

Congresswoman Cori Bush
Committee on Oversight and Reform - Testimony
September 30, 2021

St. Louis and I thank you, Chairwoman Maloney for convening this urgent hearing. It is an honor to join Congresswomen Lee, Jayapal, and Chu as part of today's panel.

In the summer of 1994, I was a young girl all of 17 years old and had just graduated high school. Like so many Black girls during that time, I was obsessed with fashion, gold jewelry, and how I physically showed up in the world. But I was also very lost. For all my life, I had been a straight-A student with dreams of attending college and becoming a nurse. But high school early on was difficult for me. I was discriminated against, bullied, and as time passed, my grades slipped and along with it the dream of attaining a full scholarship to a historically Black college. That summer I was just happy to have passed my classes and finish high school.

Shortly after graduating, I went on a church trip to Jackson, Mississippi. I had many friends on that trip and while there I met a boy — a friend of a friend. He was a little older than I was, about 20 years old. That first day we met, we flirted and talked on the phone.

While on the phone, he asked to come over to my room. I was bunking with a friend and hanging out and said he could stop by. But he didn't show up for a few hours and by the time he did it was so late that my roommate and I had already gone to bed. I answered the door and quietly told him he could come in, imagining we would talk and laugh, just as we had done over the phone. But the next thing I knew, he was on top of me, messing with my clothes, and not saying anything at all.

"What is happening?" I thought. I didn't know what to do. I was frozen in shock, just laying there as his weight pressed down on top of me. When he was done, he got up, pulled up his pants, and without saying a word — he left. That was it. I was confused, embarrassed, and ashamed. I asked myself, was it something I'd done?

The next morning, I wanted to talk to him. But he refused to speak to me. By the time the trip ended, we hadn't spoken at all.

About a month after the trip, I turned 18. A few weeks later, I realized I had missed my period. I reached out to a friend to ask the guy from the church trip to contact me. I waited for him to reach out. But he never did. I never heard from him. I was 18, broke, and felt so alone. I blamed myself for what had happened to me.

I knew I had options. I had known other girls who had gone to a local clinic to get birth control and some who had gotten abortions. So I looked through the yellow pages and scheduled an appointment. During my first visit, I found out I was 9 weeks pregnant. Panic set in.

How could I make this pregnancy work? How could I, at 18 years old and barely scraping by, support a child on my own? And I would have been on my own. I was stressed knowing that the father wouldn't be involved and I feared that my parents would kick me out if they knew. My dad was a proud father, always bragging about his little girl and how he knew I would go straight to college and become the Attorney General. With no scholarship intact and college out of the picture for the foreseeable future, I couldn't bear the thought of disappointing him again.

I knew it was a decision I needed to make for myself, so I did.

My abortion happened on a Saturday. There were a few other people in the waiting room, including one other young Black girl. I overheard the clinic staff talking about her saying she had ruined her life and that's what *they* do—they being Black girls like us. Before the procedure, I remember going in for counseling and being told that if I moved forward with this pregnancy my baby would be “jacked up” because the fetus was already malnourished and underweight. Being told that if I had this baby I would wind up on food stamps and welfare.

I was being talked to like I was trash and it worsened my shame. Afterwards while in the changing area, I heard some other girls, all white, talking about how they were told how bright their futures were, how loved their babies would be if adopted, and that their options and opportunities were limitless. In that moment, listening to those girls, I felt anguish and like I had failed.

When I went home, my body ached and I had heavy bleeding. I felt sick, dizzy, and nauseous. I felt like something was missing. I felt alone, but I also felt resolved in my decision.

Choosing to have an abortion was the hardest decision I had ever made, but at 18 years old, I knew it was the right decision for me. It felt freeing knowing I had options. Even still, it took me a long time for me to feel like me again — and until recently I've mostly kept this experience to myself.

To all the Black women and girls who have had or will have abortions — know this: we have nothing to be ashamed of. We live in a society that has failed to legislate love and justice for us. But we deserve better. We demand better. We are *worthy* of better.

Because of that, I must share my story.

Today I sit before you as that nurse, and as a pastor, activist, survivor, single mom, and Congresswoman to testify that in the summer of 1994 I was raped, became pregnant, and chose to have an abortion.