

Good Intentions: The Role of Cleveland Philanthropic Organizations in the Eugenics Movement
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Attempting to engineer the ideal man or woman is not a new concept. For centuries humankind has tried to improve the quality of its race. It has long searched for explanations for the varying degrees of talents and abilities that exist within human society. Ancient societies, like the Spartans, killed newborns who showed any sign of weakness or disability so that only the strong could grow up to be trained as soldiers.¹ In Plato's *Republic*, the famous philosopher compared the varying degrees of "quality" in human beings to iron, brass, silver and gold. He also emphasized that certain types of people should not reproduce: "And when your guardians, missing this, bring together brides and bridegrooms unseasonably, the offspring will not be well-born or fortunate."² While ideas like Plato's have been altered slightly throughout history, the main idea that "not all men are created equal" has remained a part of human ideology.

This notion of human hierarchy was transformed in the late nineteenth century when a statistician named Francis Galton became curious about whether human traits, such as morality, intellectual abilities, and social skills, could be linked to heredity. He decided that two people who possessed inferior traits would also produce offspring with the same traits. To him the solution was simple: prevent those of inferior birth, or the "unfit," from reproducing and the majority of the world's problems would disappear. Although his declaration was based on mere observations and statistics, Galton considered this to be a great advancement in science. After much thought, he decided to call this new "science" *eugenics*, based on its Greek root meaning "good in birth."³ Soon after his "discovery," Galton was praised for his research and labeled "the father of eugenics." The pseudo-science quickly gained popularity and rapidly spread across Western Europe and the United States.

¹ Allen G. Roper. "Ancient Eugenics." In *Plausible Futures* [Web site and online newsletter]. 9 November 2002. Available from <<http://www.plausiblefutures.com/index.php?id=54552>>. Accessed 20 August 2007.

² Plato, *Republic* (New York: Garland Press, 1987), 247

³ Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), xiv.

During the early twentieth century eugenics was more than just a science. Many saw it as a beacon of hope and a way for obtaining world peace and ending world hunger and poverty. Some believed it would bring an end to illnesses and health conditions such as blindness or Parkinson's disease. It was also thought that it would prevent undesirable personality traits, such as shyness, unintelligence or stuttering.⁴ Those with such traits were immediately labeled "feeble-minded" and were subject to sterilization. Many tests that exist today, such as the SAT and the IQ tests, were created during this period to test for feeble-minded status. Questions featured in the tests were based on popular culture, making it nearly impossible for those who weren't born in the United States to pass. Other traits that were considered to be undesirable varied. For example, some wished to wipe out entire racial and social groups while others just wanted to keep those with diseases from procreating. As a whole, advocates for eugenics pushed for the "institutionalization, segregation, and even sterilization of those with 'inferior blood' while promoting selective human breeding of those with 'superior blood.'"⁵ For the most part, however, the purpose of eugenics was more about creating an aesthetically pleasing human population than it was about settling the world's issues.

Those who were advocates for eugenics during its peak before World War II varied and cannot necessarily be linked to a specific class, gender or race. Eugenics was also a key element in issues such as medical research and policy making. Politicians ran with eugenic agendas. The message of selective breeding and racial betterment were an integral part of high school curriculum and biology textbooks. Research centers sent out physicians to sterilize entire communities.⁶ Respected figures and institutions, such as Alexandre Graham Bell, Margaret

⁴ Seldon, *Inheriting Shame*, x

⁵ Seldon, *Inheriting Shame*, xi

⁶ Seldon, *Inheriting Shame*, xiii

Sanger and the Carnegie Institute all donated time, research and money to the cause. States enacted laws that prohibited certain people groups from having children.⁷ Some states made eugenics a more significant part of their policy than others, but nearly every state was involved in the movement. Even large cities who considered themselves to be “progressive” tried to mold their populations into an ideal society. This was especially true for one of the most booming cities at that time: Cleveland, Ohio. Some of Cleveland’s social elite and leading philanthropist organizations played a major role in the eugenics movement of the early nineteenth century.

The city of Cleveland was experiencing a major expansion during the time of the eugenics movement. After World War I, changes were sparked in the city’s structural makeup. Industry boomed, the number of downtown buildings increased and the cultural arts grew in popularity. New additions to the city landscape included a public auditorium, library, music hall, theater district, museums, an airport and a string of parks in the metropolitan area.⁸ All of these new additions allowed for residents to enjoy the richness of city life.

Life in Cleveland, however, was not easy for everyone during the early decades of the twentieth century. Blacks fleeing discrimination in the South and eastern Europeans seeking a better life experienced a different aspect of Cleveland. Living conditions were harsh and despite the plethora of employment opportunities, discrimination made it very difficult to find work. Poorer neighborhoods also suffered from “higher rates of infant mortality, pneumonia, tuberculosis and venereal disease than other areas of the city.”⁹

While disease and hunger led to many deaths within these minority groups, many of Cleveland’s citizens, especially those of the higher classes, felt that something else should be

⁷ Seldon, *Inheriting Shame*, x

⁸ Carol Poh Miller and Robert A. Wheeler. *Cleveland: A Concise History, 1796-1996*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 113, 114.

