

# Children conceived through rape open new front in abortion culture wars

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Standing before the throngs at the March for Life on Jan. 25, Ryan Bomberger admitted that he was the poster child for one of the most difficult aspects of the abortion debate: his mother had been raped.

"I'm the fringe case that even pro-lifers have a hard time embracing," said Bomberger, an anti-abortion activist whose mother chose to continue the pregnancy and put him up for adoption.

Forty years after the Roe v. Wade decision legalized abortion, children who were conceived through rape – and women who were raped and chose to end the pregnancy – are speaking out, opening a new front in the often-fraught discussions of a decades-old culture war.

While Bomberger, 41, considers himself a warrior on the front lines of the anti-abortion movement, Jason Lovins sees himself as a worship leader more than an activist.

When he performs with his contemporary Christian band, the 31-year-old shares his testimony of being born after his mother was raped at age 15; he still remembers her high school graduation on his third birthday.

"I was so loved that it never became an issue for me that I was a product of rape," said the singer, whose Jason Lovins Band has performed with Michael W. Smith and for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

From campgrounds to churches, he has shared his story to encourage women who find themselves in the same situation as his mother to make the same choice she did.

But adult children who were conceived by rape are not the only ones revealing their pasts.

The 1 in 3 Campaign, a project of the abortion rights group Advocates for Youth, has introduced 40 women's stories in a new book to mark the Roe v. Wade anniversary. Among the stories is one from "Stefanie," a 51-year-old minister and stepmother who ended up pregnant twice after she was raped at the ages of 18 and 21.

"I chose abortion over suicide. Twice," she wrote. "Those were the most difficult decisions I've ever made. I commemorate them each year with great sadness. But, also, with tremendous gratitude for having had the freedom to make those decisions for myself."

Julia Reticker-Flynn, manager of the 1 in 3 Campaign that produced the book, said the stories aim to end the shame that comes with abortion – and rape.

"Whether a pregnancy was the result of rape, or a pregnancy was very much wanted and because of dire medical circumstance the person could not carry the pregnancy to term, our stance is that we should not judge," she said.

Joyce McCauley-Benner, 35, was working her way through college when she was raped by a co-worker. Because she was dating her boyfriend at the time, she did not know until months after her son was born who the father was.

Now, 13 years after her son's birth, the spokeswoman for the group Feminists for Life chooses not to reveal the information about his father.

"We shouldn't rank people based on how they're conceived," she said. "My child, if he was conceived in rape, that doesn't make him any less than you if you were conceived by two loving parents."

McCauley-Benner doesn't argue that every rape victim should keep a child under such circumstances. But she said stories like hers show that there are no easy answers – even for those who decide to carry the child to term.

"It doesn't mean that all of a sudden the child is going to make memories even worse, nor does it mean that the child is going to magically heal you," she said.

Recent statistics on how many pregnancies occur as a result of rape are not readily available. According to the website of the American Congress of Obstetricians and

Gynecologists, about 10,000 to 15,000 abortions occur annually among women whose pregnancies resulted from rape or incest. It also said that some 22,000 pregnancies resulting from rape could be prevented each year if female assault victims had access to emergency contraception.

A 2011 Gallup poll revealed Americans' mixed feelings on rape and abortion: The vast majority – 91 percent – of those who define themselves as "pro-choice" support abortion being legal when pregnancy was caused by rape or incest. Yet even 6 in 10 (59 percent) of those who call themselves "pro-life" agree with such a policy.

Bomberger, an evangelical Christian, said his inclusion at the January rally – and increased chatter on social media – are signs this issue is getting more attention. His Virginia-based Radiance Foundation aims to "shatter the myth of the unwanted" through campaigns that focus on adopted children, including those who were products of rape.

Michele Dillon, a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire, said the political debates show the absolutes on either side. For those who believe life begins at conception, "life is life and hence abortion should not be an option," she said. Those supporting abortion rights, meanwhile, are more likely to see the choice as up to the mother "whatever the reason."

Last year, the role of rape in the abortion debate made an unexpected entrance in two key Senate races; Missouri Republican Todd Akin said women rarely become pregnant in cases of "legitimate rape," and Indiana Republican Richard Mourdock said a pregnancy that results from rape was "something that God intended to happen." Both men lost their races.

Though politicians used "inelegant language," they raised what Susan Wills of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops called "one of the hard cases."

"These are the tough sells in the public," said Wills, assistant director for education and outreach at the bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities. "It's very easy for us to convince people that partial-birth abortion or other gruesome late-term procedures ought not to be happening, but when we talk about rape and incest, it's not a sound-bite issue."