

# Citizen Magazine

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## Tough Cookies

### How Texas Christians used Thin Mints and Do-Si-Dos to end Girl Scouts' promotions of Planned Parenthood

by Candi Cushman

One of the most important principles Dr. John Pisciotta—who's taught economics at Baylor University for two decades—stresses to his students is that it's OK to bring "issues of faith" into the marketplace.

But he never expected to become a nationally known case study of that principle.

It all started when Pisciotta opened his newspaper last May to discover that the Girl Scouts' Bluebonnet Council—comprised of 6,000 girls from 14 counties in the Waco area—had honored Pam Smallwood as a "Woman of Distinction."

As CEO of Planned Parenthood of Central Texas, Smallwood operates the only abortion clinic on Inter-state 35 between Austin and Dallas.

Pisciotta knows the place well. As the co-director of Pro-Life Waco, he's spent one day a week there for the last decade praying for the women—sometimes Baylor students—who come and go.

"It's not a pretty sight," he told *Citizen*. "At about noon they start coming out after their abortions and you see the looks on their faces. There's sadness and devastation."

By Planned Parenthood's own admission, at least 700 to 800 babies are killed there annually. So Pisciotta was saddened to see the Girl Scouts exalt the person supervising those killings as a hero for little girls.

"To me, that's like saying, 'You, too, can grow up and have a whole chain of abortion clinics,'" he said.

#### Seal of approval

Two months later, Planned Parenthood hosted a July "sex education" conference called "Nobody's Fool" for about 700 fifth- through ninth-graders. Listed as a co-sponsor was the Bluebonnet Council, which lent its logo and provided volunteers.

Turned out that—unknown to many of the Scouts' parents—the Council had been sponsoring Planned Parenthood conferences for nine years. But what made this one especially egregious was the free book distributed to seventh- through ninth-grade attendees.

Entitled *It's Perfectly Normal*, the book included graphic illustrations of people having sex, putting on condoms and other activities not fit for description. It also was littered with controversial statements about contraception, abortion and homosexuality.

"The ancient Greeks thought that love between two men was the highest form of love," one chapter declared.

Though Pisciotta was upset that the Girl Scouts had put their "good-housekeeping seal of approval" on that kind of "sexual promotion," he wasn't sure what to do. He knew from previous experience that local media—particularly the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, another conference co-sponsor—would likely disregard a pro-life group's press release. He needed something they couldn't ignore.

That's when he thought of cookies.

A boycott of Thin Mints, Do-Si-Dos and other popular Girl Scout cookies would provide a unique way to "bring awareness about the true nature of Planned Parenthood and abortion in this city," Pisciotta decided. He realized the idea was controversial, but "abortion is a blot on our community" he said. "And while it continues, we can't let it go on unnoticed and unchallenged."

His colleagues at Pro-Life Waco agreed, and on Feb. 6 they launched a voluntary "fast and abstinence" from Girl Scout cookies. At first, the effort was limited to the few hundred people on the group's e-mail and newsletter lists. But after a Christian radio station, KBDE, donated two weeks' worth of radio ads about the boycott, national media outlets—including the Associated Press and CNN—picked up the story.

Planned Parenthood and Girl Scout officials wasted no time retaliating with personal attacks against Pisciotta. Smallwood accused him of "exploiting little girls." And Bluebonnet Council Director Beth Vivio complained to television reporters that "we are being used by this individual and his attempt to further his cause."

"Certainly he's entitled to his beliefs," she said, "but it's very unfortunate that the Girl Scouts, and particularly the young girls we serve, are being used this way."

## The real radicals

But those accusations didn't ring true to Girl Scout parents like Lisa and Thomas Aguilar, the owners of a bed and-breakfast in Crawford, where President Bush has his ranch.

"The people at Planned Parenthood are the ones using and exploiting children," Thomas said. "They're using the Girl Scouts' name to push their own agenda."

"It's against our values and it's not honoring to God at all," Lisa added, citing the Girl Scouts' pledge "to serve God."

The Aguilars pulled their 10-year old daughter out of her Scout troop. And that got the attention of several Crawford Scout leaders, including Donna Coody, a stay-at-home mother of four.

Coody was in the process of founding a new Scout troop for her 7-year-old when all the controversy broke loose.

So she confronted an area Scout manager, Shirley Moore, about whether John Pisciotta's claims were true.

"She called him a 'liar' verbatim," Coody recalled. "[She said,] 'He e-mails us junk and stuff all the time.'" Moore also told Coody the Planned Parenthood conference was only about puberty and sex-abuse prevention.

At the time, Coody said, she believed those words and even expressed support for the conference because Moore "sounded very honest and forthcoming. And I didn't know John [Pisciotta], or if he was some kind of crazy radical. ... We were just naive moms."

But that naivete came to an abrupt end the very next day when Pisciotta mailed Coody and Aguilar a copy of *It's Perfectly Normal*.

"When I saw that my jaw hit the ground," Coody said. "I really just wanted to throw it in the fire because no way did I want my daughters to see it. I felt disgusted and lied to."

