**Margaret Higgins Sanger Slee** (September 14, 1879 – September 6, 1966) was an American sex educator, birth control activist and the founder of the American Birth Control League.

**Early Life**

Margaret Higgins was born in Corning, New York. Her mother, Anne Purcell Higgins, was a devout Catholic who went through 18 pregnancies (with 11 live births) before dying of tuberculosis and cervical cancer. Margaret’s father, Michael Hennessy Higgins, was an atheist who earned his living “chiseling angels and saints out of huge blocks of white marble or gray granite for tombstones,” and was also an activist for women’s suffrage and free public education. Margaret was the sixth of eleven children and spent much of her youth assisting in household chores and care of her younger siblings.

Margaret attended Claverack College, a boarding school in Claverack, New York for two years, and her sisters paid her tuition. She returned home in 1896 following her father's request to come home to nurse her mother, who died 31 March 1896. Toward the end of the century the mother of one of her Claverack friends arranged for her to enroll at a nursing program at a hospital in White Plains, an affluent New York City suburb. In 1902 Margaret Higgins married architect William Sanger and the couple settled in New York City. Margaret Sanger had developed tuberculosis as a result of the care of her ill mother and her own overwork, and the Sangers moved to Saranac, New York, in the Adirondacks, for health reasons. In 1903, she gave birth to her first child, Stuart.

In 1912, after a fire destroyed the home that William designed, the Sanger family moved back to New York City, where Margaret went to work in the East Side slums of Manhattan. That same year, she also started writing a column for the New York Call entitled "What Every Girl Should Know." Distributing a pamphlet, Family Limitation, to women, Sanger repeatedly caused scandal and risked imprisonment by acting in defiance of the Comstock Law of 1873, which outlawed as obscene the dissemination of contraceptive information and devices.

Sanger felt that in order for women to have a more “equal footing” in society and to have physically and mentally healthy lives, they needed to be able to decide when a pregnancy would be most convenient for themselves. In addition, access to birth control would also fulfill a critical psychological need by allowing women to be able to fully enjoy sexual relations without being burdened by the fear of pregnancy.

The Sangers moved to New York City in 1910, where they became immersed in the radical bohemian culture that was then flourishing in Greenwich Village and became involved with local intellectuals, artists and activists. Some of the better-known acquaintances they were affiliated with were John Reed, Upton Sinclair, Mabel Dodge, and Emma Goldman.
As Margaret worked in New York’s Lower East Side with poor women who were repeatedly suffering due to frequent childbirth and self-induced abortions, she began to speak out for the need of women to become knowledgeable about birth control. While she was working on duty as a nurse, Margaret met Sadie Sachs when she was called to her apartment to assist her after she had become extremely ill due to a self-induced abortion. Afterward, Sadie begged the attending doctor to tell her how she could prevent this from happening again, to which the doctor simply gave the advice to remain abstinent. A few months later, Margaret was once again called back to the Sachs' apartment, only this time, Sadie was found dead after yet another self-induced abortion.

This was a turning point in Margaret's life. Sadie Sachs' predicament was not at all uncommon during that time period. Margaret came to believe then, more than ever, that she needed to do something to help desperate women before they were driven to pursue dangerous and illegal abortions.

Margaret separated from her husband William in 1913. In 1914, Margaret launched The Woman Rebel, an eight page monthly newsletter promoting contraception, with the slogan "No Gods and No Masters" (and coining the term birth control) and that each woman be "the absolute mistress of her own body." She was indicted for violating United States postal obscenity laws in August 1914, but jumped bail and fled to England under the alias "Bertha Watson". She returned to the United States in October 1915, and her five-year-old daughter, Peggy, died November 6.

In 1915, William Sanger distributed a copy of his wife's publication, Family Limitations, to a postal worker who was actually working undercover. Because he was found to have been distributing "obscene" material, he was jailed for 30 days while his wife was still in Europe.

**Family planning clinics**

Margaret Sanger, birth control advocate, and her two sons. In 1915 Sanger visited a Dutch birth control clinic at which she became convinced that a diaphragm was actually a more effective means of contraception than the suppositories and douches that she had been distributing back in the United States. This realization began the slow introduction of the diaphragm to the United States with Sanger later illegally smuggling them into the country.

In 1916, Sanger published What Every Girl Should Know, which was later widely distributed as one of the E. Haldeman-Julius "Little Blue Books". It provided information about such topics as menstruation and sexuality in adolescents. It was followed in 1917 by What Every Mother Should Know. She also launched the monthly periodical The Birth Control Review and Birth Control News and contributed articles on health to the Socialist Party paper, The Call.

