connected

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Small Risk, Big Reward:

How Perinatal Mood Disorders Took Center Stage in the California State Assembly

Flipping through a *Glamour* magazine in September of 2008, Junior League of Los Angeles Provisional member Britt Bowe came across a story she could not get out of her head. In January 2007, Jenny Gibbs Bankston, a 33-year-old first-time mother, had shot and killed herself and her seven-week-old son Graham, two thousand miles away in a suburb of Birmingham, AL.

Within a month after Bankston's death, her twin sister Becky Gibbs Lavelle, an elite triathlete who later qualified as a 2008 U.S. Olympic Team Alternate, founded, along with Bankston's husband Chip and the rest of the Gibbs family, Jenny's Light, an organization dedicated to educating the public about perinatal mood disorders, including postpartum depression.

Only days before reading the story, Bowe had attended a general meeting of the Junior League of Los Angeles at which Joy Burkhard, now co-chair of The Junior Leagues of California's State Public Affairs Committee (CalSPAC), had explained a contest the League would be undertaking. Entitled "There Ought to Be a Law," the contest challenged members to submit ideas for issues that could benefit from increased public awareness—and that could be tackled from either a legislative or an advocacy perspective—by CalSPAC, the nonpartisan, all-volunteer organization representing the 11,000 members of The Junior Leagues of California.

Putting the two things together—a preventable tragedy and an opportunity to enlighten—Bowe composed a two-paragraph email to Burkhard outlining the compelling statistics: One in five women, or as many as 800,000 new mothers annually, suffer from postpartum depression and related disorders; 80 percent go untreated because they are uninsured, under-insured or because they lack access to comprehensive health care; one in one thousand suffer from postpartum psychosis; and four percent of those attempt to kill themselves or their infants.

"I learned that you have to speak up," said Bowe, a marathoner who said she was inspired by Lavelle's decision to continue her athletic career in the face of such personal tragedy.

"You never know unless you try, and I'm a firm believer in doing first, and having regrets later because great risk equals great reward, and this wasn't even a great risk."

Roughly two weeks later, Bowe received an ebullient email from Burkhard informing her that the CalSPAC had decided to attempt to sponsor legislation requiring that at the time of delivery new mothers be educated about the signs and symptoms of postpartum depression and about how to get treatment. In addition, Burkhard said, Bowe would be invited to attend Junior League Day at the Capitol in Sacramento the following spring.

Eighteen months of advocacy later, in April of 2010, as the result of significant efforts by Burkhard, former CalSPAC co-chairs Julie Elginer and Andrea Gunn, former chair Wendy Penbera, and dozens of additional volunteers, both houses of the California legislature unanimously passed a bill to better coordinate resources among public and private agencies, as well as non-profit organizations and medical providers across the state. While the final bill deviated from Bowe's original idea, it put into motion a broad-based awareness initiative.

Authored by Assembly Member Pedro Nava, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 105 (ACR 105), designates each May, the month in which Mother's Day occurs, as "Perinatal Depression Awareness Month" in California. The bill received support throughout the state and subsequently garnered the endorsement of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists District IX, the California Public Defenders Association, Postpartum Support International, and many other groups.

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"This legislation addresses a significant women's health and public awareness problem," Nava said. "The Junior Leagues' support was critical, and I thank the leaders of SPAC for their time and energy in bringing this often misunderstood issue to a wider audience."

In addition to their success in establishing PDA month, CalSPAC organized a statewide roundtable on the issue and unveiled an educational campaign entitled "Speak Up When You're Down."

As for her part, the ever modest Bowe (who is now an Active member in the Junior League of Salt Lake City) said, "I deserve no credit whatsoever, but it's amazing how a little effort, a little idea, can turn into a really big deal."

Photograph: *David Kelly Crow*

What is a SPAC or a PAC?

Despite its seemingly generic label, a State Public Affairs Committee or a Public Affairs Committee is an invention of The Junior League that has been around since the 1930s. PACs and SPACs were developed in order to influence public policy on specific issues within a particular geographic area. PACs and SPACs identify the issues that resonate with their members and that are relevant to The Junior League Mission, and develop strategies for tackling them. This advocacy takes many forms—it can be as straightforward as building awareness and educating the public about a pressing problem or as ambitious as sponsoring and writing a bill that ultimately becomes a law. PACs and SPACs are governed by their member Leagues and exist as separate entities from the Junior Leagues with which they are affiliated, though they are comprised of Junior League members.

Why should I care?

Believe it or not, many of the laws we take for granted originated with an idea that was first proposed by a SPAC or PAC. Over the years, the issues the PACs and SPACs of the Junior League have tackled include seat belts and booster seats for children in moving vehicles, childhood obesity and food security, environmental preservation, human trafficking, juvenile justice, judicial discretion for domestic violence victims, and perinatal mood disorders, among many others.

What can a S/PAC do for me?

Joining a SPAC or PAC is a great way to get educated on the pressing issues of our day and to learn how the legislative arm of our government works. In addition, it's a great place to develop your skills as a leader and a strategic thinker.

Where can you go to get advice or find resources on how to start a S/PAC?
Please visit the Public Affairs Group in the Members Area of www.ajli.org.

Get the facts on S/PACs

Is there a S/PAC in my state?

This is the current S/PAC roster, though Leagues in several other regions are in the early stages of forming or reviving their S/PACs and/or are engaged in significant issues-based work:

Junior Leagues of California State Public Affairs Committee

Junior League of Denver Public Policy Committee

Junior Leagues of Florida State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of Georgia State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of Illinois State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of Michigan State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of New Jersey State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of New York State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of North Carolina State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of Ohio State Public Affairs Committee

Junior Leagues of Washington State Public Affairs Committee

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