⁹ Miller and Wheeler, *Cleveland*, 123.

done to prevent them from growing. Charles F. Brush, a native Cleveland philanthropist and inventor of the famous arc lamp, began to take an interest in the eugenics movement that was happening in other parts of the country. Being a scientist himself, he wanted to find a way to expand Cleveland's healthy population and limit the growth of its unfit. In order to accomplish this he established the Brush Foundation in 1928. He made it very clear in the founding deed in which direction he wanted to foundation to go:

“The income of this trust shall be used by the Board of Managers to finance efforts contributing toward the betterment of the human stock, and toward the regulation of the increase of population, to the end that children shall be begotten only under conditions which make possible a heritage of mental and physical health, and a favorable environment. These purposes include the furtherance of scientific research in the field of eugenics and in regulation of the increase of population; the education of the people to the importance of the betterment of the stock and to the economic and social evils which result from too great increase of population; and any activities which shall serve the intent set forth in this instrument and its preamble.”¹⁰

While Charles Brush died only a year after he founded the organization, the Brush Foundation remained a strong philanthropic source in the city of Cleveland. Before his death, Brush emphasized the importance of not only conducting research in the field of eugenics, but also assisting others with the same goals. In 1929, the Foundation began its donations. One of its largest recipients was the Maternal Health Association, a new organization dedicated to bettering the health of women. The Brush Foundation offered the MHA a yearly \$5,000 grant if the group would agree to expand the Association's work “by stimulating formation of other clinics throughout Ohio.”¹¹ A joint committee met to discuss the conditions. At the meeting on

¹⁰ April 1928. An Excerpt from the Deed of Gift of Charles Francis Brush. Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

¹¹ 26 May 1977. The Prologue: The 1920s to the 1970s (pamphlet). Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, 1.

November 21, 1929, the MHA agreed to the conditions set by the Brush Foundation and also “to co-operate in contraceptive or eugenics research which the Brush Foundation may undertake.”¹²

In 1921, it was reported in a Cleveland newspaper that a young pregnant woman had walked off the East Ninth street pier, drowning herself and her unborn child. It was later reported that she had left behind a husband and nine other children. Alarmed by the event, the citizens of the city of Cleveland wanted to know what had led to the woman’s behavior. A prenatal clinic in the area revealed that she had been a “repeat” patient to the facility for many years. Sources at the clinic confirmed that she would consistently ask the physician on staff for assistance in preventing another birth. Her husband was handicapped and each new child brought new fears. She didn’t know how they could possibly support another child. Not long before her suicide, she made a visit to the physician, fearing that she was pregnant yet again. Her fears were confirmed. Completely hopeless, she killed herself a week later.¹³

Two volunteers who were on staff at the prenatal clinic were very disturbed by the suicide of the pregnant woman. Their names were Dorothy Brush and Hortense Shepard. They often worked when the woman would come into the clinic asking for birth control. They believed that if the physician would have provided the woman with the contraceptives she had requested, she would not have committed suicide. They were also aware that this was not the only case in the country with a similar story. They made it their goal to prevent an event like this from happening again. Out of this passion for change, the Cleveland Maternal Health Association was born.¹⁴

¹² Edna B. Perkins (secretary). 21 November 1928. Report of the Joint Committee of the Cleveland Maternal Health Clinic and the Brush Foundation. Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

¹³ *The Prologue*, 1.

¹⁴ *The Prologue*, 2.

Formal organization for the MHA began on February 23, 1923. Brush and Shepard and a group of dedicated women began planning for a “maternal health clinic.” The first clinic opened its doors to the public on March 20, 1928.¹⁵ The goal of the clinic was to “offer service to married women needing it for social and economic reasons, as well as for health reasons.” The forming committee purposefully avoided associating itself with the term “birth control.” At that time, a majority of the country was still mostly opposed to contraceptive methods. Despite the country’s avid support for eugenics, the teaching of such methods was widely considered to be “obscene” and in many cases illegal.¹⁶

The committee realized that it would need to be patient, and “believed only by careful community education could the climate of opinion be changed.”¹⁷ In order to shape Cleveland’s view on birth control, the MHA quietly began talking to local physicians, nurses, ministers, social workers and “civic minded citizens.” It slowly gained support from each group. The group’s officers told physicians that the field of medicine could not progress until women were in control of their fertility. They convinced the ministers that the church’s “burden” of taking care of the poor would not be relieved until the poor stopped having so many children. The MHA even inspired local philanthropists and socially conscious citizens to feel that it was their civic duty to donate to such an important endeavor.¹⁸

Within six years, support for the organization had grown tremendously. Once it established itself within the community, the MHA was welcomed not only by its elite but also by

¹⁵ *The Prologue*, 2.

