

# Intact America

## Children's Rights

<https://www.intactamerica.org/category/voices-2/page/6/>

## Campaign and Advocacy

Jun 19, 2018



I consider myself a lot of things: a good writer, a funny comedian, an OK actor, a better improviser. All of these things are interchangeable and, although they're things I love, they aren't necessarily things that define me as I didn't come into the world with those labels. Two things I was born with, though, are being Black and intact.

My parents made the choice as my father had recently gone through a militant phase and wanted his African-American son to keep every stretch of his Blackness. My dad, Keith, was a man who was too intelligent for his own good. He was charming and would give you the shirt off his back but battled demons throughout his life that strained our relationship. When he passed away in eight years ago this month, I grew to learn more about him. It made me appreciate the things he did and tried to do for me, especially in terms of body positivity.

As a kid I always felt very other, with the combination of not being circumcised, a little bit chubby and having scars on my hip region from chicken pox. I was in the Boy Scouts throughout my adolescence. While on a trip to St. Louis one year, some of the older boys were pranking us younger kids by pulling our pants down and piling us into a hotel bathtub. I fought valiantly but they eventually got me and pulled down my pants, and I remember one of them saying, 'What's wrong with him?'

That instance stuck with me well into high school and college as I grew worrisome about dating. What would they think? Would they be terrified by my leopard-printed pelvis, pink head, and turtleneck that made up my genital region? I shied away from sex and nudity virtually until a week shy of my 19th birthday, when I lost my virginity to my first real girlfriend after I played a zombie in a straight-to-DVD horror film. She didn't even notice, focusing more on a single hair that grew out of my shoulder and how, if anything, my penis looked like a monk taking his hood off.

After that relationship and into adulthood, I became a little more comfortable with listening to other opinions on circumcision. Many discussions involved people either shaming the idea of being intact (Why would you have that? It looks weird, just trim it) or getting their facts wrong (They cause yeast infections and they're dirty). I would try to rebuff these perspectives, or at the very least remain quiet so I didn't draw attention to myself; these friends and associates had no idea I was intact.

I started researching circumcision surgery because I didnt want to feel different anymore. I watched cringe-inducing videos and did so much homework on the process, at one point talking to a doctor about what errors could occur. I couldnt shake the feeling that no matter what, I would be losing a part of me. I read horror stories of botched circumcisions and the costly measures that people endure as a result. If Im ever lucky enough to have kids, when theyre of age I hope to have open dialogues with them about circumcision as I feel its a very personal choice and not one that I would want to make for them. There are a lot of questions and challenges that come with it, and I would like to be the type of father who is open to listening, helping and teaching where I can.

The first time on stage I opened up about not being circumcised was at an open mic in Chicago. I was nervous. I had heard other comedians talk about how much they didnt like the little elephant trunks, and I knew I may be opening myself up to a roasting. But right after my set, another comedian approached me and said he too was uncircumcised. Then another comedian went on stage and also mentioned being uncircumcised. The following week another comedian said the same. I began to work it into my routine, asking the crowd how many of them were like me and pointing out how common it was in other parts of the world.

I learned about Intact America after a friend posted about the organization online. In a thread on social media, people from my hometown discussed circumcision and the value of leaving their children unclipped, and I did something I thought I would never do I chimed in. I opened up about my body and the value of teaching kids proper cleaning and how our weens arent so different.

In the end, I didnt change a thing. I have learned to be proud of my body. I have learned to give my body to those who appreciate it just as I would appreciate theirs, and I have learned to not only embrace my being uncut but talk about it on my platforms. Up on stage I debunk the myths around health and cleanliness that hang over it. I have made my decision in the matter, and Ive chosen to stay intact.

### **Martin Mandela Morrow**

A native of Birmingham, Ala., Martin Mandela Morrow is an award-winning comedian and writer. His podcast is Untitled Black Dudes with Harrison Summerise. Appearances include Comedy Centrals Why? With Hannibal Buress, Second City, NFL Network and NBCs Last Comic Standing. This month he stages Taming of the Shamed during the Hollywood Fringe Festival.

Interested in lending your voice? Send an email to [\[emailprotected\]](#), giving us a brief summary of what you would like to write about, and we will get back to you.

