



Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger was a nurse who grew up in an Irish family of 11 children in Corning, New York. Her mother, in fragile health from many pregnancies, including seven miscarriages, died at age 50 of tuberculosis. Her mother's story — along with her work as a nurse on the Lower East Side of New York City — inspired Sanger to travel to Europe and study birth-control methods at a time when educating people about birth control was illegal in the United States.

On October 16, 1916, Sanger — together with her sister Ethel Byrne and activist Fania Mindell — opened the country's first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Women lined up down the block to get birth-control information and advice from Sanger, Byrne, and Mindell. Nine days later, police raided the clinic and shut it down. All three women were charged with crimes related to sharing birth-control information. Sanger refused to pay the fine and spent 30 days in jail, where she educated other inmates about birth control.

Although the Brownsville clinic was shut down, Sanger went on to travel the country to share her vision. For a time, Sanger supported the eugenics movement, but it would be unfair to call her a racist. In 1939, she initiated the "Negro Project" — alongside Black leaders like W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Rev. Adam Clayton Powell. The mission of the Negro Project was to put black doctors and nurses in charge of birth control clinics to reduce mistrust of a white-dominated health care system.

In 1923, Sanger opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in Manhattan to provide birth control devices to women and to collect statistics about the safety and long-term effectiveness of birth control. That same year, Sanger incorporated the American Birth Control League, an ambitious new organization that examined the global impact of population growth, disarmament, and famine. The two organizations eventually merged to become Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

The efforts of birth control proponents led to a 1936 court ruling that birth control devices and information no longer would be classified as obscene, and could be legally distributed in New York, Connecticut, and Vermont. While it took another 30 years for these rights to be extended to married couples (but just married couples) throughout the rest of the country, it was a historic step toward making birth control available to everyone.

Born on 14 September 1879, in Corning, New York; Sanger died on 6 September 1966, in Tucson, Arizona. Although her philosophies were often controversial, every American woman should honor her work, for without her they could very well have never been allowed to plan their pregnancies.