One week later, Coody and eight or nine other moms expressed those sentiments to Vivio and Moore during a two-hour meeting. But the Girl Scout officials refused to apologize for their actions, claiming they had honored Smallwood because of her years of community service, rather than her record of promoting abortion. As for the Planned Parenthood conference, they repeated the claim that it was an effort to improve girls' self-respect.

It was the same mantra used by Planned Parenthood's Smallwood in an editorial she wrote for the *Tribune-Herald* saying the conference was about "self-esteem" and "sex-abuse prevention."

"[Abortion is not even on the agenda at Nobody's Fool," she wrote. "In fact, if it were not for the children asking about the radical protesters ... the subject would not even be raised."

Never mind that the book Planned Parenthood gave attendees had an entire chapter on abortion, defining it as a "medical procedure performed for the purpose of ending a pregnancy."

Adding fuel to the fire, the *Tribune-Herald* quoted Vivio saying that she'd only received a few secondhand reports about people boycotting cookies.

"That was an absolute lie," Coody told *Citizen*. "Because I had just told her [the day before], 'I am no longer in Girl Scouts. I cannot sell the cookies.'"

Shirley Moore refused to answer *Citizen's* questions about the Crawford mothers' concerns, saying, "I am not going to respond one way or the other." Vivio deferred questions to the national Girl Scouts' office in New York, which e-mailed a written statement saying it was up to individual councils to decide whether to affiliate with Planned Parenthood.

Feeling shunned by the Scouts, the Crawford moms decided to play hardball, canceling all their cookie orders and taking their story to reporters.

It was Coody's first experience with Christian activism. "I'm wearing shoes I've never worn," she said. "I would have been scared in my boots in any other situation but God has put a fire in me that I have never had."

"Somebody needs to spill the beans on [the Girl Scouts and Planned Parenthood] because this has just been going on too long."

As a result of their efforts, at least two Crawford Scout troops—7087 and 7527

have disbanded. They've since formed an alternative organization, Circle of Friends, that's based on Christian principles.

## Show of hands

Still, Girl Scout officials continued to downplay the controversy. "It was pretty obvious they were thinking, 'Okay, so a few moms in Crawford are upset. This is going to blow over,'" Pisciotta said.

But 30 miles south, in the city of Temple, another ally emerged who would ultimately turn the battle in the Christians' favor: Cynthia Baylor, the mother of a 7-year-old Girl Scout.

"I was kind of on the fence a little bit on this issue," Baylor told *Citizen*, "but when I saw those pictures [in *It's Perfectly Normal*] it knocked me off that fence and flat on the ground on the other side."

Baylor—who has worked for years in a city preschool program and as a public school teachers' assistant wept as she described her dismay over the book's content.

"To think of young children looking at people having sex in this book just hurt me," she told *Citizen*. "I've worked with children of all ages throughout my life.... And for that book to say it should be 'perfectly normal' for kids to have sex—it is not."

So when she learned Vivio would be attending a Feb. 16 Girl Scout meeting in Temple, Baylor canvassed her community with fliers encouraging Christian Scout parents to come.

"The Council feels that there is more support for abortion than against it," the fliers said. "We would like to prove them wrong. This is not what we want for our girls."

She also invited local reporters. As a result, about 75 people, including parents and television crews, showed up. At first, Vivio tried to skirt the issue by announcing the Council would meet privately in March to discuss its endorsement of Planned Parenthood conferences.

But that runaround spurred one parent to ask for a show of hands from those who opposed the Girl Scouts' affiliation with an abortion provider. Instantly, 90 percent of the audience's hands shot up, Baylor said.

"I was excited because I thought, 'It's not just me. There are others who don't want to be a part of this.'"

Reporters noted the incident as well, making it impossible for the Girl Scouts to continue denying the existence of concerned parents representing multiple Scout troops in at least two different cities.

"It was at Temple that Vivio faced the reality" Pisciotta said, "that if [Scouts] alienate conservative Christians ... there will be a public-relations nightmare."

## Shining a light

And so, just three weeks after it began, the cookie campaign ended with a surprise win: Despite Vivio's insistence that the matter couldn't be addressed until March, the Bluebonnet Council held a secret meeting Feb. 22—and two days later, announced it was cutting ties with Planned Parenthood.

"Girls Scouts does not provide support to Planned Parenthood, nor do we have any national collaboration," a written statement said. "While the Girl Scouts Bluebonnet Council has sponsored Planned Parenthood's [conferences] in the past, we will not be doing so this year."

As *Citizen* went to press a month later, Girl Scout troops from as far away as Houston and Alabama were scrambling to declare their separation from Planned Parenthood. Smallwood accused them of bowing to "extremists" and "local hate groups."

That doesn't bother the parents, though.

"They're also slamming John Pisciotta [for opposing abortion]," Thomas Aguilar said. "But John did not give us the Ten Commandments; God did.

"God just used John to shine the light." •

## A POSTSCRIPT

John Pisciotta was inspired to launch his cookie boycott by another *Citizen* Hometown Hero—construction company owner Chris Danze ("The Concrete Coalition," January 2004, page 28). Eight months ago, Danze formed a network of central Texas concrete suppliers who refused to help Planned Parenthood build one of the area's largest abortion clinics. Read about their progress—and travails—on the next page.