May 17, 2018



My son Jude is a victim of forced retraction, a terrifying experience that I witnessed and will never forget. Its taken me almost two years to talk about this, but if I can help even one little boy by telling our story, its worth it.

Jude is two years old. When he was about two months old, he was vomiting and had diarrhea, and my mom and I took him to the pediatrician. He was pretty sick and the doctor wanted to rule out anything serious, so he referred us to Childrens Healthcare of Atlanta for tests. During the appointment, medical personnel were prepping him for routine tests while I answered questions related to his condition with another staff member across the room.

Thats when I heard him scream. To this day Ive never heard him scream like that. I went over to him and I will never get that sight out of my head. A nurse had forcibly retracted Judes foreskin to get a urine sample, and I could see his entire glans. It was all purple and swollen and there was a little bit of blood. it was so terrifying.

I said, Youre not supposed to retract him. This is not supposed to be happening. She said, No, youre supposed to be retracting him at every diaper change. I knew retraction was wrong, but I wasnt as educated as I am now about how it all worked, and I didnt have the facts in my head ready to counter their claims.

I knew forced retraction does happen, but it didnt occur to me that it could happen in a childrens hospital. It wasnt even in my head space. Its one of those things you dont think will ever happen to you or your loved ones.

When they gave him a pacifier with sugar water in it to calm him down, that broke me a little bit. I had never given him a pacifier. Im supposed to be his comfort, not a pacifier. I started to hyperventilate and had to step out of the room to get myself together. I couldnt pick him up. I couldnt do anything for him.

A while later, a nurse supervisor came to talk to me. She was almost judgmental that we hadnt circumcised Jude. She told me that I should be retracting his foreskin or I would cause him problems. My mom told her they had instead just opened him up to infection. When it was clear our conversation was going nowhere, she asked if I wanted to talk to the doctor about it. I said no, and when he came

back in with the test results, he wasn't at all concerned.

Jude was in pain for a couple of weeks. For a good week after it happened, I had to set him in the sink with water in it when he peed because he cried every time. It was so sad and he was so pitiful. When I put him in the car seat, the pressure from the buckle hurt him. I cried about it for weeks afterwards. It triggered postpartum depression.

When we were at the hospital, I had googled some facts about the dangers of forced retraction. That's when I found David Llewellyn, an intactivist lawyer in Atlanta, where I live. He has dedicated his career to ending circumcision and forced retraction. It's not easy to take on these cases here because no one questions these practices.

Through him we filed suit for battery, nursing malpractice and intentional infliction of emotional distress. We proposed a settlement that would, among other things, require the hospital to institute proper protocols for care. To my husband and me, that is the whole point of the suit. The hospital didn't agree to those terms, so the case will be going to trial.

I've found support among new friends in the intactivist movement in Your Whole Baby and other mom groups on Facebook, and from Intact America. I'm a really introverted person, and speaking out is hard. But I never want another mother to feel like I did. I'm also shocked at how many people have told me they wish they hadn't had their sons circumcised.

So I've started planting seeds in conversations. It's kind of an internal battle, building up the courage to say something. But it does feel good when people receive the message and open up their minds a bit. Most people say they hadn't even thought about it. Sometimes they don't say anything, and that's OK. Even a few thoughtful words or a passing comment can be powerful, and they'll remember it later.

I've been afraid of being perceived as a crazy penis mom. Now I'm at the point of being OK with that. I'm an advocate. It has pushed me out of my comfort zone but that's kind of what motherhood is.

### **Cassie Parks**

Interested in lending your voice? Send an email to [\[emailprotected\]](#), giving us a brief summary of what you would like to write about, and we will get back to you.

Apr 12, 2018

A couple of years before our 35-year-old son's accidental death, he challenged me with the question of why he was circumcised at birth. I was a bit taken aback but apologized profusely, while stammering something about how we thought we were doing what was best for him and that infant circumcision was at that time considered routine. He didn't pursue the topic, but I sensed my response did not totally satisfy him. I suspect he never fully forgave us.

The truth is that I was a cocky, ill-informed 25-year-old when I made that decision. (His mom left the decision to me.) I focused on such things as his potential acceptance in the locker rooms of his life rather than honoring and respecting him as a beautifully formed, embodied being.

