



## Pro-Voice in Action

By Carolina De Robertis

“Abortion is a form of killing.”

Twenty high school students shuffled back and forth, searching for their own best stance. One wall represented full agreement; the other, disagreement. After a minute, they’d taken their places—along both walls and throughout the middle of the classroom.

After reminding them that there was no single “right” way to respond, and of our ground-rule of respect for different views, I asked them to voice their thoughts.

One student found the word “killing” too strong. Two others said they believed abortion kills a baby. Yet another reflected on how it would depend on the pregnant woman’s own views on when and how life begins.

“It’s deep,” a young man said in the discussion that followed. “I realized I could have a really different point of view from the person who was talking, but I could still listen to them and hear where they were coming from.”

I brought up the fact that one in three women in the U.S. have an abortion in their lives, and asked them why we so rarely hear people talk about such a common experience.

“There’s a lot of stigma,” one young woman said, and other students nodded. “Women don’t think they’ll get respect.”

In the past two years, Exhale has held community conversations like this one throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. These hour-long, interactive dialogues were developed in direct response to requests from community groups, and are part of our public education program. I have facilitated them in English and in Spanish, at venues ranging from a computer lab for low-income immigrant women to a health educator training for youth, to an organizing circle for Latina domestic workers.

Community conversations use Exhale’s pro-voice frame to create honest, respectful dialogue about the topic of abortion. It hinges on valuing the health, voice, and cultural context of each person affected by abortion.

In a society where public dialogue about abortion is fraught with dichotomies and judgment, it is all too rare to find respectful exchange across the spectrum of beliefs. And yet, that exact kind of exchange is a key to ending stigma: it allows people to reflect on their own views, hear others’ views more clearly, ask for - and receive - accurate information, and loosen the knot of shame and silence that can surround personal experience.

Such exchange, of course, requires a different framework than the ones utilized in mainstream dialogue about abortion. It requires a commitment to listening to those whose experiences and values are different from our own, and recognizing the validity of their perspective. It requires a capacity to respect people's voices, whether or not we agree with them, and to prioritize that respect over making our own "point".

Only then can the immigrant woman who has kept her abortion secret for fifteen years tell her story to a group of peers, on her own terms. Only then can the mother who is against abortion ask about how to get one, and receive information with full respect for her beliefs. Only then can those who believe abortion is not killing learn first-hand from those who do, and vice versa, in a manner that promotes understanding for all women and girls' reproductive realities.

Then - and only then - can we free our communities from abortion stigma, and create a climate of respect and support.

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