cindy Cooper, Words of Choice



On June 7th, I watched as the first group set out on our **Reproductive Justice Walking Tour** in lower Manhattan, an event that I had planned for seven months. And now, here it was, happening. The weather had cooperated beautifully – bright, sunny, a bit warm, but welcome after a dreary spring. The groups were filled to capacity. We had badges, signs, maps, volunteers. We had guides – they preferred to be called facilitators – all interesting, young women who were pre-prepared with a carefully researched script. We had 12 performers stationed at six different sites along the way, who would add to the moment.

I wasn't going on the walk myself. After all, I'd walked the walk in the planning phase, researched the history, and helped write the guidebook with Lise Brenner, an interactive tour guide. I'd seen the performances in rehearsals, and, with artistic director Stacey Linnartz, had selected or written the material. We choose to feature pioneer Margaret Sanger, African American attorney Flo Kennedy, conservative moralist Anthony Comstock, a Seinfeld "spongeworthy" riff, a contemporary immigrant's story, and more.

I thought I would make sure the take off went smoothly and then race back to Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village to help set up a post-walk mini-fair with more creative activities, literature and refreshments. A videographer and photographer were following the walk, so I figured I could catch it all later.

Standing near the launch site, I listened as the first performer – veteran actor Lynn Silver – delivered a rousing speech by Emma Goldman that could have been written last week, except it dated to 1909. Then the facilitator led the group up Hudson Street into historic corners of Tribeca. I couldn't help myself – I just started walking.

And I was so glad. Almost everything I'd hoped for was working. Performers – a mix of fresh and experienced talent – delighted the walkers as they came upon them. The facilitators shared the history of reproductive justice and the community, too. And, best of all, the walkers responded by reflecting on their own lives and connections.

People walked and talked. We had college students and seniors and in between. I overheard conversations about: growing up in a conservative town; being part of the first abortion speakout; nursing as a career; the benefits of a menstrual cup. Walkers talked about contraceptive choices and condom efficacy (especially at my favorite site, the one-time headquarters of Trojans), about "intersectionality," and, yes, about the state of abortion rights.

I've long been passionate about finding imaginative ways to engage people in the movement for reproductive justice. In this new endeavor, people were moving their feet and expanding their minds.

I began Words of Choice a decade ago on a similar impulse. Traveling to 20 states with a pastiche of stories and a team of actors, I saw the eagerness of people to engage in a different way. I remember a young woman in Kansas who said that she had never heard people say out loud the things we were saying, and a senior in Colorado who had never told her daughters about her own (legal) abortion, but now planned to. If replicated, a walking tour might help communities build their own bridges to conversations, I thought. We can claim the streets as our own, connect the dots between rights and lives – and have fun, too.

We had beautiful feedback – “do it again;” “wonderful;” “a success.” One woman said, tearfully, she had thought about things she hadn't considered for 20 years and it had changed her life. We learned things too.

Now, I want to help other communities brainstorm about interactive events – walking tours, springboard activities, hunt-and-find adventures. And why not walk on the road less traveled? With everything coming down the pike, I figure it's time to try a different paradigm.

Project goals: <http://reprojusticetour.wordpress.com/about-2/>

Tactics by Robin Marty: <http://tinyurl.com/kuuvge5>

Initial thoughts and key elements: <http://tiny.cc/8yyihx>

Project Tumblr: <http://reprojusticewalking.tumblr.com/>

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