

Using Comedy to Push for Abortion Rights

Lizz Winstead, the “Daily Show” co-creator, has marshaled her contacts in the standup world to help supporters turn protest into action.



By Melena Ryzik

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“Things are awesome — never better!” joked Lizz Winstead, the comedian, producer and abortion rights activist. “Sleeping well; no diarrhea. Things are awesome.”

Things are decidedly not awesome, but comic misdirection might as well be oxygen for Winstead, who has banked her career on satirizing politics and media and calling out hypocrisy, as the co-creator of “The Daily Show” and a host and director on the now-defunct left-wing radio network Air America. For most of the last decade or so, though, she has been singularly, steadfastly focused on one issue, abortion. Her preferred method for delivering her message is the variety show: a little schtick, a little song, a little taboo talk.

“Don’t be ashamed of having an abortion,” the comedian Joyelle Nicole Johnson said onstage at “Bro v. Wade,” a benefit show in Brooklyn that Winstead organized recently with her group Abortion Access Front. “Maybe be ashamed of how you got pregnant. I got pregnant the classy way: On the floor. On an Amtrak train. In the handicapped restroom, babeey!”

Joking about abortion is nothing new; George Carlin went there, among many others. But Winstead’s goal is sharper: with righteous fervor and a Rolodex of comic all-stars, she leads a nonprofit that uses unexpected tools — like humor and men — to advocate for abortion as health care and as a fundamental human right.

She told her own abortion story on a Comedy Central special in 1992, and in the decades since, has been warning, on stages across the country and in social media campaigns, that reproductive rights were in jeopardy. Long before the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade last month, Abortion Access Front was preparing. Now, it is mobilizing as never before: On Sunday it will host “Operation Save Abortion,” a livestreamed daylong training session, with more than 60 partners and 25 panelists from local and national care, funding and policy organizations, and secure ways for viewers to plan direct, on-the-ground action. It will be capped off by a set from Johnson, a board member and ride-or-die touring performer, who lately has become accustomed to delivering punch lines to an audience that has spent the day weeping.



Joyelle Nicole Johnson, left, with Winstead, is a board member and ride-or-die touring performer for Abortion Access Front. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

“Politicians aren’t going to save us,” Winstead, 60, said. Laughter won’t either. But with her network of grassroots advocates, abortion providers and entertainers, she hopes to change the narrative around abortion, eliminate the shame and give newly fired-up supporters the tools to get involved. “If people have to march one more time, and rage and feel helpless and hopeless, they win,” she said of her anti-abortion opponents. “We need to give people who are, like, ‘What can we do?’ an answer,” she added.

That includes the people responsible for 50 percent of a pregnancy — men. On the eve of Father’s Day last month, Abortion Access Front produced a “Dads for Choice” video starring W. Kamau Bell, the comedian, CNN host and commentator, and inviting men to consider who bears the monetary costs of contraception: “Nobody ever got pregnant from a vibrator!”

“The more complicated the issues are, the more humor can break things down to their basic points, and clarify things,” Bell said. Especially for topics that have traditionally been deemed uncomfortable, “humor can invite people in.”

Why might comedy be an especially effective tool now? “Well, the other stuff hasn’t worked,” said David Cross, who was part of the all-male “Bro v. Wade” lineup. “Look where we find ourselves.”

Abortion Access Front performances feature sketch comedy; music; standups like Sarah Silverman, Michelle Buteau, Jenny Yang, Aida Rodriguez and Negin Farsad and notables like the writer Dan Savage and filmmaker Mark Duplass; and on the road, conversations with local abortion providers, to highlight their needs. Even pro-abortion-rights crowds are often edified and galvanized, according to audience surveys collected by a researcher from the University of California, Los Angeles.

“To give you the joy and then the information and then give you something to do, that trifecta of an evening is magic,” Winstead said. Beginning in 2016, the showcases toured annually across dozens of cities, including in states hostile to abortion.



David Cross performing at “Bro v. Wade.” Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

One of the group’s messages is that everybody can find a way to contribute; abortion rights supporters need not march in every street protest or continually reach into their overstretched wallets. “If you have 10 minutes a month to give, I can give you something to do that’s meaningful,” Winstead said. “And I don’t want you to feel bad that that’s all you can give. Life is too messed up right now.”

At one clinic, in Huntsville, Ala., Abortion Access Front and its volunteers planted hedges out front, to help block anti-abortion protesters. In Detroit, at the request of another clinic, they threw a block party as a gesture of welcome and gratitude to the community.

“For a lot of these folks, in the only clinic in their state, they feel really isolated,” said Amy Elizabeth Alterman, an abortion scholar, ethnographer and public health researcher at U.C.L.A. Out of safety concerns or for social reasons, “many abortion providers don’t tell friends and family what they do.”

Winstead’s organization, which has a full-time staff of 10 and many volunteers, served as a much-needed balm. “When a band of feminists explodes out of a van, wearing pro-abortion swag and saying, ‘Thank you for what you do. What can we do and how can we celebrate you?’ it’s often very emotional,” Alterman said. “Sometimes providers cry.”

Winstead and the group are not trying to reach across the aisle to change anti-abortion evangelists' minds. Since she became outspoken on the issue, she has personally experienced a backlash. "My parents, when they were alive, got calls constantly saying, your daughter's a baby murderer," she said. They were Catholic — "it really scared them." Her shows were boycotted; old employers were called in efforts at intimidation. She "paid a lot of money," she said, to erase her personal data from the internet.

Now, "there's no place I can get fired from — come at me, I don't care," she said.

Fomenting any cultural shift requires real dedication, said Dean Obeidallah, the comic and radio host, who was on the "Bro v. Wade" bill and performed at Winstead's first abortion-rights benefit a decade ago. "I can tell you from years of doing comedy, and trying to dispel stereotypes about Arab Americans, it's never a light-bulb moment," he said. "For people on your side already, you have to make them feel like they're in the right place. For people who aren't on the right side, or even have hate, it's chipping away."



"To give you the joy and then the information and then give you something to do, that trifecta of an evening is magic," Winstead said of her group's performances. Nina Westervelt for The New York Times

For those in the Minnesota-born Winstead's orbit, it's not surprising that she rose from a politically minded standup to an activist leader. "She's just one of those — you meet them throughout life — boundless energy, high-strung, talk very quickly, gesticulate wildly, kind of people," said Cross, a friend for more than 30 years.

Johnson, the comic who has been with the organization since it started, said, "I think she's a non-somniac, like Obama's a non-somniac, to be able to do all the things she does. Her brain is constantly worrying — since 2016, her hair has turned white."

Even for Abortion Access Front, whose allies long knew that reproductive care and women's rights were under attack, the weeks since Roe v. Wade was overturned have been, as Winstead said, gut-churningly surreal and destabilizing. "I've always felt unsafe in this country," said Johnson, who is Black, "but now it's almost a slapstick level of unsafe. It's chaos."

Winstead said, "This is almost our last shot, because we're burned out — and that's by design."

But this moment has also sharpened activists' focus, and expanded their tent. Since Roe was overturned, "I talk about it every chance — you're going to hear abortion, abortion, abortion out of Joyelle's mouth," Johnson said. "I do it for the women in the audience who are not as liberated as me, those women who cannot tell their closest family members. I hope it liberates some people."

Viva Ruiz, a performer and activist whose group, Thank God For Abortion, is involved in the training session Sunday, said, "Everybody needs to use their way — the more variance there is, the more tactics there are, the more successful we can be." She added, "The thing is, to just not stop. To keep showing up."

Together, Winstead agreed, "we are more motivated to fight and stay in the fight. And be relentless."