

The Battle Against Abortion in Waco, Texas

(Kulturkampf in den USA: Abtreibungsgegner in Waco Texas))

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The Producer/Interviewer was U. S. Correspondent, Doris Simon

You can listen to documentary in German at this URL: <https://bit.ly/3CZ0lux>

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday: On these days, abortions are performed at Planned Parenthood's clinic in Waco Texas. On this Friday, it's not yet noon and already well over 30 degrees hot and humid. In the parking lot of Planned Parenthood, a stone's throw from Highway 6, there is a yawning void. A good day, Ellen Staniszewski says with satisfaction: no cars, no abortions. Planned Parenthood's business has been seriously impacted by Pro-Life Waco's efforts, she says.

The former teacher runs what's known as the sidewalk counseling service: every week, the tall blonde woman in a straw hat and giant pink sunglasses stands with other pro-lifers outside Planned Parenthood's driveway, waiting for pregnant women to arrive. There is special training on how best to approach women coming in for counseling or abortion. Pregnant women are in a stressful situation, Ellen says, they need love, help, encouragement.

Running the gauntlet for pregnant women in Texas, there must be at least 24 hours between the mandatory counseling session and the abortion. That means every pregnant woman must come to Planned Parenthood's clinic twice - two opportunities for pro-lifers to do their bidding. Ellen came up with the idea of the pink bags that the abortion opponents hand into the car: a stuffed animal peeks out of the top, and underneath are vouchers for immediate free medical treatment: pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, or hormone treatment to reverse an abortion with the morning-after pill - all at the pro-life group's Care Net clinic just across the street from Planned Parenthood.

Also, in the pink bag: offers from Pro-Life Waco: one year of housing for up to 20 women and their children, medical care, living expenses, housing assistance, job training, adoption. Further down in the pink bag is a conversation offering for women who have had abortions, Kleenex, a handwritten note with a Bible quote and a small red heart made of glass. We want the young women to know we love them, Ellen Staniszewski said, no matter what decision they make.

The goal: hurt Planned Parenthood financially. Since the pro-lifers opened their donation-funded clinic in February, more than 100 women have changed their minds and not had abortions, Ellen Staniszewski says proudly. Across the street, at Planned Parenthood, the ultrasound required by law for an abortion costs \$350. A lot of money for women without health insurance. Care Net's free service not only offers pregnant women an

immediate alternative, but others also take advantage of the pro-lifers' other gynecological services. Together, this increasingly threatens the economic basis of Planned Parenthood, the only clinic far and wide that still offers abortions.

That's the goal: by providing cheaper and better services to customers, they're making sure others have to shut down, says Ellen Staniszewski. Planned Parenthood's clinic was forced to close once before in 2013, following tougher requirements for medical facilities in Texas. Reopening in 2017 was a shock, says pro-life activist Nonie: violence against unborn children has returned to Waco.

Along the gateways into the regional center are billboards with a picture of a sad woman and the text "Abortion hurts," or "Baby dies, mother cries"; in many front yards, display stands show baby pictures.

Every week, activists hold up signs against abortions on a main street next to Planned Parenthood's clinic. Behind them is John Pisciotta, a Catholic and volunteer director of Pro-Life Waco for many years. The stocky man in a red pro-life T-shirt, jeans and suspenders, organizes the fight against abortions and against Planned Parenthood's clinic in Waco. A former economics professor at the local Baptist college, he rejects aggressive speech or drastic photos of aborted fetuses: He wants to engage families, children, and churches to participate, he said.

In that regard, he says, it's not strategically good to use pictures of abortion victims. But if he could otherwise let every adult see these pictures, that would be a great thing, Pisciotta thinks.

The goal of Waco's top pro-life activist: to make clear that even 48 years after the Supreme Court allowed abortions, the issue is not settled. There are no majorities, John says, not for and not against abortions. Most people are somewhere in between, he says, and to win, you have to get them on your side.

The longtime activist sees with favor that there is now a conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court, and he is pleased about the tightening of laws in many Republican states. But Pisciotta is convinced that the most successful way to fight abortion is through faith.

Waco, population 125,000, has more churches than businesses or restaurants. For many here, being a believer is synonymous with: Being against abortion.

