Margaret Sanger’s Crusade

1. Margaret Sanger’s mother died at age forty-nine after bearing eleven children. In 1910, Margaret Sanger was a thirty-year-old nurse and housewife living with her husband and three children in a New York City suburb. Excited by a socialist lecturer, Margaret Sanger convinced her husband to move to the city, where she threw herself into the bohemian milieu. In 1912, she wrote a series of articles on female sexuality for a socialist newspaper.

   No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body.
   Margaret Sanger

2. When postal officials confiscated the newspaper for violating obscenity laws, Sanger left for Europe to learn more about contraception. She returned to New York determined to challenge the obscenity statutes with her own magazine, the “Woman Rebel.” Sanger’s journal celebrated female autonomy, including the right to sexual expression and control over one’s body. When she distributed her pamphlet “Family Limitation,” postal inspectors confiscated copies and she found herself facing forty-five years in prison. In October 1914, she fled to Europe again.

   Woman must not accept; she must challenge.
   Margaret Sanger

3. An older generation of feminists had advocated “voluntary motherhood” or the right to say no to a husband’s sexual demands.

   No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.
   Margaret Sanger
The new birth control advocates embraced contraception as a way of advancing sexual freedom for middle-class women as well as responding to the misery of those working-class women who bore numerous children while living in poverty.

It is our experience, as it was our aim, that as a result of child-spacing and adequate care of mothers, death rates would be reduced.

Margaret Sanger

Sanger returned to the United States in October 1915. After the government dropped the obscenity charges, she embarked on a national speaking tour. In 1916 she again defied the law by opening a birth control clinic in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn and offering birth control information without a physician present.

The real hope of the world lies in putting as painstaking thought into the business of mating as we do into other big businesses.

Margaret Sanger

Arrested and jailed, she gained more publicity for her crusade. Within a few years, birth control leagues and clinics could be found in every major city and most large towns in the country.
Margaret Sanger once said, "Women cannot be on an equal footing with men until they have full and complete control over their reproductive function."

It is now a fact that as a result of birth control, the survival rate among mothers and children is higher.

Yes, Margaret Sanger spent her life in a crusade for birth control. In 1916 she opened a birth control clinic in an immigrant, working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, in violation of state laws which outlawed birth control as a form of obscenity. She was soon arrested and the clinic closed.

A woman must have her freedom, the fundamental freedom of choosing whether or not she will be a mother and how many children she will have.

During the 1920s, middle class women began to use contraception on a wide scale. However, many poor women still lacked access to modern contraception. As the nation's foremost advocate of birth control, Sanger received letters from women desperate to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

Regardless of what man's attitude may be, that problem is hers—and before it can be his, it is hers alone. She goes through the vale of death alone, each time a babe is born.
Excerpt from a letter to Margaret Sanger:

"Please tell me what to do to keep from having more babies. I am only twenty-six years old and the mother of five children the oldest eight years and the others six, four, and two, and I have four living. The last time I had a six month's miscarriage and I have been weak ever since, it happened this past August. My husband is gone to try and find work and I have to support the children myself; I have to work so hard until I feel like it would kill me to give birth to another. I am nervous. My back and side give me a lot of trouble. I am not able to give my children the attention that I desire. I take in washing to support my children; I suffered this last time from the time I got that way until I lost it and am yet weak in my back. Please! for my sake tell me what to do to keep from having another. I don't want another child. Five is enough for me."

A free race cannot be born to slave mothers.

Margaret Sanger
Excerpt from a letter to Margaret Sanger:

“I don’t care to bear any more children for the man I got he is most all the time drunk and not working and gone for days and nights and leave me alone most of the time. I’m sewing to support me and my baby that is two years old and one dead born so I know you don’t blame me for not wanting any more children and he is always talking about leaving me he might as well for what he is doing but I am worried that I may get in wrong.”

Margaret Sanger

Excerpt from a letter to Margaret Sanger:

“I was married when I was seventeen and seven months. After nine months married I had a miscarriage at eight months. After fourteen months I had a baby boy and he is living and is now seven years old. After three years I had another boy. He was born with consumption in the bones and would shake his head one side and another but doctors did not know what that was. Now I have them nervous spells myself. All through my married life I have been working in factories. I took my children to the day nursery. Two months before the birth of my last child my husband deserted me with my children. I was then married five years to him. After four years I could not get no trace of him I got divorce, I had to work hard to keep my furniture and pay the rent as I did not want to go boarding. Now as I was twenty-six and as I had no one to depend on I married again. He is a good young man of twenty-five and he is not a lazy gambler like the other, but even with that I fear having any more children as they will not be healthy. We were married a few months ago and neither of us had any money and he is only a laborer and makes twenty-five dollars a week so you see I have struggled with my first husband and I wish I will not struggle with this one, so please if you can help me.”
1. State three facts about Margaret Sanger.

2. What laws had Sanger violated?

3. Define "voluntary motherhood."

4. What did the new birth control advocates believe about contraception?

5. What did Margaret Sanger do in 1916 and how did Sanger defy the law?

6. What happened in America after her arrest?

7. What did Margaret Sanger believe was necessary before women could have an equal footing with men?

8. Why had New York State outlawed birth control?

9. Why did many women write to Margaret Sanger?

10. What do the letters reveal about the reasons American women wanted access to birth control?