

## **Reproductive health student group emerges in Kentucky's abortion ban era**

Western Kentucky University sits in the middle of a state where abortion is banned, and reproductive health politics continue to shape campus life long after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

In that environment, a small student organization is trying to expand access to reproductive health education and supplies, while also navigating opposition from groups that say abortion is morally wrong.

For Zee Brown, starting a Planned Parenthood Generation Action chapter at WKU began long before the organization was officially approved. After months of work, Brown said the chapter was officially active in February.

PPGA, according to its website<sup>1</sup>, is a space for activists across the United States to host on-campus events. These events aim to advocate for reproductive freedom, raise awareness of health rights, educate others and drive change in their community.

Brown started their college journey at WKU but transferred to Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee, for their music therapy program. However, they said the music program “started going downhill,” and they transferred back to WKU in 2023.

Their passion for reproductive health education began in high school. During this time, Brown watched friends experience unintended pregnancies and struggle to access resources or make decisions about their futures.

During their time at APSU, Brown noticed a PPGA group forming. When Brown arrived at WKU, they noticed the absence of a student-led group focused on reproductive health education and access. Over the summer and winter break, Brown began working to make that idea a reality.

Brown's work comes in the context of major national policy shifts following the U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, which, according to Oyez,<sup>2</sup> overturned *Roe v. Wade* and ended the federal constitutional right to abortion.

Following the ruling, abortion policy returned to individual states, including Kentucky, where, according to the Lexington Herald-Leader,<sup>3</sup> a “trigger law” went into effect banning abortion in nearly all circumstances except when the life of the pregnant person is at risk.

According to the Center for Reproductive Rights website,<sup>4</sup> Kentucky is one of several Southern states where abortion access has become increasingly restricted in recent years following state-level legislation and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Brown said that was a big reason why they wanted to start this organization on campus.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/communities/planned-parenthood-generation-action](http://www.plannedparenthoodaction.org/communities/planned-parenthood-generation-action)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2021/19-1392>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article262973823.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://reproductiverights.org/resources/roe-v-wade/>

Brown said part of their motivation also comes from navigating differing political and personal environments at home and on campus.

“My dad doesn’t even know I’m doing this,” Brown said. “He’s a Republican, and I know what it’s like to grow up in a household where your views don’t align with everyone else’s.”

Brown notices a mix of political perspectives in Kentucky and the surrounding region, though experiences vary depending on location.

Kentucky is widely considered a politically conservative state, according to Kentucky’s government website,<sup>5</sup> and abortion policy has become a central point of state-level legislation since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.

Brown added that shifting political dynamics in the South have changed over time, pointing to changes in voting patterns and redistricting. They believe those broader political changes shape how reproductive rights are discussed and understood in the region.

Despite that, their experience at WKU has felt relatively supportive compared to other areas.

“I feel more supported on campus,” Brown said. “Off-campus and outside of Bowling Green, it’s a different story.”

Brown also pointed to gaps in reproductive health resources on campus as part of what motivates their work.

“Machines on campus for period products are often empty,” Brown said. “I’ve personally struggled with having access to products in the past.”

To address that gap, Brown distributed period products in their residence hall before the chapter was created, where supplies were gone within a day.

Brown said that experience shaped how they approach advocacy and the importance of creating spaces where students can express differing perspectives.

“But you do have a community here, and you can think how you want and advocate how you want,” Brown said.

They contacted PPGA organizations in both Tennessee and Kentucky, gathered information about starting a chapter and began collecting resources such as condoms and emergency contraception. At the same time, Brown navigated the university’s student organization process.

Brown worked with faculty advisor Marcus Brooks to write a constitution, who said all student organizations have guiding documents to formalize the group and lay out ground rules.

“I found Dr. Brooks because I had a sociology professor I was talking about this to, and they were like, ‘Oh my god, Dr. Brooks would be perfect for this,’” Brown said. “He’s been really awesome with helping me and everything.”

