

Intro:

Merle Hoffman (born March 6, 1946) is a writer, activist and health care provider.

Hoffman is the Founder, President and CEO of Choices Women's Medical Center, one of the nation's largest and most comprehensive women's medical facilities, and the Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of On The Issues Magazine.

Established in 1971 (two years before Roe. V. Wade in 1973) with a vision of patient empowerment through knowledge and education -- "Patient Power" (<http://www.choicesmedical.com/patientpower.html>)-- Choices Women's Medical Center today serves more than 50,000 patients a year. Hoffman also founded Choices Mental Health Center which addressed a full range of psychological issues including rape, incest, and domestic violence as well as general psychiatric and psychological services. In an historic joint venture in 1994 she worked with Russian hospitals and doctors to develop CHOICES East, the first feminist outpatient medical center in Russia. Hoffman also organized Russian feminists to deliver an open letter to Boris Yeltsin on the state of women's health care.

As an activist and organizer, Hoffman was founder of the New York Pro-Choice Coalition and organized the first pro-choice civil disobedience action at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/03/nyregion/400-protest-an-anti-abortion-group.html?n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/A/Abortion&scp=1&sq=protest%20%22st.%20patrick's%20cathedral%22%20%22merle%20hoffman%22&st=cse>

## **Biography**

### **Early Life**

Merle Hoffman was born in Philadelphia. She moved to Kew Gardens, Queens, New York City with her family when she was 12. She attended LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts, then called Music and Arts, where she studied piano. She was also a student at the Chatham Square Music School studying with Stephan Volpe and Jan Gorbaty. After graduating in 1964, she lived and studied music in Paris and later attended Queens College and graduated Phi Beta Kappa.

### **Health Care Centers**

In 1971, Hoffman founded CHOICES (Creative Health Organization for Information Counseling and Educational Services) Women's Medical Center, originally called Flushing Women's Medical Center, as an ambulatory abortion provider for Health Insurance Plan of Greater New York (HIP). New York State had made abortion legal

earlier that year, and CHOICES became one of the first health facilities in the country specializing in abortion services. Under Hoffman's direction, CHOICES has become one of the nation's largest and most comprehensive women's medical facilities, offering full reproductive health, OB-GYN and primary care.

In 1975, Hoffman founded STOP (Second Treatment Option Program). It was the first of its kind in the treatment and diagnosis of breast cancer in an out-patient facility, allowing women time to decide their treatment options. Previously, when a woman was under anesthesia and cancer was found during a biopsy, the breast was removed immediately, without discussion. STOP gave the patient the power to think about her next step and discuss her options with a trained counselor. Hoffman also worked closely with SHARE (<http://www.sharecancersupport.org/index.php>) to educate women on their surgical and alternative options to breast cancer.

Hoffman broadened the services of the medical center by creating Choices Mental Health Center (<http://www.choicesmentalhealth.com/>) which addressed a full range of psychological issues including rape, incest, and domestic violence as well as general psychiatric and psychological services. In the wake of the 9/11/2001 tragedy, the Mental Health Center became a Project Liberty provider of mental health services to those traumatized or affected by the attacks, offering free counseling at satellite centers in neighborhoods throughout New York.

In 1994, Hoffman realized there was a need for a CHOICES-type establishment in Russia when a Russian patient at CHOICES presented at CHOICES for her 36<sup>th</sup> abortion. Hoffman attempted to open the CHOICES East Center, in Russia. The prime directive was to offer the women of Russia safe and effective birth control and safe, accessible abortions.

Hoffman traveled to Moscow at the invitation of the Moscow Clinical Center Marine Hospital with 11 of her staff. She gave a speech at the Moscow Literary Society that was mobbed by invitees attempting to get samples of birth control and CHOICES staff performed abortions under anesthesia at Hospital 53 in Moscow. Hoffman also organized a team of Russian feminists to deliver a letter to Boris Yeltsin on the state of women's health in Russia.

