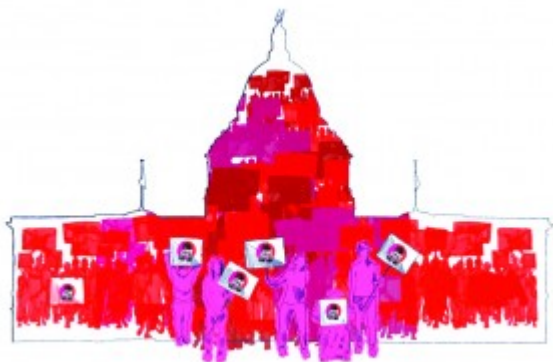


# You Gotta Fight for Your Right: One woman's desire for change was channeled into The Womxn Project



As a lifelong Rhode Islander, I'm ashamed to admit how few times I had been inside our State House prior to 2016. Maybe a school field trip or two? Maybe? But on that fateful election night more than two years ago, the world turned upside down and I, along with millions of other devastated and distraught Americans from all across the country, felt compelled to try to do something, *anything*, to set it right. I started going to every protest, every rally, every meeting of concerned citizens I could find. I had no idea what I could do to fix our new political reality and the very real dangers it posed, but I didn't feel like sitting around and waiting to figure it out.

Now, it seems, I visit the State House more often than I visit some members of my family. In the last two years I've been there at least a dozen times, fighting for issues ranging from immigrant rights to trans issues to gun control to environmental justice. I've even faced down neo-nazis in the pouring rain ([workers.org/2018/08/11/providence-r-i-activists-drive-out-far-right/](http://workers.org/2018/08/11/providence-r-i-activists-drive-out-far-right/))! At one such visit, a rally aimed at getting the vice chair of the RI Democratic Party to resign over his dismissive comments about sexual harassment, I became acquainted with a woman who would completely change the trajectory of my activism and give it a much-needed focus.

The woman I met that day was Jordan Hevenor who, along with Jocelyn Foye, co-founded The Womxn Project, a grassroots organization aimed at "using art and activism to advance education and social change." From postcard campaigns to staging rallies to creating mobile art installations, The Womxn Project (TWP) has been at the forefront of the fight for reproductive freedom in RI for the past two years. By combining Hevenor's keen understanding of the legislative process with Foye's boldness and artistic vision, the two have worked tirelessly to build movement around the issue of codifying *Roe v. Wade* into Rhode Island law.

But why would we need to codify a Supreme Court decision into state law, you ask? Well, although Rhode Island is one of the bluest states in the union, we also have some extremely restrictive laws on our books regarding abortion. Many of these laws have been found unconstitutional or unenforceable on the national level, but they remain part of Rhode Island's legal framework with respect to abortion. So long as the Supreme Court decisions governing abortion rights remain intact, our right to abortion in Rhode Island is protected. But if *Roe v. Wade* (or the later decision, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*) is

overturned or weakened, the right to safe and legal abortion in Rhode Island would be in great peril. This potential peril has been on the minds of state lawmakers for years.

The Reproductive Healthcare Act (RHCA) and its amended version, the Reproductive Privacy Act (RPA), seek to maintain the status quo in Rhode Island by striking those unconstitutional and unenforceable laws off the books. Like with any legislative battle, this one has been years in the making. If you remember your Schoolhouse Rock, you'll know that bills have to be proposed, then they go to committee where people from the public can testify on their merits, and if the committee votes them forward, they go on to a floor vote by the legislators. This happens for both chambers of our legislature. Until now, the various forms of the RHCA died in committee, if they even got that far. But now, thanks to the efforts of TWP, along with several dogged legislators and the 19 other member organizations that make up the Coalition for Reproductive freedom, the RHCA has never been so close to being passed into law.

My own personal journey as a fledgling activist has lead me all the way to TWP's board, and I've seen first-hand how harnessing collective determination can lead directly to legislative action. We connect and encourage our friends to stand up with us through social media. We give our time by showing up for rallies, canvassing our neighborhoods and writing postcards to send to other concerned voters. We spend hours testifying at hearings, or just stand strong in the State House rotunda on vote days, taking all of the harassment and abuse that comes with it. The onslaught of the past few years has sometimes made us feel powerless and overwhelmed, but it has also made us aware of our capacity for action to effect real change. Let's hope this new wave of citizen-activism continues far beyond the current administration to create a more vibrant vision of what is possible for our world.

