



April 13, 2004

Pisciotta announces opposition to Planned Parenthood nationwide

By CINDY V. CULP *Tribune-Herald staff writer*

Local anti-abortion activists held a press conference Monday to announce the results of a survey that studied how many Girl Scout councils across the country have a relationship with Planned Parenthood.

The survey was an off-shoot of a campaign organized by Baylor University professor John Pisciotta in which he asked the community to boycott this year's Girl Scouts cookie sales until the local Bluebonnet Council stopped what he termed its "cozy relationship" with Planned Parenthood.

"We're here to extend our mission of providing information, facts about the Girl Scouts' entanglement with Planned Parenthood," said Pisciotta, who is co-director of Pro-Life Waco. "Folks in the community should know, especially Girl Scout parents. It's just an information campaign, a fact campaign. We've stuck to the facts all along in this and people have responded to the facts."

A spokeswoman for Girl Scouts of the USA, the national organization, said it had no comment on the survey or councils' relationships with Planned Parenthood.

The boycott was launched in February and publicized the fact that the local Girl Scouts council co-sponsored Nobody's Fool, a Planned Parenthood sex education conference. The council also gave local Planned Parenthood of Central Texas Executive Director Pam Smallwood one of its "Women of Distinction" awards last year.

The controversy attracted national media attention that lingered even after the council announced Feb. 23 that it would sever its ties with Planned Parenthood.

During a March 5 spot on NBC's "Today" show, Girl Scouts of the USA CEO Kathy Cloninger was interviewed to give an opposing viewpoint to Pisciotta. During the spot, she said that although the Bluebonnet council had ended its relationship with Planned Parenthood, other councils across the country would continue to collaborate with the family planning agency.

After the segment aired, Stop Planned Parenthood International, which Pisciotta collaborates with, received "a couple dozen" calls from people across the country wanting to know if their local Girl Scout council was affiliated with Planned Parenthood, said STOPP executive director Jim Sedlak.

In March, the organization began the process of contacting all 315 Girl Scout councils in the country to ask that question, Sedlak said. Councils were contacted either by phone or by e-mail, and those that did not respond the first time were contacted two more times if necessary, he said.

The survey ended up getting responses from a total of 66 councils, or nearly 21 percent, Sedlak said. Of the councils that responded, 17 said they have a relationship with Planned Parenthood and 49 said they do not.

Sedlak said from the phone interviews he conducted, it seemed councils with no relationship with Planned Parenthood were quick to say

so. That leads him to believe, he said, that many of the councils that did not respond have some sort of affiliation.

To help figure that out, Sedlak said his organization is asking people to report on councils in their communities. To facilitate that, STOPP has put the survey data on a Web site — www.all.org/stopp/scouts — where people can look up councils by state to see which ones responded, and if so, their answer.

What constitutes a relationship was termed broadly. Some examples include a troop inviting a Planned Parenthood official to speak or co-sponsoring a Planned Parenthood event.

Councils were also deemed to have an affiliation with Planned Parenthood for more subtle things, such as having someone on their board who is a Planned Parenthood executive or board member or co-sponsoring a third-party event which Planned Parenthood also helped sponsor.

Donna Coody, a former Girl Scout troop leader in nearby Crawford, was one of the local parents who pulled their daughters out of the organization because of the controversy. At the press conference Monday, she said applauds STOPP for taking on the issue.

"I'm so glad they're going nationwide with this to let other mothers who were as innocent as I was know the truth," Coody said. "They can then make their own choices."

Pam Smallwood, executive director of Planned Parenthood of Central Texas, said STOPP's project will not have any effect on Nobody's Fool. She said she hopes it won't keep other Planned Parenthood affiliates and youth organizations from giving parents and children information they need to make the best decisions for them.

"I certainly think that collaborative efforts ... are one of the best approaches, if not the best approach, to tackling some of the difficult issues that face kids nowadays," Smallwood said. "Planned Parenthood will continue to collaborate with other youth-serving organizations here to give children and families information that will make it easier for them to make decisions in their lives. ... What we all need to do is keep our eye on the goal of caring for children and families, not get side-tracked by people who have different agendas, and remember that two heads are better than one."

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