

Kikue Higuchi

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Event 1st Draft

The First Day Dedicated to Bleeding:

A puddle of people dressed in red, holding bloody signs covered in pads and tampons, gathered on the northern end of Chicago's Federal Plaza, pooling outward as the day wore on. Passers-by gawk at the splash of red and the signs that scream "Axe the Tax" and "It's about bloody time." Women stop to take pictures and listen to the speakers. Men look on in confusion and then slight disgust once they realize what these people are talking about: periods.

Chicago's first National Period Day Rally was held on October 19 from noon to 2 p.m. at Federal Plaza. Organized by the Period. Inc. with support from several cohosts: Planned Parenthood, United Nations Association of Chicago, Chicago Period Project, She Votes Illinois, Indivisible Chicago in Oak Park, DePaul Women's Center, Women's March Chicago and Chicago NOW. The rally focused on protesting the tampon tax, raising awareness about period poverty, and breaking the stigma against periods.

Planning began in September with Mary Catherine Hanafée LaPlante. After reaching out to Nadya Okamoto, founder of Period. Inc., Mary was given the job of lead organizer. She immediately got to work, building a core team of organizers: Abigail Estrada, Amanda Stickels, Maria Valle Cota, Megan Harris, Riley Reed, Ruba Memon, Tiffany Cheng and Vani Sharma.

Mary had a clear vision for the rally, "One of the biggest issues with periods is that nobody wants to say the word 'period,'" she says, "I think a rally is the perfect opportunity to literally shout it from a microphone...and make sure people are talking about it." Megan Harris, the cohost organizer, had similar gusto and conviction when speaking about the purpose of the rally. When asked why she was here today she replied, "Because this is bullshit."

The organizers' enthusiasm for the cause was matched by the speakers. There were 15 speakers in all, from stand-up comedians to poets, each with a story about their periods and a rousing call to action. Riley

Reed, a student at DePaul University, spoke about accessibility. “My organization tried to start a drive for period products to Cook Country jails,” she shouted into the microphone with indignation. “We found out that it [period products] doesn’t directly go to the prisoners, it goes to the prison store, where they then have to purchase it with whatever money that they get. They can’t afford that!”

Abbey Melbon, a Naperville resident, spoke about another issue close to home. After the Learn with Dignity Act was passed, she discovered her school district was not complying with the law. She confronted her administrators and reached out to media outlets until the pressure forced the district to abide by the act. Melbon reminded attendees to look out in their local schools and ensure their compliance with the Learn with Dignity Act, suggesting a tangible way to create local change.

Another speaker, actress Mae Flores, spoke about how periods relate to trauma and just how essential period products are. As a sexual assault survivor, Flores recounted her experiences and how every month her period reminded her of the assault. She reminded her listeners to think about sexual violence survivors who don’t have access to menstrual products and the trauma they feel; inviting them to think about the wide-reaching effects of period poverty in more than one way.

One of the most powerful speakers was Leslie Honoré, a director at the K.L.E.O. Community Family Life Center. She performed a poem she had written about the stigma around periods. “If my brother had a period, pads would be free and there would be no corner of the world where periods meant inequity.” She spoke into the microphone with quiet conviction. “If my brother had a period, it would just be a normal thing. His body would be his own to govern. He wouldn’t be less of a human being.”

The effect of the speakers on their listeners was visible. Benjamin Gould, an attendee, was impressed by both the organizers and the participants. “It’s really inspiring to see people who are in high school and college doing things to impact this issue locally and also on a broad scale,” he says. “It’s an exceptional thing and remarkable how much success they’ve had. It’s definitely a motivator for more people to get involved.”

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