

Author Biography

Michelle Mueller

Michelle Mueller is a second-year History major with a minor in Women and Gender Studies. She wrote her article for Dr. Kathleen Murphy's "Introduction to the Study of History" class. Mueller is an advocate for women's safety on college campuses. After attending law school, she plans to work for a women's rights non-profit organization or interest group.

“Let's Hear It From the Girls”: Abortion Activism at Cal Poly, 1970-1980

Michelle Mueller

Amidst the second feminist movement from the early 1960s to late 1980s, young students across the country used colleges and universities as battlegrounds for attaining female bodily autonomy. Thus, in the small, agricultural town of San Luis Obispo, one is left to wonder: How did Cal Poly students participate in the national movement for abortion and contraceptive rights? Responding to judicial decisions, the second women's rights movement impacted every corner of the nation through judicial law and review. College students across the country engaged in student-led protests, sit-ins, and live debates to facilitate conversations about abortion and body autonomy. However, Cal Poly students approached activism in a less obvious fashion: on-campus discussions, forums, and student editorials on the topic of abortion.

While few prominent news sources detail Cal Poly students' role in the movement, editorials and reports in campus newspapers reveal that Cal Poly students and professors regularly debated the topic of abortion. Exemplifying Cal Poly students' more discreet form of activism, just over a year before the *Roe*

v. Wade Supreme Court decision,¹ Cal Poly's student newspaper the *Mustang Daily* published an editorial titled "Let's Hear it From the Girls"² discussing abortion activism on campus. The authors, Carole Jones and Vickie Hale wrote, "We are two girls who have been following the abortion issue in the paper and are wondering why there has been no response from the females of this college. Where are all the girls hiding?"³ Writing in December of 1971, the authors were shocked to find that the large student body had not responded to the fiercely debated topic of abortion. Hale and Jones defended the right to bodily autonomy, satirically claiming that if a man volunteered to experience nine months of pregnancy and its unpleasant side effects, then women would consider a male perspective on the topic of abortion. At the end of their article, Hale and Jones claimed that a woman should have a right to choose to continue or end her own pregnancy and no one, especially a man, should challenge her decision. With two female students pushing for a response from their campus community, or to "hear it from the girls," Hale and Jones called fellow co-eds to speak up in support of women's rights to bodily autonomy. As a discreet form of activism, students used the *Mustang Daily* to advocate for abortion rights, while also seeking to inspire other Cal Poly students to share their own opinions on the topic.

Despite the absence of more public forms of student activism in San Luis Obispo, Cal Poly students led open discussions with local community health officials, students, and professors on the moral and ethical dilemmas of legal abortion. In a weekly briefing of campus events in 1972,⁴ the *Mustang Daily's* editorial board reported on a discussion of the moral implications of abortion among professors of philosophy Dr. Walter Bethel and Dr. Stan Dundon and Shirly Buma, a psychologist at the San Luis Obispo County center. Bethel and

1 Harry A. Blackmun and Supreme Court of the United States, *U.S. Reports: Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, 1972.

2 Carole Jones and Vicky Hale, "Let's Hear it From the Girls," *Mustang Daily*, Dec. 3, 1971.

3 Ibid.

4 Kinsey Barnard, "Abortion is an Individual Matter," *Mustang Daily*, May 19, 1972.

Buma agreed that, technically, an embryo is not a “life,” as it is not a citizen, and abortion is both a personal matter and protected as a woman’s right to bodily autonomy. Assuming a pro-life position, Dr. Dundon disagreed with Dr. Buma and Dr. Bethel, arguing that “an embryo is a person” and “abortion denies the fetus its right to develop its full potential.” He claimed that “aborting a fetus is worse than killing a fully developed person.”⁵ Providing an educated insight into the topic, students, professors, administration, and members of the community could read the standpoints of their peers and leaders with full trust and even provide the reader with reasoning on both sides of the topic to decide their own opinions, without attending the in-person event.

Later in Bernard’s article in the *Mustang Daily*, the editorial board reported that there would be another debate in the College Union on the following Tuesday which would discuss the “Administrative and Legal Aspects” of abortion with other Cal Poly professors in multiple open debates on the complicated subject of abortion on Cal Poly’s campus.⁶ Due to the debate’s local news coverage and high attendance, these forums held long-lasting impacts on both the Cal Poly campus and San Luis Obispo community. The debates provided critical and thoughtful comprehension of the complexities of abortion and considered the multifaceted sides of the pro-life and pro-choice stances. As a result, the debates shaped a more reasoned narrative for a reader or audience member. Promoting activism on campus, in-person discussions allowed students and professors to voice their opinions, asking questions and commenting on the divisive topic. Thus, dismantling the stigmas surrounding abortion, students used debates to understand and advocate for their stance on the topic.

News coverage of contraceptive services was critical to the process of normalizing abortions for the student population. An article in the *Mustang Daily*

⁵ Barnard, “Abortion is an Individual Matter.”

⁶ Ibid.

informed students of abortion services and contraceptives at Cal Poly's health clinic, La Femme, and the discounts offered to students.⁷ The article explained the length of the operation and adoption and counseling services, saying, "the operation costs \$100 for Cal Poly students" and patients "are asked to return to the clinic three months after the operation and...later in the year to talk about their feelings on the surgery and their general mental state."⁸ Through its medical perspective on abortion and efforts to debunk myths surrounding the procedure, the *Mustang Daily* helped to break down stigmatic barriers for students. With education as a critical aspect of activism, the *Mustang Daily* dismantled many misconceptions surrounding abortion on Cal Poly's campus, informing students on abortion so they could form more educated perspectives.

A second campus student newspaper, *Outpost*, interviewed students at Cal Poly who shared their own experiences, contributing to a national effort to humanize the issue. The *Outpost* featured editorials and spotlights on Cal Poly students and provided an outlet for students to speak on relevant issues to the campus community.

In 1972, the *Outpost* profiled a 19-year-old Cal Poly student, Carla, and her journey through unwanted pregnancy, birth control, abortion, and overcoming guilt.⁹ Carla's first reaction to getting an abortion was negative and at times, humiliating: She "vomited at the thought of [getting an abortion]," but, ultimately, went through with the operation, believing it to be the best option for the wellbeing of her fetus and future. The student's story highlighted the stigma surrounding abortion and the scarcity of resources available to college-aged women experiencing unwanted pregnancies. Carla's focus on how others in the hospital would perceive her shows the tremendous and lingering stigma

7 "Birth Control and Abortion Services Offered by Clinic," *Mustang Daily* 38 (5), October 1, 1974.

8 Ibid.

9 Jonnie Fuentes, "Does Your Boyfriend Have Enough to Send You to Tijuana?" *Outpost* 1 (3), May 31, 1972.

that abortion carried. However, sharing Carla's story also allowed *Outpost* readers empathize with women receiving abortions. Using storytelling to shed a light on the experience of abortion for college-aged women, the *Outpost* cultivated a more personal narrative when discussing the issue.

While most Cal Poly students did not engage in the more publicized forms of protest of the era, student activists used school newspapers to discuss their opinions on abortions, report discussions and forums on campus, and communicate personal stories. Student-led newspapers on Cal Poly's campus educated their readers, and encouraged other students to voice their opinions. Cal Poly may not have hosted the famous abortion protests written in history textbooks, but students and faculty members engaged with the topic and played a distinct role in debates on abortion during the 1970s.

Bibliography

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