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## [How Women Warn: Disillusioned with law enforcement, women seek informal methods of recourse](#)



Janelle C had had enough. The local woman said she was a victim of a violent physical assault in January 2015 by her best friend's boyfriend. Janelle's friend remained with the boyfriend until he allegedly committed a life-threatening assault against her. Janelle's friend actually took the rare step of pressing charges, and, according to Janelle, the boyfriend was convicted of felony assault with a deadly weapon. The story should have ended there — the system worked. But instead, that was just the beginning.

Although the offender's probation expressly prohibited him from being in bars, Janelle routinely saw him in such establishments. Concerned that alcohol consumption might exacerbate his anger issues and heighten the risk to other women, Janelle said she routinely called the police to tell them that he was violating his probation, but law enforcement agencies were unresponsive. Then Janelle heard that this man was working in a local bar and potentially posed a threat to other women she knew. What was to be done?

Our country is at a reckoning point. The #MeToo movement has brought conversations regarding sexual harassment and sexual assault to the forefront of American consciousness, and by extension, we're forced to grapple with the ways in which sexism and misogyny permeate American life. Almost a year into the #MeToo movement, however, victims of harassment and assault still face sharp barriers to coming forward. From apathy and disbelief to increased threats to physical safety, the consequences of bringing these types of traumatic experiences to light can be severe. This is to say nothing of the perceived ineffectiveness of pursuing these kinds of allegations through legal channels. There is a constant push and pull between women (primarily) who now feel empowered to make their personal stories of abuse and mistreatment heard, and those who are inclined to disbelieve any such public allegations. Despite the tide of public opinion seemingly turning toward support for victims, women who do make the decision to come forward are all too often greeted with reactions ranging from scorn and derision at best, to abuse, trolling and even death threats at worst.

This all is occurring against the backdrop of a legal system that seems ill-equipped to appropriately handle cases of sexual assault or domestic abuse. A 2014 study published in the journal *Psychology of Violence* showed that even when victims of domestic abuse come forward and report their assaults to the police, "less than 2% of offenders ever receive jail time." This is to say nothing of the threats to personal safety victims face from their abusers if they choose to speak out.

It's no wonder, then, that women often resort to using informal channels and networks to keep themselves and their friends safe. It's not at all uncommon for women to warn each other to "stay away from that guy" or "don't go to that place" because the guy or the place in question has a reputation for being unsafe. But now, through social media and other modern modes of communication and networking, women and those who are female-identifying are finding new ways to check in and keep each other safe.

There are secret Facebook groups used by women and femmes to share their experiences in a safe and private environment. Some industrious Twitter users have posted "help me" guides to alert concerned bystanders to the types of body language women and femmes use to indicate that they feel unsafe. And public Facebook posts are often used to share stories of trauma and warn women of potentially dangerous men.

This, in the end, was Janelle's chosen method for speaking out. Compelled to act by a desire to protect women from a potentially dangerous offender, on September 20 she posted a detailed account of her experience with her friend's ex-boyfriend. She named him publicly with the intent of exposing his well-documented history of violence to their mutual friends. The response to the post was overwhelming and positive. It was shared 30 times, and Janelle reports receiving several direct messages from other women who've had a similar experience with this man.

Word eventually got around to Daniel Becker, the owner of the establishment where the man worked. Daniel immediately reached out to Janelle to see how he could be of help. "It was gut wrenching to read

[the post],” he said. Daniel and Janelle both expressed a desire for this individual to be able to access some kind of help or rehabilitation, but neither were sure how receptive he’d be. Now that Daniel was aware of the assault conviction and the apparent pattern of behavior, he faced a difficult choice: Fire this employee on the spot, in which case he might just go to the next bar for work and continue to be a threat to patrons and staff; or give him a clearly defined path toward rehabilitation that would also address the safety of coworkers. The man was not receptive to that proposal, so he was fired. Daniel also indicated that he would be in touch with other bar owners around the state to try to keep this man out of the bar industry. Of his decision, Daniel said that it was, “the right decision for myself, my business, my staff, and everyone else in this city.”

Ultimately Janelle’s decision to post about the man was successful, though she expressed some trepidation that the man could attempt to harm her at some point in the future. But in her words, “What we really need are more male allies ... to speak up. To share our stories. To push people like this out of their lives and to chastise them. Men need to hold more men accountable. We’re out here feeling pretty f\*\*king alone.”