



Margaret Sanger

Margaret Louise Sanger (née Higgins) was born into an Irish-Catholic family of 11 children in Corning, New York. Her mother, in fragile health from many pregnancies, including seven miscarriages, died at age 49. Her family experiences — along with her work as a nurse on the Lower East Side of New York — 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 speak and write to share her vision — a vision that remains controversial beyond concerns over the morality of birth control. In her writings in the scientific journal *Birth Control Review*, among others, Sanger pronounced her alignment with the eugenics movement. This movement promoted the idea that mankind could be improved through planned breeding for desirable traits like intelligence and industriousness. Although Sanger argued for a eugenics that was not applied based on race, today her reputation is tainted with accusations of racism.

In 1939, Sanger began what was called 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 racial mistrust of the health-care system.

Sanger opened the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in Manhattan, in 1923, 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, Inc.

The efforts of birth-control proponents led to a 1936 court ruling that birth-control devices and information would no longer be classified as obscene, and could be legally distributed in New York, Connecticut, and Vermont. It took another 30 years for these rights to be extended to married couples (but just married couples) throughout the rest of the United States. Nevertheless, this decision was a historic step toward making birth control available to everyone — a step that may never have been taken if not for the pioneering efforts of one courageous nurse.