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<sup>5</sup> <https://elect.ky.gov/Resources/Pages/Registration-Statistics.aspx>

Together, Brown and Brooks adapted the chapter's sample organizational guidelines to meet WKU requirements. Brown said the process took time, especially when adjusting the constitution to comply with Kentucky legislation, such as House Bill 4, while still keeping the organization inclusive to all students regardless of gender or sexuality.

According to the [Kentucky General Assembly](#),<sup>6</sup> House Bill 4 is part of a broader wave of Kentucky legislation that has reshaped how public universities and student organizations navigate issues related to gender, sexuality and reproductive health.

Because Brown already had an existing relationship with PPGA, they provided them with a sample constitution to which they made changes as needed to make it WKU-specific.

"I see myself as support," Brooks said. "It's their group, and I am really impressed with the work Zee has done and the preparedness to head the student organization as an undergrad. It is important work, and I am happy to be along for the ride."

Brown said students must be part of a registered organization to reserve tables and host events on campus. After months of preparation, the group was finally approved, allowing Brown to hold their first tabling event just before Valentine's Day.

Brown's "Valentine's Day Grab Bag" tabling event took place on Friday, Feb. 13, in the Downing Student Union. At the event, students could fill a bag with products such as Plan B with a limit of two per person, condoms, pads, tampons, candy and trinkets such as stickers or necklaces.

The university provided everything except for the pads and tampons, which Brown bought themselves. Brown also had a QR code laid out that linked to an interest form to join the group. With no members at the time, Brown planned to reach out to those who filled out the form to do an interest meeting.

"The purpose of the event really is to encourage people to be proactive rather than reactive about sexual health," Brown said. "I want to reduce the stigma around asking for resources."

WKU, located in a largely conservative region of the state, sits within the tension where student organizations addressing sexual health can become both highly visible and highly controversial.

Positive reactions from individuals emerged from Brown's event, such as Zoey Host, who came to fill a bag. Host said she is a strong believer in sexual education, so she is supportive of the chapter forming at WKU.

"It's incredible what is happening here," Host said. "I am in love with all the support."

Another participant, senior Adrian Doyd, said that having the event shows that people are trying to be safe, but may be shy about grabbing products to do so. Because of this, he likes that the event allows people to come up and grab what they need without having to ask or talk about it.

"I feel like schools must provide some type of education or resources for students," Doyd said.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://apps.legislature.ky.gov/record/25rs/hb4.html>

Among the positive reactions, negative reactions also arose. Brown said an individual came up to the table and took a free Plan B, ripped it up and threw it away. They learned later on that the individual is affiliated with “Students for Life,” a pro-life organization.

President of the WKU Students for Life chapter, junior Jason Hatfield, said that while the person was affiliated with the group, they were not a part of the WKU chapter.

“The situation was very unfortunate as neither I, nor any other of our officers approved or planned this action, and it led to a very hostile environment,” Hatfield said. “While I disagree with Plan B’s and contraceptives being handed out, I don’t think doing that was productive.”

He said that Students for Life operates as a nationally recognized anti-abortion student organization with chapters across college campuses in the U.S., often focusing on policy advocacy, education campaigns and legislative activism rather than direct disruption. At WKU, the group represents a more institutional form of anti-abortion organizing on campus.

Hatfield said that the two organizations are already very opposed to one another by the nature of the organizations, and the event during tabling made it worse. Meetings with DSU staff were held, and an agreement to not bother one another was made.

Many people came to defend Brown during the interaction, including Host, who was brought to tears.

“The people who came over here and threw a fit were ridiculous,” Host said. “Some people are just ignorant.”

Hatfield said his opposition to abortion is rooted in both religious belief and what he describes as a universal human right to life.

“I believe that abortion is wrong in every case,” Hatfield said. “Life is sacred and to be protected.”

Hatfield said his views are based on his Catholic faith, but he also believes the argument can be made in non-religious terms.

“For a non-religious person, I think we can agree that the most basic right we have as humans is the right to live,” Hatfield said. “As unborn children at the moment of conception are living human beings, they deserve this right as well.”

Hatfield emphasized that the organization’s stance, in his view, is not rooted in opposition to women.

“Our position does not come from a place of wanting to control women or their bodily autonomy,” Hatfield said.