On October 16, 1916, Sanger opened a family planning and birth control clinic at 46 Amboy St. in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, the first of its kind in the United States. It was raided 9 days later by the police. She served 30 days in prison. An initial appeal was rejected but in 1918 an opinion written by Judge Frederick E. Crane of the New York Court of Appeals allowed doctors to prescribe contraception.
Sanger founded the American Birth Control League (ABCL) in 1921. In 1922 she traveled to Japan to work with Japanese feminist Kato Shidzue promoting birth control; over the next several years, she would return another six times for this purpose. In this year she married her second husband, oil tycoon James Noah H. Slee.

In 1923 under the auspices of the ABCL, she established the Clinical Research Bureau (CRB). Sanger eventually found a loophole in the system when she had learned that physicians were exempt from the law that prohibited the distribution of contraceptive information to women when prescribed for medical reasons. With the help of her wealthy supporters, Sanger was finally able to open the first legal birth control clinic that was staffed entirely by female doctors and social workers. It was the first legal birth control clinic in the U.S. (renamed Margaret Sanger Research Bureau in 1940). It received crucial grants from John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s Bureau of Social Hygiene from 1924 onward. The grants were made anonymously to avoid public exposure of the Rockefeller name to her agenda. The family also consistently supported her ongoing efforts in regard to population control.

Also in 1923 she formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control and served as its president until its dissolution in 1937 after birth control, under medical supervision, was legalized in many states. In 1927 Sanger helped organize the first World Population Conference in Geneva.

Between 1921 and 1926 Sanger received over a million letters from mothers requesting information on birth control. From 1916 on she lectured "in many places—halls, churches, women's clubs, homes, theaters" to "many types of audiences—cotton workers, churchmen, liberals, socialists, scientists, clubmen, and fashionable, philanthropically minded women."

In 1926 Sanger gave a lecture on birth control to the women's auxiliary of the Ku Klux Klan in Silver Lake, New Jersey. She described it as "one of the weirdest experiences I had in lecturing," and added that she had to use only "the most elementary terms, as though I were trying to make children understand." Sanger's talk was well-received by the group and as a result "a dozen invitations to similar groups were proffered."

In 1928 Sanger resigned as the president of the ABCL, severing all legal ties, and took full control of the CRB, renaming it the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau. Two years later, she became president of the Birth Control International Information Center. In January 1932 she addressed the New History Society, an organization founded by Mirza Ahmad Sohrab and Julie Chanler; this address would later become the basis for an article entitled A Plan for Peace.

In 1937 Sanger became chairperson of the Birth Control Council of America and launched two publications, The Birth Control Review and The Birth Control News. From 1939 to 1942 she was an honorary delegate of the Birth Control Federation of America, which included a supervisory role with the Negro Project, alongside Mary Lasker and Clarence Gamble. From 1952 to 1959 she served as president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation; at the time it was the largest private international "family planning" organization.
In the early 1960s Sanger promoted the use of the newly-available birth control pill. She toured Europe, Africa and Asia lecturing and helping to establish clinics.

Sanger died in 1966 in Tucson, Arizona, 8 days shy of her 87th birthday and a little over a year after the Griswold v. Connecticut decision, which legalized birth control for married couples in the U.S., the apex of her 50-year agenda.

Sanger's books include Woman and the New Race (1920), The Pivot of Civilization (1922), Happiness in Marriage (1926), My Fight For Birth Control (1931) and an autobiography (1938).

The book, Motherhood in Bondage, is a large compilation of actual letters that were written to Margaret Sanger in desperation by thousands of women who were begging to be given information on how they could prevent unwanted pregnancies for a vast number of different reasons.

**Philosophy**

Although Sanger was greatly influenced by her father, her mother's death left her with a deep sense of dissatisfaction concerning her own and society's understanding of women's health and childbirth. She also criticized the censorship of her message about sexuality and contraceptives by the civil and religious authorities as an effort by men to keep women in submission. An atheist, Sanger attacked Christian leaders opposed to her message, accusing them of Obscurantism and insensitivity to women's concerns. Sanger was particularly critical of the lack of awareness of the dangers of and the scarcity of treatment opportunities for venereal disease among women. She claimed that these social ills were the result of the male establishment intentionally keeping women in ignorance. Sanger also deplored the contemporary absence of regulations requiring registration of people diagnosed with venereal diseases (which she contrasted with mandatory registration of those with infectious diseases such as measles).

