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An Oral History of the Anti-CPC Coalition at Middlebury College

A few minutes away from Middlebury College, just off of Route 7, stands a classic New England style house with white shutters that resembles the many small businesses around it. A small sign outside reads ‘Pregnancy Resource Center of Addison County.’ As cute as it looks, the building is actually a crisis pregnancy center (CPC), a religiously-motivated fake clinic which poses falsely as a healthcare facility to mislead pregnant women, provide them with false information, and deter them from getting abortions. The Pregnancy Resource Center of Addison County advertises at Middlebury College’s annual student activities fair, and has had a presence on campus in other ways as well.

In the spring of 2018, a group of Middlebury students, advised by Dr. Carly Thomsen, organized an effort to ban crisis pregnancy centers from campus – a goal which was not achieved. The community here is coalitional, rather than identitarian, in nature; these individuals are bound as feminists to a shared commitment to reproductive justice. I interviewed Grace Vedock ‘20 and Taite Shomo ‘20.5, two of the students involved in the initiative from the outset, and Dr. Thomsen, a professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, whose scholarship largely tackles crisis pregnancy centers. In her time as a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara, Dr. Thomsen spearheaded the initiative which successfully invoked a campus ban CPCs, which is, to this date, the first and only CPC ban to exist at a college or university. I should also mention that this initiative was largely spearheaded by Toria Isquith ‘19, who I did not manage to get in touch with in time to interview her for this project, but whose leadership and contributions were frequently mentioned by Grace, Taite, and Dr. Thomsen. These three interviewees generously provided ample detail on the ins and outs of trying to get CPCs off campus, their analysis on why things went the way they did, and insights as to where to go next in pursuit of reproductive justice at Middlebury.

**Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity.

For her part, Dr. Thomsen noted that her Politics of Reproduction course introduces many students to crisis pregnancy centers for the first time, and that for many, like Taite and Grace, their unfamiliarity is especially resonant.

DR. THOMSEN: One thing that's been really interesting is that CPCs are almost always the issue that enrages students the most, of everything we read about in Politics of Reproduction. And I think it's because most people come in thinking that they're pretty aware or woke around issues, and then there are some things that people don't know about, and they are surprising, but it isn't surprising that you don't know. Right, like the historical context [of abortion]. It's not that surprising that we don't know what happened

with the American Medical Association in 1880. But that's surprising information. It's not that surprising that people who are 20 years old haven't really thought very critically about surrogacy, for example, or transracial or transnational adoptions. None of that is that surprising, right, but here [in CPCs] is something that is targeting people like you. They are targeting young college students. They're also targeting poor women and Black women, and women in rural areas, which are not necessarily all of you, but they are explicitly targeting college students. And the ideologies that they're using totally run counter to things that you have come to expect of this world, and just the ways that you think about sex and gender and sexuality and reproduction. And these are people who, for the most part, come in thinking they're pro-choice, right, and here [in CPCs] is the primary way that the anti-abortion movement is doing their work, and people don't even know about them. So I think that that's why they have been such a crystallizing feature of the class, in terms of getting people riled up anyway.

But the other thing is, they come to campus and there is one on highway seven, in the old Planned Parenthood building, right next to the high school. So there is one right in Middlebury that uses all of the plays directly from the National Crisis Pregnancy Center organization's playbook. So you can see in a way how these things are totally structural, and how they play out in a way that informs people's lives in really deep in material ways. Like when they come to campus and are giving out information that says that condoms don't work. That's pretty fucking scary. And it's pretty fucking scary that we're at an institution for higher education, and the school allows for people to come to campus and hand out medical misinformation.

Taite learned about crisis pregnancy centers while taking one the Politics of Reproduction, in the spring of 2018. Taite would talk about what she was learning in class with Grace, her girlfriend, who credited Taite's final group project as her own way into learning about CPCs, a project which, as per Dr. Thomsen's classes, took the shape of a board game.

GRACE: I remember I didn't know what a CPC was until Taite started learning about them in Carly's class and Taite and her group made this really cool game called Abortionopoly. And Carly talks about it briefly in classes still, but it's just a genius use of monopoly because it's like real estate, and you know, it's like CPCs taking up space...anyways. And I played that game like a couple times to test it with Taite's group. And so that I learned a lot about CPCs, and I wasn't in the class.