¹⁶ *The Prologue*, 3.

¹⁷ *The Prologue*, 3.

¹⁸ *The Prologue*, 3.

its citizens.¹⁹ It offered services that couldn't be found at a physicians' office, making it popular among married women who wanted to be in control of their fertility. At the clinic a woman could receive a variety of services including assistance in choosing a form of birth control, receiving child-rearing advice and getting a pelvic exam.

While it mentioned in its constitution that it intended to aid the cause of "improving the human stock," the MHA offered no evidence in its beginning years that its goals were purely eugenic. In a speech given at the six year anniversary celebration, Hortense Shepard acknowledged that "backgrounds of financial security, schooling, and high intelligence" are desirable for raising large families, but she still welcomed any married women to seek services at the MHA. In fact, the majority of women who visited the clinic were white, Protestant, of Anglo-Saxon origins and from the middle class.²⁰

As the clinic grew, so did the demands for its services. The MHA opened two more clinics in addition to its main office on the grounds of the Western Reserve University. A West Side Branch was built on Detroit Avenue in 1936 and an East Side Branch was established on East 35th Street in 1940. The clinic also expanded the services that it offered. Now every woman and man, not just the married, could receive advice and services regarding sexual health and family planning. It even offered marital counseling so that young couples would be prepared to bear children. It was the Association's hope that this would in turn reduce the number of abortions that were happening every year in the city of Cleveland.²¹

¹⁹ Biennial Report for 1927 and 1928 of the Committee on Maternal Health. Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH, p. 12.

²⁰ April 1944. Summary of Closings for the Maternal Health Association. Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

²¹ "Assert Most People Not Prepared for Marriage." Cleveland Plain Dealer, 4 August 1939, sec. A, p. 1

Opening additional birth control clinics was not the only type of expansion the Maternal Health Association did. In 1945, Margaret Sanger made a public statement revealing her surprise at the country's low birth rate. She stated that the government should encourage more healthy couples to have more children. She also declared that the government should provide monetary assistance to couples who met certain criteria.²² A year later, the MHA opened a "sterility clinic" in Cleveland to help couples who couldn't achieve pregnancy. Gladys Gaylord, the MHA's executive secretary, proclaimed that low fertility "shows higher incidence in the high income group and more educated classes."²³ This assertion was the deciding factor in the placement of the clinic, which was in a wealthy area of Cleveland near the Western Reserve University campus.

The MHA's decision to strategically place a fertility clinic in a wealthy area did not necessarily prove them to be eugenics-minded, but there were other activities going on within the clinic that suggested it was headed in that direction. Gladys Gaylord decided that the clinic wasn't meeting the requirements which it had established with the Brush Foundation almost ten years ago. In 1939, she wrote an essay for the *Heredity Journal* entitled "The Eugenic Value of a Maternal Health Center." In the essay she declared that "The Maternal Health Association of Cleveland was intended to be a practical demonstration of eugenics." She believed the clinic had strayed away from its original purpose and that it was time to make eugenics a part of its agenda once again. She proposed that all future activities and services of the MHA should be related to eugenics in some way.²⁴

²² "Margaret Sanger Alarmed by Low Birth Rate," *New York Times*, 3 March 1945, sec. B, p. 1.

²³ Todd Simon, "New Clinic Here Studies Sterility." *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 25 September 1946, sec. B, p. 1, 3.

²⁴ Gladys Gaylord, "The Eugenic Value of a Maternal Health Center." *Journal of Heredity*. Volume 30, Number 6, p. 283.

After the reattachment of the organization to its original purpose, the MHA made changes in its functioning. For example, the clinic often organized events for the community in hopes of educating it on the value of family planning and maternal health. After the shift, however, topics for the events carried names like “Feeble-Mindedness...Our Problem,”²⁵ and “Improving the Quality of the Next Generation.”²⁶ At the Sixteenth Annual Meeting of the Maternal Health Association, Gaylord announced to the audience that “This is a population program, since it affects the birth rate, but it is more than that; it is a eugenic program, since it tends to increase the number of physically and mentally fit and to reduce the number of the unfit.”²⁷ Programs were supported by not only the Brush Foundation but also leading institutions and organizations in the community like the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce and Western Reserve University.

