

KELSEY: WHO CAN WE TALK TO?

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

South Dakota has some of the most restrictive abortion laws in the country. It's not an easy place to provide or access abortion care. The Sioux Falls Planned Parenthood is the only abortion clinic in the state, and they don't even have a full-time provider. Instead, doctors come in from out of state on the days the clinic offers abortions.

Today we hear from Kelsey, a resident of Sioux Falls and former Planned Parenthood employee.

Kelsey: I used to work at a Planned Parenthood in South Dakota. It's probably one of the worst states to work at a Planned Parenthood in. It's not well received in this state. We only have one Planned Parenthood in the entire state. In our neighboring states like North Dakota, they don't provide abortion services. So we serve a multi-state area.

Jenn: Kelsey worked part time, on AB days, or the days the clinic provides abortion care.

Kelsey: I was mostly there on AB days. That was on Mondays and Thursdays, because in South Dakota we have a 72-hour waiting period. So these girls have to drive however number of hours away they are on a Monday and sit there for several hours, meet with our doctor, go through all of this paperwork that this state makes them do. And then they have to leave and come back 72 hours later and spend another few hours there. So it was very difficult for some people to be able to take a couple days off of work. Or if they traveled some of them stayed in hotels in town. It was a big financial burden for them to do that.

Jenn: If you want an abortion in South Dakota, you need to wait 72 hours between an in-clinic counseling session and the procedure.

But say you need an abortion, and you work full time. Maybe you're already a parent. You have a busy schedule. But the window to get an abortion in South Dakota is not flexible. You have to do it on a Thursday. And you have to come in the Monday before. Both appointments could take hours.

Kelsey: They come in, they register, they fill out a packet of information, all sorts of information like their financial information, their personal information, reasons why they're there, age of the man that got them pregnant. Like every information you could ever provide, and then they would wait until they got called back. Then they listen to a recording from that doctor- that specific

doctor. At the end it gives them a number, a random number. You can't tell the patient what the number is. But when you come in after the recording is done, you ask the patient what's the number? They have to repeat it to you. If they do not, they have to listen to the recording again.

Jenn: Kelsey said sometimes people would come in on Monday for the counseling session. They'd have their appointment scheduled for Thursday, but something would come up. They had to reschedule.

If they wanted to reschedule, they had to start the process all over again, since different doctors come in each week to provide care, and patients must listen to the recording from the doctor providing the abortion.

Kelsey: We had people driving six, eight, ten hours just to come to this Planned Parenthood. We have a couple reservations in the state so we had a lot of girls coming from that part of the state, which is six hours away, who don't have a lot of access to health care out there.

But it opened my eyes to a whole new world. It's not all teenagers coming there. It's not what people portray it to be. It's families. It's all races. It's women of all ages. And then of course for our STD services we did get some gentlemen in there as well.

Jenn: South Dakota is a red state, and Kelsey had to be careful when talking about her work. Her own family members didn't know she worked at Planned Parenthood. She said between the clinic protesters and the state's overall conservative culture, she often felt threatened.

Kelsey: I was at a bar one night hanging out with some friends and someone asked me where I worked. I felt by their personality that I could tell them where I worked. I said I worked at Planned Parenthood, and she wanted to beat me up after I told her that. So I immediately left the bar there.

Also we have a lot of churchgoers in this state. It's a very red state. So typically when I was going to work there would be people standing outside praying or doing their promoting of not going to Planned Parenthood.

We were kind of secret about when the AB days were, so I'm not sure that a lot of the protesters knew when we provided abortion care. Because they'd be out there when we were just having family planning clinic days, yelling at people. I did feel a little unsafe. There are some people who are very respectable. The elderly people that just say their prayers and leave. I'm fine with that.

We did have one particular family that was there, and we just had this mom, she had four or five kids that she would bring with her and just stand out there. That got to be a little much for me. It seemed irrational. I did at times feel unsafe.

Jenn: In the summer of 2014, Kelsey was laid off from her other job. Planned Parenthood could not offer her more hours, and when she couldn't find another part-time job to supplement her income, she needed to quit to find full-time work.

Kelsey: I loved it. I really loved the people. I felt like it was a sense of family. I have never worked anywhere since where I felt like I was doing something good. I'm sorry, I just get so emotional when I talk about it because I really loved working there.

Jenn: About six months later, she found out she was pregnant.

Kelsey: I knew right away. Just from my background of everything. All of my experience working in women's health, things like that. I just knew. And I should know how to prevent pregnancy, and things like that. But accidents happen. So one day when I woke up after going out, I had a very large hangover, more than I normally would, and I just had this sinking feeling that something else was going on.

I had been in the same relationship since 2012. He was living with his parents, and my mom was living with me. My mom has a lot of mental problems. She was a gambler, lots of severe depression, relapsing all the time. It was best that I kept an eye on her. She would live with my sister part of the time, and then she would live with me.