Taite and Grace expressed interest in anti-CPC organizing on campus, and Dr. Thomsen put them in touch with Toria, who was putting together a group of students.

GRACE: I think Toria at that point was like working with Parton [student health center]. And it was direct, on-campus stuff.

TAITE: In terms of everyone else who got involved...So I remember Miranda Max de Beer and Mika Morton were a part of it, and they had been in Politics of Reproduction either the year before or two years before, and had organized the 5K for Reproductive Justice, and they were also sort of friends of Toria, and so they got involved that way. And then Tate Serletti and Rebecca Wishnie, we were all in Carly's class at that point. So we kind of just found each other by proximity. And Carly really helped facilitate that.

Once a group had formed, they began meeting.

GRACE: We met a Chellis House a couple times? And as a group we talked about some direct stuff that was going on, like with Parton, like there were some pamphlets that were like going out, and we talked about like how to communicate with student activities because Joanie wanted to participate in the student activities fair...And I made a web page of all of the materials like stuff that they were reading in class to like put it all together somewhere, and made a go link and stuff like that.. And that was spring of 2018.

The group aimed to get Middlebury College to ban CPCs from advertising on campus. Pregnancy Resource Center of Addison County, under the leadership of Joanie Praamsa, had been placing brochures in Parton Health Center and setting up a booth at the annual student club fair, because they offered students volunteer hours, and thus was able to register with the College as a community partner.

As far as the Parton pamphlets went, the coalition's efforts were successful – in some ways.

TAITE: They weren't allowed to be doing this, but there were several times where people found brochures from the CPC in Parton, in the stairwell where they have all the other brochures about stuff. And so even though Parton was like, yeah, we're not going to allow the CPC to advertise here, there was clearly someone on campus, who was working for Joanie or something, going in and putting them in.

GRACE: But as far as Parton goes, Gus Jordan [director] was pretty helpful. I think Toria did like a line by line refutation of everything that was like in the CPC pamphlet that ended up in Parton as well. And then they eventually made it impossible for any pamphlets to be put in Parton, like now, they just have those signs where brochures or whatever used to be. So. Yeah, the CPC pamphlets were just chock full of very false information anyway, so. But it's not like you can get an abortion on campus, so.

While there are no longer CPC pamphlets at Parton, Dr. Thomsen points out that the removal of pamphlets altogether was not exactly a victorious refutation of CPC ideologies.

DR. THOMSEN: Rather than saying to the Crisis Pregnancy Center, you cannot put inaccurate information in the hallway, [Parton] created a totally different protocol just to

avert the problem. There was no other problem here, it's just the crisis pregnancy center. But instead they created a whole new system and mechanism for being able to put things in that area. Why is everybody so afraid of conflict? With somebody who is doing something that is unethical and inaccurate? It's just absolutely bizarre to me. But, you know, for the Gus Jordans of the world, his job is to provide medical care, not to counter inaccurate information being circulated by activists. So whose job is it? I don't know, but all I know is that it seems like it's nobody's job, and when you try to do the work that nobody else is doing, they actively try to thwart it.

Indeed, the students' attempts to persuade the Student Activities office to uninvite the Pregnancy Resource Center from the club fair were met with disregard. Taite, Grace, and Dr. Thomsen told the same story: that people at the student activities office (namely Ashley Laux, who now directs the Center for Community Engagement) routinely voiced their personal dislike of crisis pregnancy centers, but claimed that there was nothing they could do – a statement which all three interviewees could immediately refute for a whole host of reasons.

TAITE: [the Student Activities Office] was like, we can't just ban people for no reason, and we were like, well, there is a reason, which is that they're falsely advertising themselves. And so then they sent Joanie a letter and they were like, 'you can't say that you're a health care facility. And if you keep doing that, we can ban you.' But basically, Student Activities was like, they haven't done anything that warrants banning them, and if we did ban them, then they could sue us? Which I don't think makes any sense because as a private institution, I think Midd can just be like, no, you're not welcome, but whatever. I got the feeling that student activities and Ashley Laux in particular didn't want them there, but were like, we can't really do anything about it.