The project, a joint venture between Merle Hoffman, CHOICES, the Moscow Clinical Center Marine Hospital and the Department of Marine Transport of the Ministry of Transport, came to an end because of disagreements about control and governance.

## **Politics and Political Organizing**

On Nov. 23, 1974, Hoffman was the initiator and moderator for the First Women's Health Forum, hosted by HIP at the Statler Hilton Hotel in New York City. Speakers included Barbara Ehrenreich and Congresswoman Bella Abzug.

In 1976, Hoffman co-founded the National Association of Abortion Facilities (NAAF), now called the National Abortion Federation (NAF), and served as its first president. In 1985, Hoffman founded the New York Pro-Choice Coalition (NYPCC), the first umbrella organization of pro-choice individuals and organizations committed to ensuring safe, legal abortion in New York. The NYPCC was the first group to organize a national response to the efforts of Operation Rescue ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Rescue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Rescue)) and other anti-choice groups to shut down clinics. The NYPCC set the standard for how to defend clinics and published a pamphlet, "The Battle to Defend Abortion Clinics: Organizing Against 'Operation Rescue,'" that included detailed information on grassroots pro-choice organizing.

When Operation Rescue announced it would shut down abortion services in New York City from April 30 to May 7, 1988, the NYPCC announced that week would be Reproductive Freedom Week. To kick things off, on April 29, 1988, the NYPCC organized a march for women's rights and reproductive freedom. About 1,300 activists and supporters marched from St. Patrick's Cathedral at Madison Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> Street to the New York Right to Life Headquarters at 34<sup>th</sup> Street and 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

For the duration of Reproductive Freedom Week, the NYPCC organized clinic watches and phone trees, dispatching people to the clinics and doctor's offices Operation Rescue targeted, in an effort to keep them open.

During the next year, Hoffman and the NYPCC frequently defended abortion clinics in New York, and groups across the country defended clinics in other cities.

In January 1989, more pro-life groups demonstrated outside clinics in New York City and again, Hoffman and the NYPCC counter-demonstrated. Anti-choice protestors were arrested, with the New York Post reporting "176 Abortion Foes Busted at Rally" on January 14, 1989. Judge Robert Ward had already issued a permanent injunction against blocking access to abortion clinics, and Operation Rescue's Michael Barbaro said "We have absolutely no intention of giving any respect to these decrees."

On January 14, 1989 Hoffman and other pro-choice leaders including Bill Tatum, then-Chairman of the Amsterdam News, Maxine Gold of the New York City Commission on the Status of Women, Rabbi Balfour Brickner of the Stephen Weiss Free Synagogue, Kelly Conlin of NOW, Ellen Carton of NARAL, Dr. Vicki Alexander and City Councilwoman Carol Greitzer gathered for a back alley news conference. They announced plans for a counter-offensive against Operation Rescue and pro-life picketers. The alley symbolized that women had to resort to illegal means in the days before abortion was legal.

"I know that I am possibly standing in and looking at my future- the future of millions of American women if the continued attacks against legalized abortion and the agenda of Operation Rescue succeed," said Hoffman.

On January 15, 1989 The New York Times reported 685 more abortion opponents were arrested. <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/15/nyregion/685-are-arrested-opposing-abortion.html?scp=1&sq=%22685%20are%20arrested%20opposing%20abortion%22&st=cse>

In April 1989, Hoffman and the NYPCC led the first pro-choice civil disobedience action at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. They protested Cardinal John J. O'Connor's support of Operation Rescue. Protestors held up a Proclamation in front of the massive bronze doors and sat down on the sidewalk in front of the cathedral. The proclamation read:

*On behalf of the women of New York City and their sisters throughout this country and out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light.*

*We stand here today to affirm the following to Cardinal John J. O'Connor who has blessed, praised and hosted the anti-abortion fanatics of "Operation Rescue":*

*That you have consistently turned a deaf ear and a cold heart to women by repeatedly ignoring urgent requests to meet with us about the terrorism and violence towards women that "Operation Rescue" represents.*