Sanger was also an avowed socialist, blaming what she saw as the evils of contemporary capitalism for the unsatisfactory conditions of young white working-class women. Her very personal views on this issue are evident in the last pages of What Every Girl Should Know.

**Psychology of Sexuality**

While Sanger's understanding of and practical approach to human physiology were progressive for her times, her thoughts on the psychology of human sexuality place her squarely in the pre-Freudian 19th century. Birth control, it would appear, was for her more a means to limit the undesirable side effects of sex than a way of liberating men and women to enjoy it. In What Every Girl Should Know, she wrote: "Every normal man and woman has the power to control and direct his sexual impulse. Men and woman who have it in control and constantly use their brain cells thinking deeply, are never sensual." Sexuality, for her, was a kind of weakness, and surmounting it indicated strength.

Sanger was also influenced by psychologist Havelock Ellis, especially in regards to his theories on female sexuality and its importance. His views inspired Sanger to broaden her arguments for birth control claiming that in addition to an already large number of reasons, it would also fulfill a critical
psychological need by enabling women to fully enjoy sexual relations, free from the fear of an unwanted pregnancy. After Sanger and her husband divorced later on, Sanger had an affair with Ellis and also reportedly had an intimate relationship with H.G. Wells.

Though sex cells are placed in a part of the anatomy for the essential purpose of easily expelling them into the female for the purpose of reproduction, there are other elements in the sexual fluid which are the essence of blood, nerve, brain, and muscle. When redirected into the building and strengthening of these, we find men or women of the greatest endurance greatest magnetic power. A girl can waste her creative powers by brooding over a love affair to the extent of exhausting her system, with the results not unlike the effects of masturbation and debauchery.

Early in her writings, Sanger, like many Americans in the early 20th Century, sometimes entertained archaic thoughts on human development:

It is said that a fish as large as a man has a brain no larger than the kernel of an almond. In all fish and reptiles where there is no great brain development, there is also no conscious sexual control. The lower down in the scale of human development we go the less sexual control we find. It is said that the aboriginal Australian, the lowest known species of the human family, just a step higher than the chimpanzee in brain development, has so little sexual control that police authority alone prevents him from obtaining sexual satisfaction on the streets.

Sanger, at that time, wrote that masturbation was unwise or even dangerous:

In my experience as a trained nurse while attending persons afflicted with various and often revolting diseases, no matter what their ailments, I have never found any one so repulsive as the chronic masturbator. It would be difficult not to fill page upon page of heartrending confessions made by young girls, whose lives were blighted by this pernicious habit, always begun so innocently, for even after they have ceased the habit, they find themselves incapable of any relief in the natural act. Perhaps the greatest physical danger to the chronic masturbator is the inability to perform the sexual act naturally.

For her, masturbation was not just a physical act, it was a mental state:

In the boy or girl past puberty, we find one of the most dangerous forms of masturbation, i.e., mental masturbation, which consists of forming mental pictures, or thinking obscene or voluptuous pictures. This form is considered especially harmful to the brain, for the habit becomes so fixed that it is almost impossible to free the thoughts from lustful pictures.

**Eugenics and Euthanasia**

Sanger was a proponent of negative eugenics, a social philosophy which claims that human hereditary traits can be improved through social intervention. Sanger’s eugenic policies ran to an exclusionary immigration policy, free access to birth control methods and full family-planning autonomy for the able-
minded, and compulsory segregation or sterilization for the profoundly retarded. She expressly
denounced euthanasia as a eugenics tool.

In A Plan for Peace (1932), for example, Sanger proposed a congressional department to:

Keep the doors of immigration closed to the entrance of certain aliens whose condition is known
to be detrimental to the stamina of the race, such as feebleminded, idiots, morons, insane,
syphilitic, epileptic, criminal, professional prostitutes, and others in this class barred by the
immigration laws of 1924.

And, following:

Apply a stern and rigid policy of sterilization and segregation to that grade of population whose
progeny is already tainted or whose inheritance is such that objectionable traits may be
transmitted to offspring.

Sanger saw birth control as a means to prevent "dysgenic" children from being born into a
disadvantaged life, and dismissed "positive eugenics" (which promoted greater fertility for the "fitter"
upper classes) as impractical. Though many leaders in the negative eugenics movement were calling for
active euthanasia of the "unfit," Sanger spoke out against such methods. She believed that women with
the power and knowledge of birth control were in the best position to produce "fit" children. She
rejected any type of eugenics that would take control out of the hands of those actually giving birth.

