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Report from the Frontlines: Toronto's Counter-Protest to the "March for Life"

By Tina Beier, May 2019

On Thursday May 9, I attended a counter-protest to the March for Life at Queen's Park in Downtown Toronto. The weather was chilly, and rain threatened the entire time, but our turnout was strong. The March for Life claimed they had over 700 people at their demonstration, but from where I was standing (at the front, near the edge of the police blockade), it was far less than that. I confirmed later with an organizer that the March for Life had 150 at maximum. We had around 100 at our peak. Our counter-protest was organized solely on Facebook and at the time of the protests, 2.5 thousand people followed the event.



Tina Beier holds a sign "My daughter deserves a choice", next to her sister (right) at the pro-choice counter protest to March for Life on May 9, 2019 in Queen's Park, Toronto.



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There were three parts to the protest. The first involved our group gathering in Queen's Park (where the Ontario legislative building is located) and chanting and shaking signs as speakers for the anti-choice group spewed out rhetoric. We yelled chants such as "they say no-choice, we say pro-choice" and "we're not going back". We could hear the feedback of our chants in their speakers, and our presence clearly sent the message that people oppose their discriminatory arguments.

It was disheartening to see many teenagers, as well as people who had brought young children. As the protest began at 10am, they clearly had been taken from school. In fact, many of the students were bused in from Catholic schools in the region, which is very frustrating, as the Catholic school board is publicly funded in Ontario.

We counter-protested for almost two hours, fingers freezing on our signs, as convenors and support staff moved through our group, handing out water, coffee, and snacks. Marshals helped the protest move in a way that was non-threatening and conformed with police requirements. The police blockade appeared unimpressed with the entire situation but there were no altercations – it was a peaceful protest. Several times anti-choicers left their group to shout insults at us, but we directed our chants their way and they quickly fled. I witnessed Toronto 640 radio interviewing a protestor on our side. There were several other video camera crews, though it was unclear whether they were from news stations or anti-choice groups. Either way, our message stayed the same.

When we were told the anti-choice presentation was going to wrap up, we moved to the road. We spread out in a large line on the edge of the park, attempting to elicit supportive honks from drivers. Not only did the sun come out while we stood on the grass, many drivers beeped to show their support. If you ignored the taxis, almost a third of drivers beeped and only a few people shook their heads or frowned at us.

After this, most of the group disbanded, but my sister and I were part of 50 who continued to Carr Hall a few blocks away, where the anti-choicers were having a conference. We lined the path to the doorway, with more police blocking us, and this was where emotions grew more heightened. We were much closer to the anti-choicers when they walked past (around 20 in total, in groups of 3 or 4 at a time), and it was hard not to yell personal insults. I know at one point there was a woman with her tween daughter and I couldn't stop myself from yelling "your daughter deserves a choice!" quite angrily. We also had a run-in with a pedestrian. A man in his early 30s walked by with his friend and started berating us. Our collective booing and "pro-choice!" chant chased him off. He later returned but did not attempt to engage again.

Overall, it was uplifting to see so many people banding together to defend the rights of women and transgender people. The number of male allies was especially nice to see. As we were leaving Queen's Park, I caught an older lady's eye. As I smiled, she shook her head and said, "I can't believe I'm still protesting this."