*That you have added to the atmosphere of fear, terror and anxiety that women must face when attempting to exercise their constitutional right to an abortion.*

*That you have encouraged the fanaticism and women hating that feeds the politics of "Operation Rescue."*

*Now, therefore, we stand here not as beggars at your gate but as people of conscience to affirm that:*

- I. Women are full moral agents with the right and ability to choose when and whether or not they will be mothers.*
- II. Abortion is a choice made by each individual for profound personal reasons that no man nor state should judge.*
- III. The right to make reproductive choices is women's legacy throughout history and belongs to every woman regardless of age, class, race, religion or sexual preference.*
- IV. Abortion is a life-affirming act chosen within the context of women's realities, women's lives, and women's sexuality.*
- V. Abortion is often the most moral choice in a world that frequently denies healthcare, housing, education & economic survival.*

In an April 3, 1989 *New York Times* article reporting on the St. Patrick's Cathedral demonstration, Hoffman is quoted saying Operation Rescue is "violent toward women" and that women's rights are in a "state of emergency."

(<http://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/03/nyregion/400-protest-an-anti-abortion->

group.html?scp=1&sq=%22merle%20hoffman%22%20%22state%20of%20emergency%22&st=cse)

Hoffman has taken stands against the Hyde Amendment, which in 1976 banned federal funding of abortion. In 1977, Hoffman helped to convince congress to pass legislation requiring the accurate labeling of over-the-counter birth control.

Hoffman was also a vocal proponent for the accurate labeling of over the counter birth control drugs resulting in congressional hearings and the eventual labeling requirements.

## **Political and Feminist Positions**

### **On Animal Rights**

“I closed the book [Hans Ruesch’s *The Naked Empress*] and said ‘I can never eat meat again.’ When I began to read, to ground myself in the knowledge, it became so obvious to me that if you were progressive and a feminist you had to incorporate a radical sense of compassion. You could no longer complain about a woman being treated as ‘a piece of meat’ and sit down and eat a hamburger. Personally, this decision made me feel better than most things I’ve done in my life.”-Merle Hoffman

*Organica Magazine*, by Susan Hussey, Autumn, 1988

**On Racism and Feminism (the Central Park Jogger case**  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trisha\\_Meili](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trisha_Meili)) **and Yusuf Hawkins**  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusef\\_Hawkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yusef_Hawkins)):

“Feminists have been slow to respond publicly to both these cases because of an increased sensitivity to being labeled racist on the one hand and a history of struggle with black women over participation and leadership within the women’s movement itself, on the other. But condemning deadly assault and rape of the Central Park jogger does not cancel out acknowledging the continual racist stereotypes used to describe it, or the use of rape itself by some to further inflame racial tension in the city.”

From an article by Merle Hoffman in the *Amsterdam News*, Aug. 25, 1990

### **On violence against abortion providers:**

It wasn't until after Britton's murder, the second doctor to die in 19 months, that government officials seriously began to consider and investigate the possibility of an organized national anti-abortion conspiracy to kill providers. Although seemingly realistic and psychologically comforting, it is a serious strategic mistake to view the murders of the two doctors as acts of individual madness. The evidence can be extracted from both the statements of anti-abortionists about what to expect in the way of more

killings and the intellectual climate that has been, I believe, deliberately created to undermine support for freedom of choice -- even among its strongest proponents.

Consider the words of Don Treshman, director of Rescue America, who was quoted in *The New York Times* on July 30 saying that Dr. Britton's killing "may be the start of a new civil war." He continued, "Up to now, the killings have been on one side, with 30 million dead babies and hundreds of dead and maimed mothers. On the other side, there are two dead doctors. Maybe the balance is going to start to shift."