GRACE: Also, like Taite was saying, like as a private institution, they have the ability to set their own parameters. They can move the goalposts as much as they want, and they can avoid liability that way. But also basically they were saying that anyone can partake in the student activities fair so long as they offer volunteer opportunities to students. But there's other clauses in the agreement that you have to sign on to as a community partner, and one of those is false advertising. The CPC was not meeting that standard, and they never met that standard, but basically it just wasn't being enforced. And they're still offering volunteer opportunities to students. I don't know what those opportunities look like and I don't know what students volunteer with them. But Joanie seems to know at least some students in a positive way, so I don't know, it just feels like the college was trying to avoid taking sides, even though they very much could be like, 'you're presenting yourself falsely, we can end this partnership. Students can still volunteer there privately if they want to.'

CARLY: OK, so I met with Ashley a couple of times and basically she was like, ‘despite my personal feelings about them, which are very in line with yours, we can't prevent them from coming to campus,’ which is just not true. And they wouldn't just say that they weren't going to invite the crisis pregnancy center. They weren't willing to do that. My position was, just disinvite them. Just either stop inviting them or actively disinvite them and give them a bunch of material regarding the dangers of crisis pregnancy centers. You could send them all the academic articles that exist, that we have access to through our library, and make an argument based in logic and reason, which are exactly the things we're teaching here, hopefully, and just disinvite them by using reason. That is what I advocated for, but that's that's not what happened.

And so I then said, well, if you don't want to cause a kerfuffle, you could just not invite them. You don't have to actively disinvite them. You could just not invite them. But she said something like, ‘well, there's maybe greater possibilities for increasing awareness about crisis pregnancy centers by having them here,’ which is not necessarily wrong, but it does also require that students do a bunch of unpaid labor to counter them. So if they were willing to pay a student to organize something in response through that office, then I think I would be more willing to accept that position. But they're not offering a paid position for anybody to undo the work that they're promoting, that's wrong and harmful so...it didn't really go anywhere.

GRACE: The college's obsession with both-sides-ism will prevent them from banning the CPC from campus because they kept saying, I mean, Ashley and Amanda [from the Student Activities Office] kept saying well, ‘we have Planned Parenthood’, as if that's an apt comparison.

TAITE: They were like, ‘well, we have Planned Parenthood, then it's fair for us to have the CPC’. And we were like, not really, because it's not the same thing, because Planned Parenthood is like a legitimate health care provider and like the CPC is not. But that's kind of the way that they viewed it.

While this gridlock deterred the students from pursuing the Student Activities angle further, Dr. Thomsen had an additional experience which she felt was important to the story.

DR. THOMSEN: The other thing that I want to say from my perspective, which is something the students involved wouldn't know, is that I got a call – I don't care if you put this in here, it's all true – but Miguel [Fernandez] from the diversity office called me and wanted to know what my involvement was with the students who were doing anti-crisis pregnancy center organizing. And he said, you're not in trouble, don't worry, you're not in trouble. I'm just wanting to protect you. And some people are concerned about your involvement with the student group and what they've been doing and blah,

blah, blah, blah, blah. So a member of the administration in the diversity office is trying to squash anti-sexist organizing.

Dr. Thomsen explained that this phone call occurred at around the same time as a court case at Oberlin College wherein a school administrator suggested the college boycott a bakery which was involved in a racist incident.

DR. THOMSEN: That situation is not the same as a junior faculty member who writes and teaches about crisis pregnancy centers in an academic way, who then advises students who come to her with questions about crisis pregnancy centers, that are deeply informed by the intellectual work we're doing in the classroom.

So they were worried, basically, that the college was going to get sued, but then they tried to use the language of being concerned with me and wanting to protect me. And then when Miguel was like, 'so what was your involvement with what happened at the student activities fair', and I was like, you know, 'I have supported the students in a lot of ways, I teach about crisis pregnancy centers in classes' and he was like, 'you haven't been to any meetings'. And I was like, 'it's been a while since I've gone to any meetings.' He's like, 'that's all I need to know.' Which suggests that it was never about protecting me. Right. Or it was just about protecting the college. And students can do what they want, the faculty, of course, can't. So those are some important pieces that show how the institution has engaged with this issue or I would say attempted to thwart engagement with this issue. From staff to administrators, there has been zero support.

