

Pro-Life Mobilization in Waco

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Friday morning in Waco Texas, a stone's throw from Highway 6. The sun is beating down on the driveway in front of Planned Parenthood. On this day, the parking lot is empty, the employee of a security company bored in the only shady corner.

Steven stands outside the driveway for a couple of hours, as he does every week, waiting for patients, but on this day no one comes, even though Fridays are actually one of three days of the week when abortions take place. He's all about saving women from harm, the 25-year-old student says. Abortion is a grave sin, destructive even to women's lives, he says. Abortion does not bring healing or peace, he says. Steven believes that women who have abortions will regret it later.

Steven is convinced: As a man, he can tell a woman what she is allowed to do with her body. As a Christian, as an American, he has the right to do so. The woman must know that she carries another life in her womb and does not actually have the right to end this life.

Waco, population 125,000, has far more churches than businesses or restaurants; all faiths are represented, usually in conservative forms. For many here, being a believer is synonymous with being against abortion. Along the roads leading into the regional center are posters with a picture of a sad woman and the text "Abortion hurts," or "Baby dies, mother cries"; in many front yards, display stands show pictures of babies.

Every week, activists hold up signs against abortions on a main street next to Planned Parenthood's clinic. Behind them is John Pisciotta, volunteer director of Pro-Life Waco. His goal: To make it clear to everyone that the abortion issue is anything but settled. People have grown accustomed to other Supreme Court decisions, he says, accepting them. But not to abortions, says the former economics professor at the local Baptist college. He has devoted all his time to fighting abortions for more than a decade. His role model is Martin Luther King.

We want to get people on our side. That's how you win, not by hammering people. They ask: won't you think about it. Challenging Americans on the basis of their Christian convictions--that's exactly what Martin Luther King did.

A key component of the pro-life movement in Waco is the donor-funded Care Net facilities. Since February of this year, an outpatient clinic has been providing women with completely free medical care, from pregnancy tests to ultrasounds and all prenatal exams. The clinic is located right across the street from Planned Parenthood, where the ultrasound required by law for an abortion costs \$350. A lot of money for women without health

insurance. With Care Net, we offer women on the road to abortion an immediate alternative, says Ellen Staniszewski. The former teacher with long blond hair packs colorful bags for pregnant women with other volunteers--and she trains other activists on how to properly approach women:

These girls who are in crisis pregnancies, they need love, they need help, they need encouragement. And whatever decision they make, even if they've had an abortion, there's information in the bag for them, about help. There's also a box of tissues and a little red glass heart so the young woman can go home and know that we love her no matter what decision she makes.

In Texas, there must be at least 24 hours between the mandatory counseling session and the abortion. Thus, for an abortion, pregnant women must visit Planned Parenthood's clinic twice, two opportunities for abortion opponents to do their bidding: These include free postpartum housing for mother and child for up to a year, coverage of living expenses, transportation to school or college, help with housing and job training in transition, and adoption assistance. In fact, the number of abortions in Waco has declined: More than 100 women have taken advantage of the Care Net clinic's services and not had abortions since it began operating in February, Ellen Staniszewski says proudly. Like other pro-life activists, she believes even after rape or incest, it's better for women not to terminate the pregnancy:

Regardless of how the baby was conceived, it is still her baby. Unfortunately, sometimes the decision to have an abortion is like a second physical assault on the woman.

Pro-life leader John Pisciotta is currently planning new actions to take the abortion clinic off the ground. When the local magazine told him they would continue to accept ads from Planned Parenthood, the pro-lifer organized an ad boycott threat from local business owners. Since then, The Wacoan Magazine has stopped accepting ads from the clinic.

Last week, Pro-Life Waco protested outside the local branch of Bank of America: The bank, like many American employers, has a program to encourage charitable giving: if its employees donate, the bank adds to it. That has to stop with donations to Planned Parenthood, the abortion opponents demand.

We're not losing the battle in Waco, Pisciotta says. We're winning. Slowly. We just keep doing what we're doing.