Taking sharp issue in plain words with certain other eugenicists, however, Margaret Sanger
completely rejected the idea of gassing the unfit. 'Nor do we believe,' wrote Sanger in Pivot of
Civilization, 'that the community could or should send to the lethal chamber the defective progeny
resulting from irresponsible and unintelligent breeding.'

Sanger's views thus broke from those proposing Nazi eugenics—an aggressive, and lethal,
program. She wrote in a 1933 letter:

"All the news from Germany is sad & horrible, and to me more dangerous than any other war
going on anywhere because it has so many good people who applaud the atrocities & claim its
right. The sudden antagonism in Germany against the Jews & the vitriolic hatred of them is
spreading underground here & is far more dangerous than the aggressive policy of the Japanese
in Manchuria."

Sanger believed the responsibility for birth control should remain in the hands of able-minded
individual parents rather than the state, and that self-determining motherhood was the only unshakable
foundation for racial betterment; she wrote:

"The campaign for birth control is not merely of eugenic value, but is practically identical with
the final aims of eugenics.... We are convinced that racial regeneration, like individual
regeneration, must come 'from within.' That is, it must be autonomous, self-directive, and not
imposed from without."
We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother... Only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment.

She advocated coercion to prevent the "undeniably feeble-minded" from procreating;

"The undeniably feeble-minded should, indeed, not only be discouraged but prevented from propagating their kind."

Her first pamphlet read:

It is a vicious cycle; ignorance breeds poverty and poverty breeds ignorance. There is only one cure for both, and that is to stop breeding these things. Stop bringing to birth children whose inheritance cannot be one of health or intelligence. Stop bringing into the world children whose parents cannot provide for them. Herein lies the key of civilization. For upon the foundation of an enlightened and voluntary motherhood shall a future civilization emerge.

**Freedom of Speech**

Sanger was an avid defender of free speech who was arrested at least eight times for expressing her views in a time when speaking publicly in favor of birth control was illegal. She stated in interviews that she had been influenced by the agnostic orator Robert G. Ingersoll, who spoke in her hometown when she was 12 years old.

**Abortion and Related Issues**

In a chapter from Woman and the New Race (1920) titled "Contraceptives or Abortion?," Sanger wrote, "While there are cases where even the law recognizes an abortion as justifiable if recommended by a physician, I assert that the hundreds of thousands of abortions performed in America each year are a disgrace to civilization."

Roger Streitmatter has claimed that Sanger's opposition to abortion stemmed primarily from a concern for the dangers to the mother rather than moral issues. Nonetheless, in her 1938 autobiography, Sanger notes that her 1916 opposition to abortion was based on the taking of life: "To each group we explained what contraception was; that abortion was the wrong way—no matter how early it was performed it was taking life; that contraception was the better way, the safer way—it took a little time, a little trouble, but was well worth while in the long run, because life had not yet begun."

In a 1916 edition of Family Limitation, Sanger advised women douche with boric acid and to take quinine to prevent implantation. She wrote further, "No one can doubt that there are times when an abortion is justifiable but they will become unnecessary when care is taken to prevent conception. This is the only cure for abortions."
Legacy

Sanger remains a controversial figure. While she is widely credited as a leader of the modern birth control movement, and remains an iconic figure for the American reproductive rights movements, pro-life groups condemn Sanger’s views, attributing her efforts to promote birth control to a desire to "purify" the human race through eugenics, and even to eliminate minority races by placing birth control clinics in minority neighborhoods. Despite allegations of racism, Sanger's work with minorities earned the respect of some civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. according to Planned Parenthood Federation of America. In their biographical article about Margaret Sanger, Planned Parenthood notes:

In 1930, Sanger opened a family planning clinic in Harlem that sought to enlist support for contraceptive use and to bring the benefits of family planning to women who were denied access to their city’s health and social services. Staffed by a black physician and black social worker, the clinic was endorsed by The Amsterdam News (the powerful local newspaper), the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the Urban League, and the black community’s elder statesman, W. E. B. Du Bois.

In 1957, the American Humanist Association named her Humanist of the Year. A residential building is named after her on the Stony Brook University campus. A room in Wellesley College’s library is named after her. Margaret Sanger Square is the leafy intersection of Mott Street and Bleecker Street in New York City's Greenwich Village.

Sanger's story has been the subject of films, including Choices of the Heart: The Margaret Sanger Story starring Dana Delany and Henry Czerny, and Margaret Sanger: A Public Nuisance (1992).