"Heroism: Theory and Practice," by Merle Hoffman from *On The Issues Magazine*, Winter 1994

<http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1994winter/heroism.php>

### **On Self Defense:**

In 1993, as a result of the violence against abortion clinics and abortion practitioners, Hoffman bought a shotgun. "If you're looking for violence, it's the anti-choice people who harass and hunt people down." –Merle Hoffman

"Make Her Day," *New York Daily News*, March 2, 1993

### **On AIDS and Men:**

"For women, sex has always had consequences. Now, for the first time, there is an aftermath for men, too."- Merle Hoffman

*Women News*, October, 1983

### **On Gender Roles:**

"I'd say I'm a people's libber in a strong sense. I don't believe in women just taking over the male roles in society without questioning the values." –Merle Hoffman

*New York Daily News*, June 19, 1977:

### **On Aileen Wuornos:**

"Aileen Wuornos is a symptom of what's happening to women in this society- an epidemic of violence, rape, incest and battering... The only thing that makes her so unusual is that she fought back, and more than once." –Merle Hoffman

*New York Daily News*, Feb. 6, 1994

### **On Feminism and Abortion:**

"In the early 1970s, feminists understood that the decision to have an abortion was a

decision of power. They understood that women require the ability to choose--morally, legally, and psychologically--in order to be full participants in society. The power of the state has to stop at their skin. Once abortion became legal, and women started to line up in the thousands outside of clinics to have abortions, there was a bifurcation between theory and practice. Most feminists and activists were not involved with the actual doing of the thing....

What we have to say is, "Yes, [abortion is] the termination of potential life. We know that, and we accept that responsibility." What we're talking about here is power. The medical establishment, the military establishment, and the criminal justice establishment have always had that ultimate power: It rests in the hands of the patriarchy. But through abortion, women have the power of life and death. Women are uncomfortable with that power, which is the acceptance of responsibility..."

Interview with Merle Hoffman in *Women's Review of Books*, December 2001  
<http://merlehoffman.com/press.html>

### **On the Right to Choose:**

"Hoffman said the way one thinks about abortion mirrors one's deepest views of society.

'What is the truth about abortion,' Hoffman asked. 'Who should have the power?'

"Historically, men have decided who lives and dies, she said, arguing that this is why abortion is so strongly opposed.

'You are responsible for your life and the life growing inside you,' Hoffman told the women inside the room. 'You have the right to choose.'"

Article on Merle Hoffman's keynote speech at a three-day symposium celebrating the 15th anniversary of Duke University's Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture. *The Herald-Sun*, Durham, North Carolina, November 1, 2003  
<http://merlehoffman.com/press2.html>

### **On Sarah Palin:**

How can you be a politician who claims to support women and the shattering of glass ceilings when your policies would put iron bars around their wombs and the concept of reproductive freedom in the garbage bin of history?

"Sarah Palin and The Apocalypse," by Merle Hoffman, *On The Issues Magazine*, Fall 2008 [http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2008fall/2008fall\\_publisher.php](http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2008fall/2008fall_publisher.php)

## Writing and Journalism

In 1982, Hoffman began *On The Issues Magazine* as a newsletter of CHOICES Women's Medical Center in an effort to communicate with other health care providers and pro-choice activists. The first issue in 1983 featured pieces about the early days of the AIDS crisis, the newly-named and diagnosed pre-menstrual syndrome and a report on Hoffman's debate with Jerry Falwell in Detroit.

For a few years, it was published twice a year and sent out free to large mailing lists of progressives, feminists and pro-choice activists. The kind of writing and topics that *On The Issues Magazine* was covering struck a responsive chord in those who were reading it and many suggested Hoffman turn the newsletter into a magazine.

In response, Hoffman, with the help of committed staff and editorial professionals, created what was to become *On the Issues, the Progressive Woman's Quarterly*. At the height of its readership it reported a circulation of 20,000, with additional thousands of readers from free subscriptions to women's studies departments, women's centers, students and prisoners.

Some of the writers published in *On The Issues Magazine* were Andrea Dworkin, Kate Millett, Jan Goodwin, Phyllis Chesler, Erika Jong, bell hooks, Shere Hite, Carolyn Gage, Elizabeth Holtzman and Julienne Malveaux.

