Politics & Gender (2026), 1–8
doi:10.1017/S1743923X26101123

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Testifying in Texas: Reflecting on *We Testify Texas*, a State-based Abortion Storyteller Retreat

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(Received 24 September 2026 UTC; revised 24 September 2026 UTC; accepted 25 September 2026 UTC)

Introduction

"I want to talk about my complicated feelings and how I was treated during my abortion procedure," a Texas 20-something declared as they[1] hoisted themself out of the pool's deep end. Three others considered the proposed topic and quickly tiptoed across the surrounding hot deck toward the shaded chairs to join the conversation. The 22 Texans lounging around the pool deck were part of *We Testify*'s first state-based abortion storytelling cohort, *We Testify Texas*, held at a small retreat center in Mineola, a rural town east of Dallas in 2019. The *We Testify Texas* program sought to strengthen the state's robust reproductive justice organizational advocacy infrastructure by training Texans who have had abortions[2] to share their stories and engage with advocacy efforts to preserve and expand abortion access and challenge hostile criminalization efforts in Texas. Although storytelling has been a tactic integral to feminist and social justice organizing (Fernandes 2017; Ganz 2024; Polletta 2022; Ross 2008), nonprofit organizational efforts primarily focused on the production of stories for public consumption, rather than engagement with the storytellers as local experts and organizers. This creates a transactional relationship between advocacy organizations and the people most impacted by the issue, separating storytellers from their stories and leaving storytellers as an untapped resource of testimonial expertise in communities. How can social justice movements and advocacy organizations center people who have had abortion experiences to lead cultural and state-based policy change work? This Notes from the Field reflects on the *We Testify* storytelling model as implemented through the *We Testify Texas* program, including the national-local partnership, programmatic activities, impact of the

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cohort, and how such a program could be replicated in similar political climates and distinct communities.

We Testify is a national advocacy organization focused on strengthening the leadership of people who have abortions. Core to this work is developing/supporting/cultivating their role as abortion storytellers,[3] with the goal of shifting the status quo narratives about people who have abortions in news media, pop culture, and policy advocacy. I founded *We Testify* in 2016 as a program of the non-profit organization the National Network of Abortion Funds. From the beginning, the program has maintained an economic and racial justice ethos rooted in reproductive justice values (Price 2010) and been part of the larger movement which situates the demand for abortion rights within a larger demand for the right to have children and raise children in safe environments. *We Testify*'s employment of a reproductive justice lens supports abortion storytellers' ability to share fuller aspects of their experiences, including their abortions in relationship to other pregnancies, socioeconomic status, varied emotions and experiences with stigma, and structural inequity and political analysis.

Recentering the Storyteller in the Story: The *We Testify* Way

Storytelling by national reproductive rights organizations has traditionally focused on sharing the stories of survivors of sexual violence, people impeded by anti-abortion activists, or those experiencing significant health complications during their pregnancies. These organizations have also tended to elevate a disproportionate number of storytellers who are white, married within heterosexual relationships, economically secure, pursuing or having completed college education, and monolingual English speakers (Bracey Sherman and Mahone 2024; Kaplan 2023; Ludlow 2008; Sisson and Kimport 2014). These stories of justifiable abortions by people with socially normative identities paradoxically produce a stigma for abortions that the general public deems less acceptable (Cockrill et al. 2013; Dubriwny and Siegfried 2021; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell 2009; Ludlow 2008).

By the time of *We Testify*'s founding, storytelling had grown to become a respected tool of the reproductive justice movement (Ross et al. 2008). *We Testify* emerged as a power player in abortion storytelling efforts by centering its programming on individuals representing the majority of abortion patients and focusing its efforts on building up storytellers as leaders with testimonial expertise (Berny 2024; Bracey Sherman 2021; Lindberg et al. 2022; McQuade et al. 2024; Rios 2025; Winderman and Knutson 2023). My goal for *We Testify* was to increase the number and diversity of abortion storytellers and offer them leadership development training, allowing them to become movement strategy decision-makers. In particular, I wanted abortion storytellers to understand theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) and Black feminism (Collins 2000) and have the ability to articulate how power, privilege, and structural oppression impacted their individual experiences and the experiences of the people in their communities. I believed that while the increasing visibility of

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abortion stories in the public sphere was important, without a critical race and gender analysis, the stories would not fully eradicate abortion stigma or critique the underlying white supremacist and pro-natalist ideologies fundamental to anti-abortion policies (Goodwin 2020; Kaplan 2023; Roberts 1997).

In contrast to other abortion storytelling efforts, *We Testify*'s aim was not to solely create a "story bank" to extract the stories, thus separating the testimony from the testifier. My vision for *We Testify* was to train storytellers as anti-oppression organizers who shared their abortion stories as a rallying call and acted as local leaders training peers and reducing community- and individual-level stigma. This was a shift to force the pro-choice movement to engage with the people who have abortions rather than extracting our stories for financial and political gain. Within *We Testify*, the social change comes from the storyteller, not the presence of stories.

