HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

STUDIES IN INDIANA WOMEN'S HISTORY

Mothers against AIDS in Kokomo, Indiana

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In December 1984, thirteen-year-old Ryan White of Kokomo, Indiana, was diagnosed with AIDS. A few months later, the local paper published an article about his diagnosis. Ryan's mother, Jeanne White, used the coverage to educate the community about how AIDS was spread. Ryan expected to return to school in the fall; however, the Western School Corporation barred him from attending at the end of the summer. Parents quickly organized to insure that "AIDS" stayed out of the classroom. Leader Mitzie Johnson, a mother of two young children, asserted, "They don't know how contagious it is and unless they can give us a 100 percent guarantee, he shouldn't be in school." The community divided over the credibility of the available medical information about AIDS while the media highlighted the emotional side of the struggle between a mother and her innocent dying child versus mothers and parents trying to protect their healthy children from contagion.

Jeanne White's battle against AIDS focused on finding treatment for her son and educating others so her son could have a normal childhood. Mitzie Johnson fought against AIDS as a lethal virus that had unknown potential to infect children. Both mothers sought out medical information about AIDS and in the process became lay medical experts. This paper begins with an examination of the availability and content of AIDS information in Kokomo, Indiana prior to the school conflict and then investigates the mothers' efforts to obtain, evaluate and share information during the conflict. Ultimately, national coverage of Ryan's struggle to attend school increased public awareness of AIDS transmission and of discrimination against people with AIDS. This paper considers the key role mothers played in the distribution of medical knowledge during the community dispute.

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