From 1990 to 1999, *On the Issues Magazine* was published quarterly. Because the magazine's funding came from Choices Women's Medical Center, it was vulnerable to what the clinic was vulnerable to: the politics and attacks of the anti-choice movement. In 1999 Choices (and Hoffman) had to fight on many fronts: bomb and death threats, and eviction from a space that had been leased for over 20 years. At that point, Hoffman was forced to suspend publication to focus on the clinic's survival and ability to serve women in need, her first priority.

In Spring 2008, *On The Issues Magazine* was revamped and introduced as a free online magazine, including searchable archives of the print edition. New, themed editions go online quarterly, and the Cafe section features new articles weekly.

Many progressive and feminists news outlets hail *On The Issues Magazine* for its content:

- "ON THE ISSUES delivers solid articles that are original and engaging without becoming esoteric. Every issue is carefully balanced to represent a wide range of interests and experiences..." -Elizabeth Larson in UTNE Reader

- The magazine is "dense" and "politically diverse." - Jeanne Cooper in the Boston Globe



- "ON THE ISSUES really is--on the issues, that is. It kind of reminds me of Ms. when it was a lot younger and a lot more feisty, when it really had something to say about topics of concern to women no matter how revolutionary or radical they seemed. – *WLW Journal* (Women's Library Association)

"I was recently alerted to the newly re-launched *On The Issues Magazine*. *On The Issues* was originally published from 1983 to 1999 as a print quarterly feminist magazine started by reproductive rights activist Merle Hoffman. The new incarnation is only available online and based on what's on the site now looks great." -Cory Silverberg on About.com

"Good reads in the *On The Issues Magazine* cafe, including Diana Whitten's look at Women on Waves, a Dutch organization that provides on-ship abortions in international waters for women from countries where it is illegal. Women on Waves recently won an important victory in the European Court of Human Rights. And don't forget to check out the winter issue, which features stories on topics from ratifying CEDAW to Second Life." - Our Bodies, Our Blog

"Most women's magazines have long used romance, love and family- and, inevitably, sex -- as mainstays, but some now are pushing the limits of decency. They're becoming more tawdry and displaying women . . . as bodies, without souls or minds. If women accept these images of themselves, they are losing the battle against rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Even pristine *Ms.* magazine, normally a standard-bearer of sexual equality, has fallen into the Big Orgasm craze, notes Sheila Jeffries in the current ON THE ISSUES, a magazine for progressive women. *Ms.* recently ran such racy articles as "I was a teenage slut" and "Eroticizing equality." "An unreflective politics of orgasm seems to be winning out," Jeffries says. "Unfortunately, freedom is being defined as the achievement of bigger and better orgasms, by any means possible." – "Women More Than Sex Machines," by Barbara Reynolds, *USA Today*

### **Hoffman Editorials, Articles and Interviews of Note:**

"The Greening of the World: An Exclusive Interview with Petra Kelly, Founder of the West German Green Party and Anti Nuclear Activist" *On The Issues Magazine*, Vol. 9, 1988

"The Making of A Radical Feminist: a Different Perspective on Andrea Dworkin in an Intimate, Candid Interview" *On The Issues Magazine*, Vol. 9, 1988

"Breaking the Barriers: Interview with Kate Millett" Vol. 10, 1988  
[http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1988vol10/vol10\\_1988\\_4.php](http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1988vol10/vol10_1988_4.php)

"Thelma and Louise Live" Winter, 1991.  
<http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1991winter/winter1991.php>

"I Am Against Fanatics": A Dialogue Between Elie Wiesel and Merle Hoffman on Abortion, Love and the Holocaust. Spring, 1991.

[http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1991spring/Spring1991\\_1.php](http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1991spring/Spring1991_1.php)

"Replacing PROZAC with PLATO, a Conversation with Lou Marinoff" Winter, 1999.

<http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/1999winter/w99hoffman.php>

"Sarah Palin and the Apocalypse" Fall 2008:

[http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2008fall/2008fall\\_publisher.php](http://www.ontheissuesmagazine.com/2008fall/2008fall_publisher.php)

All of Hoffman's editorials can be found here.