Cleveland’s eugenic activity in the early twentieth century mirrored that of the rest of the country and was not challenged until the late forties. During the eugenics movement, the United States was not the only country who had implemented eugenic policies into its political framework. An emerging leader during the 1930s named Adolf Hitler was praised by American eugenicists for his political party’s race policies.²⁸ Country’s who supported eugenics did not realize the full consequences of their actions until after the Nazi part had killed millions of innocent people including the mentally and physically handicapped, gypsies, homosexuals and a third of the world’s Jewish population. After 1950, “enthusiasm for research in eugenics and race

²⁵ June 1938. Invitation to attend an opening of the exhibition “Feeble-Mindedness In Ohio.” Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

²⁶ Frederick Osborn. 16 October 1940. Improving the Quality of the Next Generation (speech). Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

²⁷ Gladys Gaylord, 17 May 1944. Building for Tomorrow (speech). Planned Parenthood Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

²⁸ Stefan Kühl. *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3.

questions had sharply declined as the full horror of Nazi uses of eugenics and race science became apparent.”²⁹

After World War II, those who had been leading supporters for eugenics quickly attempted to erase it from their records. Many laws were quickly abolished and places of research such as the Carnegie Institute quickly redistributed their funds into other areas. While the Brush Foundation and MHA were a little slower than the rest of the country to changes their motives, they did eventually make a move to change their eugenics image. The Brush Foundation dropped its research component and became solely a philanthropist organization. It is still an active philanthropist organization in the city of Cleveland, but it is not widely known. It still describes its mission as “to ensure that family planning is acceptable, available, accessible, affordable, effective and safe,” but without the eugenic intentions it once had. It still offers yearly contributions to organizations with the same goals.³⁰

Whether or not the Maternal Health Association remained a eugenics organization after World War II is relative. While it dropped the term “eugenics” from all of its publicly released materials after the fall of Nazi Germany in the late forties, like its annual reports and constitution, some still suspected the organization to have racist intentions. For example, during the 1960s the MHA purchased and ran what was called a “mobile clinic.” It was a large RV that stopped in various Cleveland neighborhoods offering birth control. Since it only stopped in what were then the poorest neighborhoods, some suspected that the MHA was trying to keep certain people groups from procreating by providing them with generous amounts of contraceptives.

²⁹ Kühl, *The Nazi Connection*, 5.

³⁰ “The Brush Foundation.” In Global Philanthropy and Foundation Building [Website and database]. 1 July 2000. Available from <<http://www.synergos.org/globalphilanthropy/organizations/brush.htm>>. Accessed 3 September 2007.

Whether or not this was true was not proven and the mobile clinic services were discontinued during the early 70s.³¹

Suspicion that the MHA had a eugenic agenda ended around 1966 when the clinic officially changed its name to Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland.³² People in the community now associated the clinic and its services with those of its mother organization, Planned Parenthood International. Although the organization's founder, Margaret Sanger, was a strong supporter of eugenics, the majority of Cleveland and the country did not associate PPI with the movement.³³ Today Planned Parenthood of Greater Cleveland still holds ties to PPI and remains an active organization, delivering "vital health care services, sex education, and sexual health information to millions of women, men, and young people" within the greater Cleveland community.³⁴ In the past the organization has been accused of being "racist" since its clinics were located in areas where the populations were mostly African American, but these accusations have stopped since the building of additional clinics in areas such as Solon and Rocky River.³⁵

Few people know about eugenics and the role that many respected individuals and institutions played in the movement. Whether or not eugenics still exists today is relative. Obviously there are still people who feel superior to others, but it is left up to debate whether or not the same type of racism is institutionalized. Most people and organization who were involved in the movement have hidden the evidence (or have at least tried to), but some have openly

³¹ "Moving Ahead: the 1960s." In *Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio* [Website]. Planned Parenthood International. 1 May 2007. Available from <<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/cleveland/moving-ahead-1960s-.htm>>. Accessed 15 August 2007.

³² "Moving Ahead: the 1960s."

³³ "Moving Ahead: the 1960s."

³⁴ "Who We Are." In *Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio* [Website]. Planned Parenthood International. 1 May 2007. Available from <<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/about-us/who-we-are.htm>>. Accessed 15 August 2007.

³⁵ "Local Health Centers." In *Planned Parenthood of Northeast Ohio* [Website]. Planned Parenthood International. 1 May 2007. Available from <<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/cleveland/local-health-centers.htm>>. Accessed 15 August 2007.

admitted it and have publicly offered their sincerest apologies. Many were like the MHA, who “acted as a feminist catalyst, stretching legal, medical and social policy to benefit women, yet remained firmly planted with the ideological strictures of reverence for motherhood, preservation and enhancement of the white race.”³⁶ Others simply felt they were the best the planet had to offer and that everyone else should be eliminated. All of their reasoning behind their actions, however, is the same: we meant well.

³⁶Jimmy Elaine Wilkinson Meyer. “Birth Control Policy, Practice and Prohibition in the 1930s: The Maternal Health Association of Cleveland, OH.” (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1993), 2, 3.

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