Among the pro-life activists, who come from all ages and social backgrounds, are many Born Again Christians, people who, after a revival experience, see fighting abortion as their mission in life.

Nancy, with her husband Tom, is one of Pro-Life Waco's major funders. All her friends would think like her, says the well-groomed slender woman. Yet Nancy is no stranger to abortion: one of her sisters had two clandestine abortions many years ago. Today, Nancy's sister volunteers at an anti-abortion clinic in Santa Fe. God turned it that way, Nancy is convinced, so her sister is now redeeming lost souls with her own story.

Megan Roos has started a student group at the local college: Their long-term goal is to end all abortions. The 21-year-old, long hair, shorts, and sneakers, wants to continue the fight against abortions professionally after her communications degree. Privately, too, the issue dominates her life.

"I can't not talk about it, when I'm in a conversation, it comes up at some point. For example, last weekend I was at my cousin's graduation party, and I couldn't help but bring up this horrible topic. Fortunately, I was with people who roughly agreed with me. So, it wasn't hostile. But I feel challenged to do that. It's become so much a part of me."

For Steven, 25, approaching pregnant women outside Planned Parenthood's clinic every week is a service to women: They need to be saved from destroying their lives; they would regret an abortion later. For the young man, abortion is a tragedy and murder.

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 is carrying another life in her womb and that she does not have the right to end this life.

To the activists of Pro-Life Waco, anything after conception is considered a child whose rights outweigh the woman's self-determination. Yes, absolutely, answers Tom, a friendly former professor of accounting, when asked: for him they are babies, just as human as the mother and belonging to God.

Abortion is banned even in cases of incest and rape. The new Texas law bans abortion as soon as the fetus shows a heartbeat. At that point, many women don't yet know they're pregnant, but then no doctor is allowed to perform an abortion even after incest or rape.

Ellen Staniszewski thinks this is right. She is convinced that it is better for the woman concerned not to terminate the pregnancy in any case. No matter how it came about, it is still her baby, says the former teacher. For her, the decision to have an abortion is a renewed attack on the woman's body.

In addition, Ellen says, the woman can give the child up for adoption after it is born. Pro-Life Waco helps there, too, she says. The former teacher has adopted two non-white children and thus belongs to the exception rather: White children find adoptive parents everywhere in the country more easily than non-white ones. The latter often have to stay in homes for years under difficult circumstances. Relatively speaking, non-white women have abortions much more often than white women. What is often explained by economic problems is, for abortion opponents like Ellen, systematic racism: non-white women would not be educated about alternatives to abortion in order to avoid higher birth rates for these ethnic groups.

On this morning, about equal numbers of white and non-white women come to the anti-abortionists' donation-funded Care Net Clinic-for pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, other exams. All are grateful for the free services offered by the donor-funded clinic. I wouldn't have known how to decide otherwise, says a young woman with long black hair. The interview with the young woman has to be deleted after a representative of the Care Net clinic asked her to demand that the reporter delete it. A tour of the facility and an interview with the clinic's management also fail to materialize; the distrust of unknown female journalists is obvious.

There are only positive things to report, says the founder of Pro-Life Waco. Pisciotta prefers to fight with an open mind, if necessary, with a hard line; his goal is to take the ground away from Planned Parenthood's abortion clinic.

So, he organized an ad boycott threat from local businessmen after the local magazine published a Planned Parenthood ad and wanted to continue doing so. It wasn't long, Pisciotta recounts, before the magazine's attorney called him: They were giving up; the local magazine would no longer accept ads from Planned Parenthood.

This year, Pro-Life Waco picked a bigger opponent: Bank of America. Like the local magazine, its branch is located on the multi-lane main commercial street through Waco. Like many U.S. employers, Bank of America has a program to encourage donations: it adds to the donations of its employees. This must stop with donations to Planned Parenthood, the pro-life activists demand. So far, the bank has not responded to the first demonstrations in front of the branch. But John Pisciotta is confident: "It was no different with the local magazine at the beginning.

We're not losing the battle in Waco, says John Pisciotta. We're winning. Slowly. We just keep plugging on.