<http://merlehoffman.com/merleoti.html>

Hoffman's writing has appeared in numerous publications and journals including the American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the Journal of the American Medical Women's Association. Hoffman also published two studies in the 80s that documented how poverty leads many women to choose abortions and another that showed nearly half the women seeking abortion at CHOICES would pursue one illegally if Roe v. Wade were repealed.

One article "Abortionomics" was picked up by UPI in 1982 and reprinted across the country. The study Hoffman conducted argued that the Reagan Administration's economic policies were "having a direct effect on abortions in this country." The study, conducted in 1981, said 1.5 million abortions were performed a year in the United States and that because of economic circumstances women were "sacrificing their desire for children."

#### **Written by Merle Hoffman:**

Journal of the American Medical Women's Association, Opinion "On Power and Sex: the Cost of Things" Nov/Dec 1985

#### **Articles of note about Hoffman, CHOICES or On The Issues Magazine:**

The New York Times, "About New York: Love In a Very Small Place" by Francis X. Clines 12/19/78

Lear's Magazine, "Enterprise" by Eva Pomise, February 1994

Women's Review of Books, "A Conversation with Abortion Rights Activist Merle Hoffman" by Amy Hoffman (no relation), December 2001  
(<http://merlehoffman.com/press.html>)

The Herald Sun, Durham, NC, "Pro-Abortion Activist Praises Roe v. Wade" by Hunter

Lewis 11/1/03 (<http://merlehoffman.com/press2.html>)

### **Noted Speeches, Debates and Television Programs**

Hoffman speaks regularly about women's rights and pro-choice issues and has appeared on hundreds of radio and TV programs. Hoffman has debated all the main leaders of the anti-choice movement including Jerry Falwell and Jean Head.

Hoffman produced, directed and wrote the documentary film "Abortion: A Different Light" (<http://www.choicesmedical.com/history3.html>) in 1982, and in 1986 she produced and hosted the first feminist television show, "MH: On The Issues, a syndicated 30-minute cable TV show. The program's first guest was Congresswoman Bella Abzug. Other guests included Bill Baird, Carol Bellamy, Susie Orbach, Elizabeth Holtzman and Betty Friedan.

1/26/1985 "Women, Love and the Power of Choice," at the First Unitarian Church of Brooklyn

2/10/1985 "Anti-Choice Violence and Media Distortion and the Future of Abortion Rights in the U.S." sponsored by Women's Quarterly Review, Café Lexus, NY, NY

1/23/1986 Hoffman organized and led a rally on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary of Roe v. Wade. Speakers included Congresswoman Bella Abzug and Hoffman.

9/1995 The International Women's Conference in Beijing, China.

11/1/2003 Hoffman gives Keynote speech at the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Duke University's Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Durham, NC

8/2006 Women's Equality Day Tribute to Betty Friedan, NYC  
(<http://www.choicesmedical.com/history2.html>)

### **Honors**

In 2002, Hoffman was appointed to the National Advisory Board of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association. Her archives were acquired by Duke University in 2002 and are a major part of the Sally Bingham Center's Women's History papers.

Hoffman was honored for her work by the Department of Corrections of New York City, the National Organization for Women (NOW), Women's Health Care Services, Ecovisions, Community Action Network, the National Victim's Center, the Congress of

Racial Equality, the Veteran Feminists of America, former NYC Mayor Ed Koch, and others.

A film, "Choices from the Ground Up," was produced to honor Hoffman.  
(<http://www.choicesmedical.com/history4.html>)

Hoffman was given the Women of Power & Influence Award by the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1988, the first year they gave the award, and again in 1998. **(From what I can tell it's the same award, I will look into it more...)**

### **Archives**

Merle Hoffman's Archive Collection featuring the On The Issues Magazine back catalog, CHOICES documents and thousands of pages on the Reproductive Rights movement are in the Merle Hoffman Papers Collection, 1994 to 2001, at Duke University.  
)<http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/rbmscl/hoffmanmerle/inv/>)