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Both sides see victories from abortion opponents' boycotts

By J.B. SMITH *Tribune-Herald staff writer*

It worked against the British before the American Revolution, when colonists shunned tea and tea taxes. It worked against the bus companies of Montgomery, Ala., when blacks refused to ride segregated buses. It was an effective tool against apartheid in South Africa and against labor abuses in the vineyards of California.

Can a boycott work against the Girl Scouts?

The abortion opponents have been promoting a "fast and abstinence" from Girl Scout cookies because of the area Girl Scout council's relationship with Planned Parenthood. In calling a boycott — a tactic long favored by the political left — they are following a national trend among anti-abortion activists.

Pro-Life Waco leader John Pisciotta, the Baylor University economics professor who organized the campaign, compared the effort with Martin Luther King Jr.'s Montgomery bus boycott of 1955.

But he said he took more immediate inspiration from an effort last fall in Austin to stall construction of a Planned Parenthood clinic through economic pressures. Chris Danze, an Austin concrete contractor, threatened to publicize the names of all subcontractors on the clinic project and to ask churches and the anti-abortion community to boycott their services. As a result, most of the firms pulled out of the project.

Danze has become a hero in the anti-abortion movement. His efforts have received positive press in conservative evangelical magazines, and he said he met with national anti-abortion leaders recently in Washington, D.C.

Pisciotta, leader of Pro-Life Waco, said he knows Danze through Catholic anti-abortion circles. He said Danze's campaign demonstrated to him the potential of a boycott.

"Chris Danze has been a role model for me," he said.

In a spot on Christian radio this month, Pisciotta urges a boycott to protest the "cozy relationship" between Planned Parenthood and the local Bluebonnet Council of the Girl Scouts. The council is a nominal sponsor of Nobody's Fool, a Planned Parenthood sex education conference that Pisciotta opposes. And last year the council named local Planned Parenthood Executive Director Pam Smallwood as a "Woman of Distinction."

"I want to see a complete disassociation with Planned Parenthood," Pisciotta said in an interview this week. "I want to see Girl Scout councils back off their feminist affiliations, and from any feminist agenda they may have."

On the surface, Danze and Pisciotta seem to be fighting losing battles. Planned Parenthood, the nonprofit woman's reproductive health agency, has resumed work on its Austin clinic, using new contractors. Donations to the Austin agency have skyrocketed, Planned Parenthood officials said.

Meanwhile, the boycott of Girl Scout cookies seems to have helped cookie sales, said Beth Vivio, executive director of the Bluebonnet Council. One man bought \$1,000 worth of cookies, she said.

"In the Waco area, we have been inundated with people calling to find out where they can purchase cookies," she said. "People are wanting to show their support, and feeling bad that girls are caught in the middle of a debate that has nothing to do with them."

But Pisciotta doesn't mind.

"I'm hearing that Girl Scout cookie sales may hit an all-time high," he said. "I'm happy about that. I hope they double it from last year."

He said the boycott has been effective in bringing issues before Girl Scout parents and supporters in Waco, Temple, Bryan-College Station and elsewhere in the council area.

"In our boycott, the financial impact is nil," Pisciotta said. "Our whole goal is education. We want everyone to know about this multifaceted entanglement between the Girl Scouts and Planned Parenthood. Many people are mad about this."

In the wake of the boycott, the parents of nine Girl Scouts in Crawford have withdrawn their daughters from the organization. Earlier this week, Vivio met with a group of 40 parents in Temple, some of whom strongly opposed any cooperation between the Girl Scouts and Planned Parenthood.

Vivio said Girl Scout leaders are now considering whether to continue the council's official relationship with Nobody's Fool and will probably have a decision in the next couple of weeks.

"A good portion of our membership is not comfortable having our name being associated with Planned Parenthood," she said. "It's very divided, much like the greater community."

Vivio said the Bluebonnet Council has co-sponsored the event since 1995, but it has not supported it financially. She said the council may take its logo off the conference promotions but continue to make information about the event available to girls.

She said the Girl Scout council will not apologize for naming Smallwood its 2003 Woman of Distinction. She said a volunteer committee recommended Smallwood because of her work with her church and civic organizations, not for her job at Planned Parenthood.

Pisciotta said he met with Vivio after Smallwood was selected, but he didn't believe she took his objections seriously.

"For conservative Christians, that's just mocking us to say Pam Smallwood is a woman of distinction," he said. "I think they regarded our community as a small segment. . . . I hope she doesn't remain in denial in thinking that this is no big deal."

Vivio said Pisciotta's campaign has given people a distorted picture of her organization.

"Individuals have made comments, like 'We can't support Girl Scouts because Girl Scouts supports abortion.' That's not true. We work very hard not to take political stands on issue. We do not take a stand on abortion, just as we do not take a stand on homosexuality."

Meanwhile, Danze's Austin boycott has also seen a backlash, said Danielle Tierney, a spokeswoman for Planned Parenthood in Austin. She said the agency was aiming to raise \$720,000 for its new clinic by the end of December and ended up raising \$1.1 million.

"Chris Danze is the best thing that's ever happened to our fund raising," she said. "When the public finds out about Chris Danze and his true agenda — to make sure abortion is not available in any case, even in rape or incest or the health of the mother — people are going to stand up and act on their feelings."

Planned Parenthood in Austin is moving ahead as general contractor for the project and is helping to conceal the identity of its subcontractors. Danze's group, meanwhile, has scouts every day on the site, trying to identify them.

Like Pisciotta, Danze appears unfazed by the boycott backlash. He said he has succeeded beyond his dreams, and he still hopes to stop the project.

"When we started the boycott on Sept. 23, we said our goal was to stop it or slow it down and make it more expensive," he said. "Every day we offer resistance, we make it more expensive."

His Web site lists the names of contractors who are allegedly working on the project. The site urges people to avoid the contractors and to pressure the contractor's clients not to do business with them. The site also lists contractors who agreed to abstain from the project and urges the public to support them.

The list of abstainers includes Waco-based Alamo Steel. Company officials declined to comment on the issue.

"This is being copied around the country," Danze said. "We've proven it can be done and that it can be successful."

Danze has publicly stated that his goal is to drive all abortion clinics out of business in Austin. He has also been accused of mailing anonymous letters to the neighbors of an abortion doctor, calling the doctor a "serial killer" of children. Danze has refused to confirm or deny that he was involved with the letters.

Anti-abortion forces have used similar tactics in Wichita, Kan., protesting outside the homes of abortion clinic employees and trailing them around town with signs.

Danze said in an interview this week that he doesn't oppose efforts to stigmatize and harass people in the abortion business as long as those actions are not illegal.

Meanwhile, in Waco, Pisciotta said he doesn't have any specific plans for boycotts against other organizations or businesses, but he wouldn't rule it out.

"I would hope other groups would take note of what's going on here," he said.

Baylor history professor James SoRelle said boycotts are a time-honored way for Americans to work for social change.

He said the tactic has tended to be most successful when combined with other political forces. For example, the Montgomery bus boycott was followed by federal court decisions calling for complete desegregation, which went beyond the demands of the boycotters.

SoRelle said those on the right of the political spectrum seem to have learned strategy from the civil rights movement.

But he said he doubts many people would ever participate in a boycott of Girl Scout cookies. He said it would be hard to persuade people that buying Girl Scout cookies somehow contributes to abortion. And the cookies are hard to resist, he said.

"What the Girl Scouts have going for them is that they have product a lot of people like," SoRelle said.

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