
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

CALL the JANES

Elisa Leonelli · Tuesday, January 3rd, 2023

I was aware of the movie *Call Jane*, directing debut of screenwriter Phyllis Nagy, because it premiered at Sundance in January 2022, I had read reviews and interviews, so I immediately went to see it after it opened in theaters on October 28. If you missed it, it's available on Amazon Prime and other VOD platforms. [Watch trailer.](#)



Call Jane

Call Jane tells the story of a middle class housewife, Joy (Elizabeth Banks), in 1968 Chicago, with a teenage daughter and a lawyer husband, who is happily expecting a second child, when her

doctor detects a heart condition that would make childbirth dangerous for her survival, however the all-male board of the hospital denies her a medical abortion. She finds a note scribbled at a bus stop “Pregnant? Need Help? Call Jane,” and a phone number. Thus begins her and our discovery of this group of courageous women, headed by Virginia (Sigourney Weaver), who provided this illegal procedure, with humor and compassion.



The Janes

A couple of months later I watched the documentary *The Janes* on HBO, which had also premiered at Sundance, and saw some of the real women, such as Laura Kaplan, author of the 1995 book *The*

Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service, explain the work they did 50 years ago, at great risk to themselves, to save women's lives and provide basic healthcare, which eventually landed seven of them in jail in May 1972. All charges were dropped, when the *Roe v. Wade* decision by the Supreme Court, January 22, 1973, guaranteed the constitutional right to an abortion, which was overturned by the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision, June 24, 2022.



Radical Party © Elisa Leonelli

As appalled as most of us were when that happened, we knew it was coming right after Donald Trump was elected president instead of Hillary Clinton, on November 8, 2016, because he would pack the Supreme Court with conservative judges. We realized how this decision made the situation much worse that it already had been for decades, especially for poor women, when this simple procedure, that should be part of every gynecologist's training and practiced in every hospital, was relegated to small clinics, making the providers vulnerable to violent protests, and now to criminal charges. [Read here](#) how to mitigate the impact of Dobbs.



Abortion. Let's do it ourselves © Elisa Leonelli

The women who started the [Jane Collective](#) had come from the civil-rights and anti-war movements, and this subject resonated with me, because I participated in the student movement in 1968, and in 1970 joined the first feminist group in Italy, [Rivolta Femminile](#). In June 1976 I traveled back to Rome to cover the elections as a photo-journalist, and I connected with the [Radical Party](#), that won four seats in Parliament for the first time in its history. They supported the rights of women and gays, and their main objective was to obtain the [legalization of abortion](#), which would eventually happen in May 1978. In the meantime, their affiliate organization C.I.S.A. (Italian Center Sterilization and Abortion) was performing thousands of clandestine abortions. So I contacted them and asked if I could witness one of the procedures and photograph it. Like in *Call Jane*, where the need for a doctor had been eliminated by Joy learning to perform the abortion herself, then teaching it to the others, we were all young women around a kitchen table. We chatted, had coffee, hugged, became friends, but despite these optimal circumstances, the procedure, which I described in detail in my article, was painful and frightening. Not something anyone would wish for, if they could avoid it.



Elizabeth Banks © Wilson Webb:Roadside Attractions

As Elizabeth Banks said to press at Sundance: “In all of my experiences I find that unwanted pregnancy is 100% caused by irresponsible ejaculation, men are responsible, so let’s get them more involved in these conversations.”

To explore the question of when does human life begin-conception, viability or birth- you may [read this article](#).

Featured photo: Members of the Jane © HBO

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