Ironically, I am intact. I was never teased about it in locker rooms and am very pleased with my foreskin. However, growing up I felt somewhat self-conscious about not being like all the other guys. I somehow made the assumptions that others regarded being intact as suggesting an unsophisticated family background and that an uncircumcised penis was less attractive to women.

I was obviously uncomfortable about my decision because, while my son was a young lad, I kept my foreskin retracted pretty uncomfortable for a few years, so that when he saw me naked it would not be as obvious that he and I were different. (Then I could avoid actually having to talk with him about why he was circumcised.) I never told him all this and suspect he assumed I was circumcised too.

What possible ethical justification was there for me to commit to permanently surgically removing healthy tissue from another person's body without his permission? Being born with a functional foreskin is not a medical emergency, and therefore is not justification for surgical intervention initiated by me as a parent, doctors, hospitals, insurance companies or anyone else.

I have reflected on his disappointment over the loss of his foreskin many times over the years. My shame was that my first official act as a parent had been deep disrespect of our first-born child. I had totally taken away his right to make an informed decision about an important part of his body.

Over time I did come to forgive myself. I have also become more informed about the fabulous foreskin, its lack of respect by the medical community and, sadly, that genital pleasure sensors are removed with circumcision. I offer my sincere posthumous apology to you, my son, and my compassion goes out to all the other men and boys who have been cut without their consent.

I am committed to being an intactivist, and I hope my story will inspire others to defend the right of all males to remain intact until they are of an age to make informed decisions about their own bodies.

### **Lew Rose**

Interested in lending your voice? Send an email to [\[emailprotected\]](#), giving us a brief summary of what you would like to write about, and we will get back to you.

Mar 14, 2018



Since the mid-1990s, I have been deeply immersed in the frustrating and maddeningly thorny topic of male circumcision. Like a bolt from the sky, I was struck hard and deep by the realization that in the United States of America, boys are being systematically assaulted and deprived of their normal genitalia for life.

That bolt from the sky came from a woman named Polly Strand. In 1994, I was a producer and host at WBAI Radio in New York City. I hosted a fairly popular public affairs show called Waldens Pond, and Polly, who lived in California, was the show's producer. It covered a wide variety of topics from health and politics to environmental issues and often featured live guests.

On one of our calls, Polly asked if I would be interested in producing a show on circumcision. Circumcision? To me, the word signified something disturbing and ominous. She said she would send me information on it. A week later, I received a huge packet of brochures and documents. I read some of it and I was disturbed. I felt this was profound information that I needed to digest in full, but I was not prepared to handle it at that moment: I had always felt my genitals were not normal, but I did not have the vocabulary or willingness to confront the situation. I set it aside.

Life at the station was turbulent at the time. We were busy hiring a new program director, and O.J. Simpson was in the news. I did not address the circumcision topic for nearly a year. Finally, in April 1995, Polly asked me about it again. I assented and she put me in contact with Marilyn Milos, then the director of NOCIRC, for an interview. Speaking with Marilyn before going on the air the following month, I felt like a light had been turned on in my head. I had a tingling feeling of anticipation that as difficult and disturbing the road before me looked, it was going to lead eventually to something good.

During the interview, Marilyn described in great detail her evolution from mother to nurse to intactivist. Afterwards, I sat in a room by myself, attempting to process what I had heard and felt from Marilyn. I felt an indescribable sense of loss that something had been taken away from me for eternity and I would never be able to get it back. Something had been stolen from my body without my consent, and my sex life had been irretrievably altered and damaged, like that of many other American men.

I sat in the quiet of the room for a few hours. I felt like someone had died. It was late in the day, and as I watched the sun going down, I wondered: OK, how am I going to deal with this?

I was deeply angry. I realized that I needed to process this anger into something positive; it was vital that I do so. I had to think about this: I knew that I would lose friends and acquaintances, some of whom were Jewish. But I also knew intuitively that this would change my life and I would never be the same. This was a risk I had to take, because if I did not speak up at least for me, who would?