We Testify Texas

In 2018, several Texas-based *We Testify* storytellers from earlier national cohorts requested a localized cohort to support the broader advocacy infrastructure built by Texas abortion funds.[4] The fourth *We Testify* cohort was the first state-based model, partnering with nine Texas-based abortion funds (The Afiya Center, The Bridge Collective, Clinic Access Support Network, Frontera Fund, Fund Texas Choice, Jane's Due Process, Lilith Fund, Texas Equal Access Fund, West Fund). Abortion funds were engaged as partners on the program: *We Testify* provided the curriculum, retreat planning, and training for the storytellers at the retreat, but the ongoing engagement with the storytellers would remain at the local level with the abortion funds. While *We Testify* and abortion funds were part of the same network (the National Network of Abortion Funds), it was important that abortion funds were able to maintain autonomy and support storytellers in engaging locally and through state-based advocacy rather than being subsumed in national political organizing. This allowed the local abortion funds to increase the state's abortion storytelling network to combat abortion restrictions and propose proactive state and local policies, including Rosie's Law[5] (Bracey Sherman and Mahone 2024).

The *We Testify Texas* state cohort's training mirrored the national *We Testify* three-day anti-oppression, anti-stigma, and racial and reproductive justice values-based training with several adaptations such as a training on Texas abortion policies, state legislative advocacy, and abortion fund volunteerism. Storytellers discussed hyperlocal issues, including the impact of the state-imposed abortion bans on their morale and their experiences of organizing in a state that is the site of extractive national organization fundraising, negative global headlines, and a hotbed for anti-immigration, anti-trans, and anti-Black surveillance. The storytellers appreciated the ability to connect with people who had abortions and were interested in organizing locally, giving them a direct connection to various organizations and communities on the ground. On the final day, storytellers were given an appreciation shower, a moment when they are encircled by their fellow participants, turning slowly to make eye contact

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with each participant as they "shower" the storyteller with verbal affirmations and appreciations. Currently pregnant storytellers were gifted with onesies decorated by their fellow participants to celebrate being pregnant when they wanted to be.

Upon the conclusion of the program, the storytellers were reconnected with their local abortion fund and given opportunities to participate in campaigns, local and national rallies,[6] and other events. One local abortion fund staff member served as both a point of contact and liaison between *We Testify*, the abortion funds, and the *We Testify Texas* storytellers. When sharing their stories, the storytellers specifically highlighted their identities, Texas roots, the state-enacted barriers they overcame, and vision for abortion access in Texas. Storytellers were featured in local and national news outlets including the *Houston Chronicle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Bustle*, *Teen Vogue*, *NBC News*, and *BBC News*, as well as a video feature on *ABC News*. Two storytellers participated in documentaries. This positioned them as experts in the media, particularly at a time when national spokespeople from outside the state were overwhelming the public conversation.

Several storytellers joined the board of directors, and three became staff of their local abortion funds, placing them in leadership positions where they were able to direct the strategy of the organization and statewide movement. Five storytellers joined the staff of national abortion organizations, and one launched a new local abortion mutual aid organization. Several are currently staffers at local and national abortion organizations, including one leading a national self-managed abortion campaign. Others led local storytelling workshops to increase the reach of their voices and prepare additional storytellers for future engagements.

As the cohort began to find their stride, the COVID-19 global pandemic hit, and *We Testify Texas* storytellers pivoted, sharing stories on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to counter attempts by the Texas state government to deem abortion clinics as non-essential, forcing their temporary closure (Carpenter et al. 2023; White et al. 2021). One storyteller used the platform to demystify the experience of having an abortion, destigmatizing the identity of someone who has had abortions and, in the process, amassing over a million followers. Another storyteller participated in a comic series to share her self-managed abortion story and how it was impacted by Texas' COVID-19 response and clinic closures. The comic, which was translated into English and Spanish, allowed her to protect her identity, share a more expansive version of her experience, and use visual images to reach audiences of varied literacy levels.

The organizing and storytelling training of the participants prepared them to be spokespeople against efforts to shut down abortion clinics during the pandemics, which later morphed into *S.B. 8*, the state law that would outlaw abortion after six weeks and allow individuals to sue anyone who "aids and abets" abortion for $10,000 prior to the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision. In response, Texas abortion funds sued the state while making abortion storytelling a key component of the effort. As access to care in Texas became dire and after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, in 2021 and 2022 five *We Testify Texas* storytellers testified before the United States House of Representatives and

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Senate at committee hearings, raising testimonial expertise to the level of the medical and legal expertise given simultaneously. Their stories, along with the stories of other Texas storytellers from previous cohorts, were shared in response to abortion restrictions by House Representative Veronica Escobar (TX-16).

