

Testimony of Heidi Shulista, Certified Birth Doula, in Opposition to HB 2253
Senate Public Health and Welfare Committee, March 22, 2013

Madam Chair and members of the committee,

There was a time in our history before Roe v Wade that abortion was legal, before 1850. At that time it was turned into a criminal act, and between 1850 and 1973 abortions did not go away, women still found ways to control their own bodies and the size and timing of families. The difference was that thousands of women died horrible deaths because of abortions that were performed in less than sanitary conditions and in ways that could be considered torturous. I would like to tell the story of one of these women.

Ethel was married to Lester Lanier in 1921; they had 6 children by 1938, the youngest of which was not even 2. They lived in Ottawa, Kansas. Life was difficult and finding food to feed 6 children plus 2 adults during these years was sometimes impossible. Ethel discovered that she was pregnant once again. The fear of having her 6 living children starve and go without, and to try and provide the basic necessities to another life was insurmountable. No mother wants to have to make decisions like this, but no one can understand why a mother would, except that woman herself. Because abortion was illegal at the time, Ethel and her husband Lester chose to terminate the pregnancy on their own. The procedure was done at home. Ethel became sick with a fever and died after suffering for several days at her home. Lester was arrested, tried and sent to prison.

Various family members tried to help out and take care of the kids, but they all had their own children to take care of. The oldest child was nearly an adult and went on his own way. The middle children were sent to various farms to serve as farm hands. The younger ones were placed in Kansas Children's Service League, a brick building that housed an orphanage. The second youngest child was a girl that had been born in 1935.

That little girl is my grandmother. She can still remember pulling up to that building. She would tell heart-wrenching stories about the orphanage and still, at almost 80 has nightmares about that time in her life. If she were here at this meeting today, she would say that if abortion had been legal at the time, her mother would not have died. She would have been raised with her siblings and mother and father.

Legislators and committees focus on the pregnancy, it seems, but who is thinking about these women and who is thinking about children left motherless because of situations like these. None of us can understand why a woman would choose to end a pregnancy, but none of us should have to. That decision should be left up to her and her family and doctor to decide. By making abortion illegal it is driven further underground where no one talks of it and women die scared and lonely, afraid to speak about what they are facing, and ultimately choose to abort by the most horrific means. If we keep it legal there is opportunity for women to reach out for guidance and some of those women may make another choice.

Thank you,
Heidi Shulista