I think that's a crucial part of the story of Middlebury College. That, like these things were happening, that there were conversations around the time of the Oberlin case. And I was asked point blank about my involvement with student activists. And like that is a pretty shocking piece of information. And then also that Ashley, you know, told me personally she is opposed to crisis pregnancy centers, but professionally, they have to allow them. That's just bullshit. It's also untrue.

Dr. Thomsen explained to me that the coalition also met with Senator Ruth Hardy, and tried to get in touch with Planned Parenthood, both of which were more or less dead ends.

DR. THOMSEN: it seems like Planned Parenthood isn't terribly interested or concerned with crisis pregnancy centers, it seems like our elected officials who are concerned with reproductive justice are not terribly concerned with crisis pregnancy centers, and it seems like the institution, including staff who organize the community fair as well as members of the administration, are actively opposed to precisely what I would consider the kinds of teaching that happens outside the classroom, that Middlebury attempts to capitalize on when attracting students – that they actually actively try to shut that down.

Taite is not particularly optimistic that the College will rethink their 'both sides' ideology and disinvite CPCs from advertising on campus, but does see a couple potential paths to victory.

TAITE: I'm sure Carly has talked about how UCSB is the only college campus to successfully ban CPCs, and actually, my sister goes there, and when she went to the club fair her freshman year, there was CPC at the club fair there. So I don't know. I mean, I think potentially if the SGA passed something...But it seems like at Middlebury, the SGA has less power than it does in other schools. It kind of seems like the SGA can pass whatever it wants, but then the school can just say no. So I think it would either have to go through the SGA, or Joanie would have to actually breach the contract that she has in a more significant way. Because I don't see the college willingly just being like, okay, we'll ban them.

Dr. Thomsen is more optimistic that with the right angle and the right people, Middlebury could be convinced to ban CPCs from advertising on campus.

DR. THOMSEN Because we were so shut down by the institution, we didn't even try to – we thought about going to community council or to the SGA and saying, would you pass a resolution saying that you do not support crisis pregnancy centers on campus? And at least if there were those kinds of forms of institutional buy-in, maybe then these other people would take the problem more seriously, but then it just didn't happen. So I do think there are strategies that we can think about in terms of how to work within the institution to do something. I think there are ways. Or even meeting with Student Activities and revisiting this. You know, there are ways that we could do something here. There's a lot here to work with, and it's such a small school, and we're just talking about one crazy bitch. It's not like it is elsewhere where you're dealing with structures that are too big to take on, that's not the case. This is one woman and her church. You know, it could totally be doable, and it really just wouldn't require that much, just a couple of people to get on board.

Taite and Grace advocated for feminists on campus to refocus their efforts on cultivating reproductive justice at Middlebury in alternative ways.

GRACE: I don't think that the college would ban the CPC outright, because of optics and because of the strange cult of centrism that exists there, but it would be really cool, if we could, I don't know, get Misoprostal [medication used to induce abortion] on campus or something like that. I don't know what things look like now with the pandemic, but I know at one point that there was a free bus that you could get to go to Planned Parenthood. But, you know, even as a student, it can be a little bit confusing, coordinating that sort of transportation to get somewhere that is not close to campus. So it would be great if it weren't as difficult to get to Planned Parenthood or something like that. I think there are other ways that you could expand access, because I think the college is being cowardly.

TAITE: Yeah, and I think Parton refers people to Planned Parenthood. But I think Parton could be a lot better with reproductive health care.

GRACE: Yeah, I'm like, put Plan B in MiddExpress! How cool would that be, you know, put it next to the condoms!

For Dr. Thomsen, the whole experience was enlightening, and from a feminist perspective, important.

THOMSEN: These aren't just intellectual questions, these are political questions. If we are feminist scholars, we have to think about the impact of the things that we're concerned with and that we write about. And I think that's part of the imperative of being a feminist scholar.