I drove myself to Target. Picked up one of those digital tests and whole huge thing of juice like Juno style. I drove over to my friend's house with her, and me, and my friend, and her husband. We were all waiting for the test. It has a little clock thing that spins. Waiting, waiting, waiting. It was kind of silent. And then when it said pregnant I immediately started crying. There was lots of hugs around. A lot of what are you gonna do kind of a thing.

I didn't stay there very long because my boyfriend was getting off work at midnight and this was late at night, so I drove over to his house and just kind of waited until he got there. I was sitting there at his house and I said, "I have something to tell you" and he said, "you're pregnant aren't you?" And I said, "yes I am."

So then we had a little cry-fest and a little bit of a discussion. I knew that I could not go to the Planned Parenthood in Sioux Falls. My job was not flexible at all. And we knew very early on that that is the decision we wanted to make. We were not in the situation to be having a child. I had my mom's situation I was dealing with. She had just relapsed a few weeks before this. My boyfriend was having a hard time finding a job in the field he went to school for. We were in limbo with a lot of that and we weren't even living together at that time. So we knew what our decision was. It was not a hard decision for us. But I knew that I could not go to the one in Sioux Falls. Just because of the three day waiting period, and trying to get time off work was not possible. So I started calling around to all these other planned parenthoods that I could think of. Omaha they had a wait. Lincoln had a wait.

Jenn: These were long waits. Over a month in some cases. Kelsey knew she didn't want to be pregnant, and she wanted to end the pregnancy as soon as possible.

Kelsey: Everybody has their own moral of what they find acceptable for themselves, and I didn't want to wait for very long. I didn't want to have to start having actual symptoms. I didn't want to have to start going through morning sickness and things like that. Mostly because I didn't want everybody else to find out. I called the one in Minneapolis, the Vadalicia clinic, they said they had an opening. It was on February 5. I knew exactly what day it was. I had that day off.

My boyfriend and I left the night before though because my appointment was early in the morning. It was a four hour drive so we left after I got off work at 9:00 at night, drove, stayed at a hotel, got up the next day and went there.

There were protesters outside the clinic when I went. There was this guy and I remember seeing him there when I did my training, because when I got hired at Planned Parenthood I had to go to the Vandalia clinic for my training. And he likes to walk. There's like a railroad in the back and then they have a high fence. That's where some of them like to hang out. And he was yelling things over the fence- through the fence is what I should say, and you could kind of see his outline. He was more so yelling, saying different things and carrying on.

It was a long day. They tell you it's six hours, and they're not kidding when they say you're going to be there six hours. You do a lot of waiting there because again there's so many regulations. Minnesota is not as strict as South Dakota but there are a lot of regulations on how they do things, and that clinic is a lot busier than the one in Sioux Falls for sure. But I think the anticipation, I mean I even knew what to expect sitting there filling out all the paperwork, waiting to be called.

And then of course I chose a medical abortion which is when you take the pills. Then they have to do a blood draw and I don't know why this slipped my mind but I have awful veins. So you sit there with the hot pack on your hand, and they prick you a couple of times to get something.

It was a very emotional day. I will never forget it that's for sure. Thank goodness I had my boyfriend with me. I did see a young couple, and it that that was interesting. They were doing some fighting in the waiting room. It seemed like they didn't know each other very well. I remember being focused in on that couple, I don't know why. I think I felt bad for the girl. And I had a really good support system and it seemed like her man really wasn't there. He was kind of taking it a little too lightly when, yea, he's not in her shoes, but it's a more emotional thing than some people think. I will never forget them though sitting there, and she was, I think she was going through the same thing I was, like when are they going to call me? What am I to expect? I kind of wish I would have talked to her now. I just got this feeling that she needed somebody to support her.

Jenn: Kelsey is a natural caregiver. Even in this time when she herself needed to be cared for, her first instinct was to reach out to someone she thought might need her. But she was called into he office before she could say anything.

Kelsey: You talk to the doctor. You do a little consultation, and they go over the packet. Mine was fairly short there because they knew that I already knew what to expect and what to do, so they just did a short overview for that.

After you meet with the doctor they send you on your way. They prescribe you Percocet and some other things. You have to go to a pharmacy and when you go to put in your order and hand them the slip they actually have to call and verify that you were at the clinic that day. I kind of found that really traumatizing. I was like can we just get this filled? Because then the guy was on hold waiting to verify that I was actually at the clinic. And then they ask you around what time, and it's like all day guy, I was there all day.

So then we're waiting for the prescription, and I'm getting so hungry, so my boyfriend goes and gets a Subway sandwich at a Subway, and they screwed up his order, and that sent me flying. Once we left I broke down in tears crying, mad, I felt all the emotions that I had built up throughout the day. Then I had to pick up my prescription where the guy needed to call and make sure I was at Planned Parenthood that day, and you know that they know and I shouldn't feel ashamed but that's what you're made to feel.

