

CHOICE /LESS



KELLY: HOW DO I TAKE BACK MY STORY?

Jenn Stanley: Welcome to CHOICE/LESS, a storytelling podcast from Rewire Radio about reproductive injustice and the laws that put people in choice-less situations. I'm Jenn Stanley, senior staff reporter at Rewire, and the host of this podcast.

In each episode, I talk to people about the difficulties and consequences they face accessing basic health care. When I came up with the concept for this show, I hoped to give people a platform to take back their stories from the dangerous, false, and shameful rhetoric surrounding sex, unplanned pregnancy, and reproductive rights. But coming forward requires bravery, because it can come at a price.

Anti-choice legislators and activists will often try to advance their agenda by targeting those who speak out and grossly misrepresenting their stories. In many cases, they will fabricate a false narrative entirely to silence and shame.

This episode is a perfect example. Kelly Fitzgerald is a 30-year-old writer who lives in Cape Coral, Florida, with her fiancé, Fernando, and their two cats. Kelly is three years sober. And in the fall of 2012, she had an illegal abortion while living in Mexico, an event that she now credits with helping her on the path to sobriety.

In April 2016, Kelly wrote about this experience for an online publication called Ravishly. Within weeks, it had been poached by a handful of anti-choice websites that used personal photos from her social media accounts to accompany defamatory headlines and stories filled with medical and scientific inaccuracies.

Here's Kelly's story:

Kelly Fitzgerald: I had moved to Cancun in 2009, basically to get away from life. I really just wanted to escape reality. And since I moved there I had partied, a lot I drank a lot, I used a lot of drugs. I became involved with people who drank and used the same way that I did, and it was a very chaotic situation. My life was definitely unmanageable in every way possible.

I've gone through different stages of drinking and partying throughout my life and Cancun especially is where it heightened. It's a party town it's a tourist city so everyone is drinking and partying. So it was basically heaven for me.

The year 2012 was very crazy for me. I had broken up with an ex-boyfriend the previous year, and I just went crazy after that. I was drinking every night, using cocaine almost every night. And during spring break was even worse because during spring break there's even more people, more parties.

I met Fernando and our relationship was very rocky in the beginning. We fought all the time we were emotionally abusive to each other. We broke up several times. It was very toxic in the beginning and this was all related to drinking and using drugs.

And there were friends that I was around with that were also very toxic just fighting all the time. More drinking and using. And people that I would have never hung out with had I have not been drinking and using.

And you know there were blackouts as a result of my drinking where I would wake up and not know what happened. I was a person who got nasty hangovers. I almost always threw up either while I was drinking or sometimes not until the next day. And um, I would have pounding headaches, I felt bloated all the time. My face was very bloated and just discolored, and I can look at pictures from back then and think like wow that doesn't even look like me, and my face just looks completely different

And I was missing work a lot at that time. I actually ended up quitting a job that I had where I was going into an office and got another job that was work from home so that I could party more. And you know I felt disgusting basically.

I think we had been dating, Fernando and I, about five months before I found out I was pregnant. My body was feeling much different than normal even though you know I had been used to feeling crappy because of drinking, but this was much different. This was more extreme. I was extremely tired. I would go to bed at like 10 p.m. and like wake up at 8 a.m. right before work and still be exhausted. I was very bloated- and I had- so- Fernando and I hadn't been the safest when using birth control and that goes back to I had stuff going on on my face I had melasma right around the time when I met him so I had gone off oral birth control so with that we were being unsafe not using commons as much as we should have.

And we had known that we were unsafe so I decided to take the morning after pill, and I thought that worked and it didn't so I continued to feel this weird way my body wasn't normal. Two friends of mine at that time became pregnant and I was like weird everyone's getting pregnant. Then I thought to myself, Oh my gosh, I'm feeling so weird, what if I'm pregnant. And I thought to myself that can't be the case because I took that morning after pill, but then I was like, I don't know.

So after a couple of days I decided to take a pregnancy test and find out. Because I was feeling very weird. So I went to pharmacy in Cancun, bought a pregnancy test for like \$4, went back to my house, took the test, Fernando came over and it was positive. We were in my little apartment in Cancun and I just was like a mess. I lost it as soon as I saw the results of the test.

I started hysterically crying. I was extremely angry at myself. I was like Oh my god, what am I going to do. He looked like a deer in headlights. He was obviously just as surprised and worried and upset as I was. But he was trying to console me. I was just very, drained and terrified.

The first thing I did was go to a gynecologist, because I was like, well let's just go see if this test is correct. I got a recommendation from a friend to see a gynecologist who's a woman doctor. And I went there thinking, you know, that, I don't know. I don't know what I thought it was going to be like, but it wasn't what I thought it was going to be like. So they did an ultrasound without asking me if I wanted one. And printed me out a picture, you can barely see anything. But it was still traumatizing nonetheless and emotional. And the gynecologist was like, congratulations. And then she gave me some vitamins, some pre-natal vitamins and she sent me on my way. It was obviously never talked about that I possibly wouldn't go through with the pregnancy because abortion is illegal in Cancun. So they assume you would obviously want to continue the pregnancy.