I expected pushback from my colleagues. In the first year after interviewing Marilyn, I went on to do a dozen more shows on circumcision, bringing in doctors, lawyers, intactivists and other experts. Colleagues pressured me to stop. Station supporters wanted me taken off the air. After I raised money to support the station, they left me alone.

Maybe I was naive, but I wondered: What's wrong about talking about this? We talk about sex in all its manifestations in some of the most ugly and disgusting ways and we can't talk about this? We can't talk about circumcision, not even in a clinical sense, because somehow it's taboo? It's the most mystifying thing I've ever seen.

I did find support in some corners. A week after my first circumcision program, another producer scheduled a replay of my show in her time slot. And I started to hear from listeners who said they were glad I was speaking out, and giving others a forum to speak out. Through all of this, I learned at least a couple of things:

This is about the freedom of personal choice. This is about human rights. An infant is too young to decide for himself and so he should be left in peace, to make his own decisions when capable of doing so.

I now better understand my own life experience. I have a better sense of self. Finally being able to talk openly about circumcision empowered me, and it made me stronger.

Frankly, I think routinely removing baby boys' foreskins underlies a lot of social and interpersonal dysfunction in this country. A lot of men aren't going to talk about this. They don't want to be seen as weird, strange, or deficient. As a result, I don't think women are aware of how angry men are about this. It comes out in these passive-aggressive ways.

This would be a much gentler and more loving society if we didn't cut helpless children's genitals. I am determined to contribute to a better society. That's what keeps me going.

**Shelton Walden**

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and we will get back to you.

Feb 15, 2018



As Editor of the new Voices column for Intact America, I thought it only fitting to start with my story. The urgency of this issue is relatively new to me, but over the years it tugged at the edges of my conscience, like a toothache that flares up from time to time. Cutting the penis of a baby just didnt seem right.

On the other hand, I had vague knowledge of health claims in favor of itdisease prevention, that sort of thing. And so, without thinking about it too much, like most people I accepted routine removal of the foreskin as a temporarily painful but necessary thing, like a vaccination or a swab of alcohol on a cut.

That all changed last year when I met Intact America Executive Director Georganne Chapin. We talked about collaborating on some writing projects, and she told me about IA. I had no idea such a movement existed. Georganne told me that the U.S. medical communitys claims of health benefits from circumcision were untrue. But I wanted to find out for myself. So I dug in, first googling the history of circumcision and then soaking up all I could about why people say its medically justifiable.

I came away convinced that it is not. Furthermore, it is a violation of basic human rights, since baby boys have no say in what is being done to their bodies. It causes tremendous pain, and creates an open wound prone to infection. For many, scarring is the resultboth physical and emotional.

The body is an amazing machine. All the parts have a purpose. Why remove a natural, protective, healthy body part if its not medically necessary to do so?

I grappled with the religion question. But I learned that even among parents who might opt to circumcise for this reason, a growing number are forgoing it and preserving the true meaning of the ceremony in other ways.

Last summer I spoke with a woman who grew up in England. Sarah has two young boys and is married to an American man who was circumcised as an infant. In Europe, circumcision is the exception. It floors her that the practice is still prevalent in the United States today.

Now, this intrigued me. Id assumed the U.S. was on the leading edge of medical care. Learning that European doctors speak out against child circumcision, I wondered how we could be so out of step with our peers in Europe? What do they know that we dont? Suffice it to say, Europeans dont have higher rates of the diseases that circumcision is supposed to prevent.

I tend to stay on the fringe of movements, supporting quietly, researching, writing. Ive been a journalist for years, and I strive to see all sides in matters of debate and do my homework. This issue tugs at my heartfor the needless trauma inflicted on babies, for the U.S. medical establishments myopic stance, and for any man who has struggled as a result.

Im taking baby steps to speak up. My friend recently gave birth to a boy. Before he was born, I surprised myself by asking if she and her husband were going to have him circumcised. Her husband didnt want to, and she was on the fence. I wouldnt have judged them or been surprised if they had; it is just what we do in this country.

I pointed her to IAs [circumcisiondebate.org](http://circumcisiondebate.org) and casually mentioned a couple of highlights. When they chose not to circumcise, I was happy and relieved. I may not be a flag waver, but I can point someone to a website. I know progress when I see it.

**Sally Parker**

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