



SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW! Organizational Narrative

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[SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW! Organizational Timeline PowerPoint](#)

“I think what is most clear- the lesson of these days of politicking, connecting, and learning- is this need to see ourselves reflected in each other, to be together before, during, and after the storm, and dare to believe that our collective freedom and liberation is possible.”

- SPARK co-founder, Paris Hatcher.

SPARK has always been at the forefront of organizing for queer and trans people’s reproductive health and freedoms. Following the March for Women’s Lives in ‘05, Paris Hatcher, Mia Mingus and their co-conspirators had a "vision to build a vibrant community of queer/WoC leaders to be the radical edge of the reproductive movement” according to Hatcher. It was essential to form a collective that was "bold," that had a “really sharp political analysis" and to take an RJ/Black Feminist framework and "put it on the ground at the state level." SPARK has used various strategies to realize their policy goals, to make pleasurable space for the queer and trans folks of Atlanta, and to mobilize around issues ranging from HIV criminalization to Medicare expansion. In doing archival research through SPARK’s old promotional material, websites, and documents, and through conversation with co-founder Paris Hatcher, I’ve learned so much about how SPARK has made its mark on the organizing world as well as how to build a strong, healthy, reproductive justice movement that works to ensure that trans and queer youth are protected, trained, validated, and centered.

From the beginning, SPARK identified that political organizing was a worthy cause as attacks on abortion came from the state level, and so founders Mia Mingus and Paris Hatcher organized SPARK’s first legislative resistance event LegislateTHIS! in 2008. LegislateTHIS! (abbreviated to LT) was designed to engage grassroots strategies to realize our right to make sustainable and liberatory decisions about our bodies, genders, sexualities, families and lives within the context of public policy making. The earliest form of protest I could find that seemed to be the focus of LT! 2008 was SPARK’s YouTube video speaking against House Bill 526 which stated that accessing products whose function is to prevent pregnancy would be illegal for anyone under the age of 18, undocumented folks, people without “proper identification,” or a juvenile ward of the state. It was discarded by the Georgia legislature, alongside other bills like HB1155, introduced and heavily protested against in 2010, which would have made it a felony to provide “sex/race-selective” abortions. SPARK has shown out every year since 2008 to amplify the stories and nurture the political astuteness of Atlanta’s youth, especially during a time when so many bills are being introduced that directly harm queer and trans youth of color.

Direct Action has also been a major strategy of SPARK’s organizing toolkit. Direct action is a political organizing strategy in which people hold actions, show up in protest, or engage in mutual aid instead of appealing to authority figures for assistance. In 2017, SPARK held three different field days where they went out into the community to dialogue and ask questions about mental health, homelessness, and gender while giving away food. And way back in 2008, the SPARK team confronted traveling hyper-conservative group Operation Save America --

responsible for targeting and harassing clinics -- outside of their hotel with a marching band to disrupt their meetings. According to Paris Hatcher, there was limited resources, money, and support as SPARK was considered the fringe and yet the energy and will to interrupt violence was pervasive. SPARK comrades covered up and tagged the "Black Children are an Endangered Species" billboards with messages of beauty, and an attendee Unique made it clear in SPARK's Speak Justice blog that "we, women of color, queers, pro-choice, women who go to those clinics, any and everybody else who's down with standing up for our bodies...are a force to be f***ed with."

SPARK's 3-year centering of incarcerated and shackled Black pregnant people was a study in patience, dedication and commitment to a singular cause that had a ripple effect on the later and larger reproductive justice movement. Inspired by a woman named Gwen who had been shackled while pregnant, SPARK was dedicated to centering her story and the stories of all other birthing people who had their births restricted or miscarried. In the words of Paris Hatcher, "to me it was really really important that [Gwen] was able to see herself as a leader and expert of her lived experience." As a reproductive justice issue, protecting incarcerated birthing people and offering them a more dignified birthing process first appeared in the SPARK archive around 2010 and it wasn't until 2019 that Georgia passed an anti-shackling bill. It may not have passed if it weren't for the diligent and thoughtful work of Paris Hatcher, Mia Mingus, and the former SPARK team doing that early, hard work.

Over the years, SPARK has also made collaborating a central aspect of their organizing. SPARK partnered with Project South to hold the first Sex, Wine and Chocolate event, and has allied with SisterLove and SisterSong to hold many other events through the years. Seeing all of these partnerships manifest helped me to understand how much of organizing is building community spaces and structures with other collectives with similar, even overlapping priorities. These partnerships are also a reflection of the collaborative spirit and movement building that SPARK has committed itself to through its RJ programming. An important part of SPARK's mission is working towards freedom from coercion for all people using the strengths of marginalized perspectives, experiences and expertise -- a goal that can only be realized when in community and collusion with others.

Post 2013, SPARK began to focus more on building and assembling cohorts of LGBTQ+ youths and really centering leadership development and political education through media/art. Through their Trans Leadership Initiative and their Organizing Intensive, queer and trans folks are given in depth opportunities to improve their organizing skills while learning all about reproductive justice as a movement framework. SPARK's FYRE camp also demonstrates the expanse of hands-on learning made available and the variety of ways RJ can and does intersect with poetry, theatre, dance, zinemaking and podcasting. Much of SPARK's ongoing programming centers giving youth the chance to apply their creativity to build a stronger, more resilient RJ movement while also learning tried and true methods of organizing.

One thing that I really enjoyed finding out was that SPARK's programming, while tackling challenging and serious topics, has always made room for play. "Community and fun were really key and central to our work," says Hatcher. A sometimes overlooked aspect of reproductive justice is its centering of our expressions of desire and how we make room in our lives for pleasure. It was very cool to stumble upon the Sex, Wine, and Chocolate event of 2008 and to read people's testimonies -- to attendees it was not only fun but also a place to gather, eat, and dance and create a space free from sexual oppression. The Kick it with Spark! events

introduced in 2015 were emotionally energizing gatherings with ice cream and food, and their 2017 JUICE: Lingerie Party seemed like a really safe space for thinking through fat liberation and desirability politics while enjoying art in the comfort and warmth of other fat folks. SPARK has been intentional about bringing folks together to think critically and liberatory thoughts and to engage with what makes life enjoyable. Their strategies have been and are brilliant and spirit sustaining. I've been so grateful to work with the SPARK team over the past 10 weeks and learn so much about what it can look and feel like to organize around RJ in the past, present, and future.