On the activist front, Texas abortion funds launched the Rosie's Law Coalition, a campaign and advocacy effort with state activations and a state capitol advocacy day. Half of the storytellers engaged in multiple coalition actions. Although the efforts have been stunted due to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, local activists have won significant efforts to allocate Austin city funds to logistical support organizations helping people receive abortion care outside of the state (Jane's Due Process 2024). *We Testify* abortion storytellers were at the forefront of each win.

While these achievements were lauded, what was divergent about the *We Testify* program was its measurement of participant engagement. Rather than requiring participants to engage in a specific number of actions or activities, storytellers were encouraged to engage in a variety of opportunities that felt meaningful for them. This put the storytellers in control of their output, centering their desires, capacities, and individual interests, while focusing on the quality of their engagement. Storytellers were not in competition with each other for opportunities or based on metrics of how many actions each individual took, nor were they forced to participate in activities that didn't fit their needs to meet funders' arbitrary metrics. I believe this is how storytelling should be measured: led by each individual storyteller's aspirations, gifts, and values.

Replication Recommendation

Despite the current criminalized status of abortion access across the nation, I believe that the *We Testify* model is easily replicable. In fact, I believe it is essential that it is replicated in a political moment such as this one. People who are having abortions under logistical, financial, and political duress feel isolated and stigmatized. Creating spaces in which they are able to engage in narrative therapy with other people who have had abortions is critical to the reduction of their internalized stigma and healing. Several abortion funds have created similar support group spaces, although the retreat aspect can prove financially challenging for struggling nonprofits. However, the Texas Equal Access Fund has created its own talk line and storytelling retreat program, Post Abortion Truth and Healing, led by a *We Testify Texas* abortion storyteller (Post Abortion Truth and Healing n.d.).

Replication is also essential to maintaining people who have abortions within the leadership ecosystem of the abortion rights movement, particularly storytellers of color and those who experienced financial, logistical, and economic barriers to abortion. A challenge noted during the *We Testify Texas* recruiting process was that several abortion funds could not identify a board member or staff member who had had an abortion. This identified a lack of experiential

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epistemology within abortion funds leadership and the abortion rights movement overall. This continues to position people who have abortions as people to be helped rather than knowledge keepers with testimonial, experiential, and subject matter expertise to be engaged at all levels of the abortion rights movement.

Nonprofit leadership does not tend to reflect the demographics of the people the organization purports to serve. Consequently, an intentional effort to immerse people who have abortions in movement leadership will ensure a diversity of experiential knowledge and a healthy and consistently evolving movement (Danley and Blessett 2022; Nickels and Leach 2021). Similarly, national organizations engaging in partnership with local organizations and activists must be cognizant of their role and power dynamics at play. Therefore, they must be willing to offer infrastructural support, funding, and requested training, while stepping back to allow the local organizations the opportunity to ideate, experiment, and create based on their own vision.

Conclusion

Personal abortion storytelling has become an essential tactic in abortion advocacy. However, it has taken deliberate work, grounded in reproductive justice values, to ensure that the cadre of storytellers includes those with marginalized identities whose stories currently experience less visibility and, in turn, less public support. Abortion storytelling initiatives like *We Testify Texas* involve tactics that invest in, reframe, and rebuild in efforts to center the leadership and knowledge of people who have abortions. By trusting us to know what we need, we can support each other in healing from the oppressions we've faced and build a new movement where all of our stories are heard with all of the nuance and complexity they deserve.

Notes

1. *We Testify*'s storyteller cohorts include transgender, nonbinary, and genderqueer people who use various pronouns, including the singular "they."
2. I use the phrase "people who have had abortions," as well as variations on the phrasing, to be inclusive of the gender expansiveness of those who have abortions and in the tradition of "people first" language. This phrase centers the person having the abortion as an individual separate from their medical procedure and whose identity and experience of abortion extends beyond a particular moment in time.
3. I use the phrase "abortion storytellers" to denote a subset of people who have had abortions and openly share their experiences, with the general public in particular.
4. Abortion funds are non-profit, community, and mutual aid organizations that provide financial and logistical support for people seeking abortions who cannot afford a portion or the entirety of their procedure.
5. Rosie's Law, a proposed bill named after Rosie Jimenez, was an effort to restore public and private health insurance coverage of abortion and contraception.
6. For example, Rosie's Law Rallies, Bans Off Our Bodies 2021, and Rally for Abortion Justice 2021.

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Cite this article: Bracey Sherman, Renee. 2026. "Testifying in Texas: Reflecting on *We Testify Texas*, a State-based Abortion Storyteller Retreat." *Politics & Gender* 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X26101123

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