So leaving the gynecologist I was just crying my eyes out, and Fernando was just consoling me. And I was like Ok well we need to figure out how to get an abortion, and that was pretty much my reaction right away. Because I knew that there was no way that I could go through with it.

I think every woman who's sexually active thinks about what they would do if they got pregnant and I was no different. I had always known about abortion, I am obviously pro-choice, and I had thought many times if I got pregnant i would have an abortion. But it was really hard when it actually happened.

Jenn: Abortion is illegal in Mexico except in cases of rape, incest, or when the pregnant person's life is in danger. States can regulate their abortion laws, and some allow abortion for severe congenital defects. But Kelly did not fall into one of these categories. If she chose to have an abortion in Mexico, it was not going to be legal.

Kelly: I had friends and acquaintances who had had abortions in Cancun. It was like word of mouth, they passed me a business card. It was very down low. Hush hush. They were like, call this number, go see this guy, and he'll take care of you.

I was so scared. I was terrified, oh my god, I was so scared, I don't know. I was terrified because no. 1, I had to have an abortion no. 2, I had to go to some doctor that I didn't know, and um that was illegal, and shady and in a weird part of town, in a country that I'm not from, but I knew it was the only way.

So I went and saw the doctor the office was in a not the worst looking part of town but a really shady area set back from the road and there was no signs or anything to tell you that it was a doctor, so that makes me feel unsafe. I just I remember the steps were falling apart and the paint was cracking off the walls and um Fer was with me through all this, he went with me. And we went in and talked to the doctor and sat in his little office room. And he just had like one small waiting room and one big procedure room and there was like a desk next to the bed where the procedures are done. It doesn't look like any doctor's offices that I've seen in the United States that's for sure.

The doctor was very nice, um and you know he was straightforward. He told me and Fernando exactly what was going to happen. He was going to give me pills first. I would go home and take them, let those pills work. Lay down for the rest of the night, rest, and come back in the morning, and um get the suction procedure done to make sure everything was removed. Um and we had to pay in cash. Obviously because you know it was illegal. I just remember getting my paycheck and literally 80 percent of that paycheck went for the abortion.

Um, so we went and saw him and then he wanted me to wait a week or so to actually get the procedure because I was running a race or something. And I actually drank in between that time too, because that's how I dealt with my feelings back then. So then when the day came, um, I took the pills, and you know went to the bathroom and bled a little bit, and then the next morning went to the doctor's office and I didn't really know, I mean this was also, he was talking in Spanish mostly so Fernando was my interpreter because I only had limited Spanish at the time.

And he put me under general anesthesia. And that's all I remember. I still don't really know what happened because I was asleep. I mean the procedure only took about 15 minutes I think. Fernando was outside the door the whole time. Then they sent me on my way and everything went well as far as I know but it was scary, because I just felt like I didn't really know what was going on.

I was very, very tired, I had to sleep for a few hours after that. But the days afterwards I just felt like I was grieving. Like my body ugh, just didn't feel like my own. It took forever for my body to go back to normal.

And I kept the print out of the ultrasound. For like six months afterwards. Fernando was like you need to throw it out because it's just making you upset every time you find it, when you're like, cleaning your room. And I was like, yea and then I eventually did. But it took me a while to part with the picture.

I don't know I just wanted to remember what happened I think. I don't want to forget. It was like a really significant event in my life for many reasons. So I don't know I think I needed that reminder and then when I was you know felt like I was past a point of grieving I got rid of the picture. And I wouldn't want it now.

Jenn: Kelly continued to drink and use after her abortion. She says it's how she managed her emotions.

Kelly: Fernando and I had gotten closer. I think actually the abortion had made our bond stronger and so with that we started living together. He had often times told me that um, he thought I had a worrisome relationship with alcohol so I tried to cut back.

Jenn: But six months later, their relationship was in trouble. She had gone to Punta Cana for a friend's bachelorette party.

Kelly: Fernando didn't want me to go on the trip because he knew how I drank. He didn't trust that I would be able to control my drinking. We had been talking about it for months because we had planned the trip, my friends and I, for months. And I told him that I would be ok, that I wouldn't blackout, I would be responsible.

So I went on the trip, and the first days I did ok, I still drank but I didn't blackout. I was able to message Fernando and tell him I was ok. But like the second or third day there, I ended up blacking out just like I always had, and he knew like what happened, and I had gotten out of control. I had thrown up. My friends had to take care of me. The same old drinking patterns that he had to deal with several times in the past and he had been my caretaker during drinking many times.