So then we started our long journey home. I fell asleep. I think I was so emotionally drained I don't think I woke up after we got on the interstate. I think I slept the entire way home.

So the next day, you have to wait for the next day before you take the pills that you stick in your cheek. I didn't realize I was going to have the cramping. I expected it, but a holy Hannah, thank goodness they prescribe you Percocet for that because then I just slept through the rest. But that was kind of difficult to deal with. I think mostly though the emotions came afterwards where I was still going through the healing process, and you just had hormones and then you drop them off kind of a thing. So that's where I found myself really searching for somebody to talk to.

Jenn: Kelsey knew from working at South Dakota's Planned Parenthood that finding a sympathetic ear to listen to her wouldn't come easy. Remember the woman who threatened to beat her up? She was afraid of ending up in a similar situation, or worse, because this time, she was the one choosing to terminate a pregnancy.

Kelsey: I talked to my boyfriend a lot. I think he kind of got a little overwhelmed with talking about it. Because my boyfriend is really not a super emotional person. So I think he was dealing with his own emotions that he didn't want to talk about. And his friends are a little more on the conservative side so he really didn't have a lot of friends to open up to. He had my friends which were all girls. Not really the people that you really want to turn to when you're a man going through this. That's another thing that I feel like you should have more of, the support for the man. Because it's not always a deadbeat guy. It's not always like that. It's a loving boyfriend, it's a loving husband, it's whatever.

Jenn: Kelsey and her boyfriend are still together. She says that though she feels she's healed from her experience, they still talk about it all the time. In fact, she said something that kind of surprised me.

Kelsey: We don't feel any less parents than people that actually have kids. But that's how I view it. Some people might not view it that way. But that was the choice that we had made for our family. So yea we talk about it all the time. We have the ultrasound picture and we keep it in the little separate box and whenever, sometimes working overnights I tend to feel lonely sometimes because the rest of the world is all functioning on a different time. So if I'm ever feeling down or something, I can talk to him about it. I don't have so many instances of that anymore. I'm pretty much healed from those wounds.

Jenn: Why did you keep the ultrasound picture?

I didn't really know I wanted one really until I got there. I was like, I think I want one. I don't know what my thought process was. It was more of a spur of the moment thing. I was making decisions like you know they always ask you do you want to know if there's multiples and I was always wondering at the Sioux Falls clinic, why would people say yes? Why would they want to

know that? But then here I am at the Vandalia clinic saying I want to know. I don't know why. I think it was more of a curiosity thing. You just don't know what you're going to do until that time comes. And then I said can I have a printout of that? And she gave me three pictures she put them in an envelope. I didn't want to look at it right away. It took me a few weeks to open it. But I just don't know it was just something that we could take out and talk about. We used it as a healing thing. And we still keep it. We don't really look at it that often anymore, but it was definitely good for us healing wise.

I can't imagine having no one else to talk to. There's no way I could be a happy person again. It takes some healing afterwards when you have all these people praying in front of the Planned Parenthood in town here, and we've got all these pro-life rallies, and you're a terrible person, and why would you want to do this, and I don't see how anybody could do that. You don't know until you're there. You have no clue until you're in those shoes. You just feel like you're being judged. And I know my mom would be so upset if she found out, she would be so mad.

Jenn: People heal in different ways. Some people don't feel they need to heal at all. There's no right way to feel about an abortion. Kelsey told me that providing reproductive health services is her passion. She hopes to get to do it professionally again, but she doesn't think that's likely if she stays in South Dakota, where there are so few options to provide or access care. For now, she hopes that telling her story can help others who want support, but don't feel safe talking about their abortions.

Kelsey: Getting my abortion did make me have even more greater respect for Planned Parenthood workers, volunteers, anybody that works with women in that field. It definitely makes me feel like I want to get back into it somehow. Probably it's not going to happen in Sioux Falls. But I feel like that's my calling, and I always tell them if you have a girl there that needs to talk to somebody or wants to share their emotions afterwards, I'm here, because I understand.

I had felt every emotion under the sun, and sometimes you feel like, am I supposed to be feeling this way? Is this normal? Am I supposed to just be happy? But everybody is different everybody experiences it a little bit different. There's going to be some people who are more relieved than others there are going to be some people that are going to be sad about the whole situation more than others. Everybody is different. It depends where they're at in their life. And I didn't really get to see a whole lot of that after experience working at Planned Parenthood because I saw them just for their procedure and then they were gone.

Jenn: This episode 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 technology. Music for this episode was by Doug Helsel. Special thanks to all the staff at Rewire. For more information on Kelsey's story, forced waiting periods, and comprehensive news, commentary, and analysis on reproductive and sexual health and justice, visit our website at Rewire.news/Choiceless. Thanks for listening.