While abortion is illegal in Kentucky under state law, he said advocacy work continues because access still exists across state lines and through medication obtained elsewhere.

In a more restrictive state like Kentucky, Students for Life chapters often focus on outreach and support for women and children through fundraising and service efforts.

Hatfield described his experience at WKU as generally positive, noting that the campus includes both supporters and critics of his views.

“There are a lot more pro-lifers on campus than I expected,” Hatfield said.

He sees the campus, and the broader Southcentral Kentucky region, as politically mixed rather than uniformly conservative.

“People tend to agree with our position, but the area is not a monolith,” Hatfield said.

Brown received all positive reactions from their second tabling event on Friday, March 13, titled “Stay Lucky This St. Patrick’s Day.” This event functioned the same way, allowing attendees to fill a bag with products they may need.

After the first event, Brown had 256 boxes of Plan B left over, but they had to restock items such as pads, tampons and condoms.

However, after talking to their PPGA representative, Brown said they were encouraged to make an Amazon wish list of what they may need and PPGA would fund it. Brown said they didn’t have to purchase new candy or trinkets because of the help from the wish list.

Many people came up to them during the event who were interested in joining, some even coming from outside of campus.

“Two girls came up to me and were like, ‘Yeah, we saw this on someone’s story, so like, we left our apartment and drove here, like we weren’t even on campus,’” Brown said. “I have also had a couple people take pictures of it to tell their friends about it.”

A participant had told them that when they saw it on stories on Snapchat, they didn’t think it was real.

“There have been so many people who were like, ‘Oh, how much does it cost?’” Brown said. “I’m like, ‘Guys, nothing.’ And then they’re like ‘really?’”

Many people, Brown said, walked by the table acting like they were interested but scared to interact, so they tried to get their attention and encourage them to come over to the table.

Brown also noted that one of the biggest issues they have run into so far was creating social media for the organization because there is an Instagram account still active from a previous organization on campus called “WKU Generation Action.”

“I have tried reaching out to the past president to deactivate the account,” Brown said. “I think I just should come up with a different name, just be like ‘Hey guys, please watch out for this other one. It’s inactive.’”

Brown's first interest meeting took place on Friday, March 27, in DSU after inviting everyone who filled out the interest form at their past events.

With six people present, the attendees began talking about the anti-abortion individuals associated with Abolitionists Rising who were on campus on Thursday, March 26, and Friday, March 27. While the group was not present at the meeting, their presence on campus was heavily discussed.

According to their website<sup>7</sup>, Abolitionists Rising "...exists to spread abolitionist ideas and support abolitionist organizations, projects and legislation." The goals of the group are to glory God, repent the nation and abolish abortion.

The group stood outside of popular areas such as the Commons at Helm Library and the Downing Student Union, holding signs. One sign said, "Taking a pill to terminate a baby is murder with malice aforethought." Another sign showed a picture of a fetus inside a womb, reading "Am I not human? Were you not once here yourself?"

One of the attendees, Avery Hunt, said they witnessed many people debating with the group and heard someone get called a whore. They said they also witnessed someone getting told they are going to "super hell" for having an intrauterine device, commonly known as an IUD, which is a form of birth control.

"I just wanted to sit in the grass and eat my bread and butter pickles in peace," Hunt said. "But no, I couldn't do that."

After the conversation died down, Brown began going over their PowerPoint. All attendees introduced themselves and Brown explained things that the group strives to do, which are tabling to hand out resources, offering free testing services, holding information meetings, informing voters and more.

Brown ended the meeting with advertising officer positions available within the group. While Brown serves as the president, they were looking for a vice president, secretary, treasurer and social media manager.

By their last meeting on Friday, May 1, Brown said they had around seven official members of the organization, had set officer positions and discussed ideas for next semester.

They hope to implement more into the chapter, such as teaming up with other organizations, helping people get registered to vote, tabling more and doing more event meetings.

On a large campus like WKU, Brown said it can be difficult to make sure students know what resources are available. Through this chapter, they hope to improve accessibility, reduce stigma around sexual health and provide students with information and supplies without fear of judgment.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://abolitionistsrising.com/about/>