And so he messaged me while i was in the Dominican Republic and was like alright this is over, I can't be with you anymore. You made these promises you obviously aren't serious about controlling your drinking, and I don't want to deal with this anymore. I'm breaking up with you. And so the remaining time I had to think about that. I was extremely upset. I continued to drink in the Dominican Republic for the last two days, and um, in the airport on the way home back to Cancun, I just had like a break down. I just was crying my eyes out. I was hungover. I felt like crap. Emotionally, physically, mentally.

I called my mom in the airport and I was like I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't stop drinking. I mean, I can, but I can't control the way I drink. Every time i want to drink normally and I can't, and I keep failing at the things that I'm setting myself up for. And I'm losing a relationship that means a lot to me. A man that has been very supportive and great for me I'm losing him. I had an ex-boyfriend before I dated Fernando who brought up to me that he didn't think my drinking was normal. So I was like, ok, I've gotta do something. I'm the common denominator here.

Jenn: Fernando picked her up from the airport. She said she was committed to trying to stay sober, and she's been sober ever since.

Kelly: That's my sober date, May 7, 2013. Now that I'm sober I have this way that I can reflect on my life where I'm really grateful for everything that I've been through, especially my abortion because it was honestly the turning point in my life. I think back and I'm like if my life hadn't been so unmanageable and been shown to me in the way that I got pregnant and I had to have the abortion I might not have ever gotten sober. And sobriety has given me everything. So I'm grateful for all of the events that led up to that. So I would say I kind of have moved past the grieving process for my abortion and it's just something that I'm really grateful for now. It changed my life, it saved my life.

I think now how different my life would be had I gone through with the pregnancy and had a child. I mean I might not be sober. I might not be with Fernando. I mean who knows if our relationship would have made it through that. And now I get to marry him and we get to decide when we're having out kids.

Jenn: Kelly gradually told her close family and friends about her abortion. She says that although her mother had always been pro-choice, and an active member of the National Organization for Women, she was the most difficult person to tell.

Kelly: I didn't want her to know I was in Cancun drinking, and getting pregnant, and having this completely chaotic life. I didn't want her to worry. I kind of felt like I deserved to keep the burden to myself.

Jenn: Now that she's sober, she finds purpose in sharing her story. She started a blog while still living in Cancun. And a post she wrote about her first year of sobriety went viral, and began her writing career.

She still hadn't written or spoken about her abortion publicly until late 2015, when she shared her story with the Abortion Diary podcast. Then, in the spring of 2016, she wrote a personal essay about her experience for the online publication, Ravishly.

Kelly: After my article was published on Ravishly I shared it with my social networks everyone had a great response everyone was very supportive.

I didn't have one negative response, until I realized there was an angry reaction on my Facebook post and Uh I didn't know who it was from so I clicked on this girl who was a stranger. I'm not friends with her. Not on Facebook. And so I clicked on her

Jenn: The anti-choice propaganda site, Life News, had published an article about her with the headline, Woman Has Abortion So She Won't Have to Stop Drinking and Party-ing, and a picture of her taken from her Twitter account.

Kelly: And I saw it, and I was like 'Oh my god,' and my stomach just dropped, I was like I felt sick I was like, what is my face doing on this website with this headline, I was so shocked and disgusted and I was like, 'Oh my god, why is this happening?'

Someone had copy and pasted most of my Ravishly narrative onto this article, and then used it to say that abortion was wrong, and tell the world and name me and use my photo that they stole from my Twitter account to tell the world that I had an abortion to keep drinking and party-ing. And they had mentioned in there, because I wrote in my Ravishly article that my abortion was the turning point in my life which led me to sobriety, and they said, no that's not true. Now if you google my name and abortion, all of these defamatory articles come up.

Jenn: There are several versions of the article on the Internet. Each misrepresents Kelly's story to support medically inaccurate claims, like abortion commonly leads to drug addiction and depression. None of them reached out to Kelly for permission or for a comment.

Kelly: I'm surprised they singled me out and stalked through my twitter profile and took the time to demonize me. But um, if anything, it just makes me realized how important it is for people to share their abortions stories. These right wing, anti-choice, anti-abortion people, they demonize sex. They didn't experience the emotions and grieve like I did. Only I have that power.

Jenn: Kelly says that she's going to continuing telling her story, despite the risks. In fact, she thinks that as anti-choice lawmakers are currently chipping away at Americans' access to abortion and contraception, it's more important than ever to tell people about what it was like to get an abortion in a place where it's illegal.

This episode of CHOICE/LESS was produced by me, Jenn Stanley, for Rewire Radio, with editorial oversight by Marc Faletti, our director of multimedia. Jodi Jacobson is our editor-in-chief, Brady Swenson is our director of tech. Music for this episode was by Doug Helsel. Special thanks to all the staff at Rewire. For more information about Kelly's story,

and for comprehensive news, commentary, and analysis on reproductive and sexual health and justice, check out our website at [Rewire.news](https://rewire.news). Thanks for listening.