

THE PROVIDENCE PHOENIX

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'Intactivists' take to the streets in Providence

Protest Dept.

By STEVE AHLQUIST | November 20, 2013



A COLORFUL PROTEST Brother K.

"The destruction to the male genitals is absolute," says Brother K. "Total. You're left with a fraction of what God and nature intended. It's appalling."

It's Sunday morning on Hope Street in Providence and cars are whizzing by. Some honk their horns in solidarity; others carry passengers clearly confused as to the necessity of a demonstration against circumcision featuring men in white jumpsuits with large red bloodstains on their crotches.

"This is meant to shock the conscience of Americans," says Brother K, referring to his attire and accompanying signs like, "CIRCUMCISION HORROR BLOODSTAINED MEN." He pauses frequently to pose for passing cars. "They don't understand that a man is carrying around a bloody wound for the rest of his life. It doesn't repair. It doesn't self heal. It's as devastating as if they've done the same thing to a woman and removed her entire clitoral hood."

Brother K is his legal name (the K stands for "Kind") and he leads the Bloodstained Men, a California anti-circumcision group on a seven state tour of the northeast with stops scheduled in Boston, Hartford, Philadelphia, Trenton, and Manhattan. They're here in Providence today as part of Intact Rhode Island's "Demonstration for Genital Autonomy," a family-friendly event to raise awareness about the negative consequences of male circumcision.

Brother K became aware of how much his own circumcision had hurt him back in the '70s, "when I first had a loving relationship with a woman and found that things just didn't work the way they should, as much in love as we were," he explains. As a Vietnam War and draft protester, he was part of a generation that protested everything, he says. But he couldn't figure out why no one was protesting circumcision. "I finally said, 'There's no one else to do it, so we're going to have to do it.'"

Intact Rhode Island is co-directed by Erin Waldron and Michelle Merritt, two young, self-identified "stay at home moms" and "intactivists" who work to help others make better choices regarding their son's genitalia. Founded in 2007, IRI counts about 30 members in its ranks, and has mustered seven supporters for today's event — more if you count their young children. Earlier in the month the group sponsored a "peaceful parenting" table at a parenting event in Waltham.

Merritt became an intactivist for her two sons, she says. "My first son was circumcised at birth, and my second son is intact," she explains. When her first son was about four months old, she started researching circumcision, and began to learn about the unnecessary pain the baby suffered and the possible loss of sensitivity her son would face as an adult. "I made a promise to my son and to myself that I would help as many boys stay whole as I possibly could."



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Circumcision, of course, pushes a lot of buttons. It requires us to think about our infant son's future sex life, not something many young parents are mentally prepared to deal with. Perhaps more problematic is the fact that the practice is of religious importance to Jews and Muslims, and many see attempts to curb the practice as tantamount to anti-Semitism. Last year the German Parliament, acutely aware of such appearances, acted quickly to pass legislation ensuring a parent's right to have their boys circumcised after a regional court came close to equating the practice with child abuse.

"I was in Germany last year, wearing the bloodstained suit in front of the parliament when they passed the law to legalize circumcision," says Jonathan Friedman, who arrived in Rhode Island with the Bloodstained Men. "I was there to protest because I'm Jewish, and my family is Orthodox Jewish." German intactivists were happy to have a Jewish person there, he says.

Brother K understands the sensitivity of the issue as well. "It breaks my heart that so many of our Jewish friends feel that they have to inflict this ancient blood sacrifice, this sacrifice of flesh, on their children," he says. "Judaism at its core is a very beautiful, spiritual religion, but they've kept this horrible custom."

Changing the American public's opinion on circumcision is going to be tough. (One woman passing by the event informed me that uncircumcised penises are "gross.") But Brother K isn't giving up.

"I'm 66 years old and I've been working on this all my life," he says. "I would like to live my last years knowing that we've ended this folly."

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