

(Pro) life after Scheidler

There was a time in the late 1980s when Georgette Forney didn't want to turn on the evening news because she kept seeing the same frightening scenes over and over.

Waves of Operation Rescue activists were doing sit-ins at abortion facilities, often handcuffing themselves to the doors while others collapsed nearby chanting, singing, praying, and reading Scripture. Then police would drag everyone off to jail. This cycle of civil disobedience kept repeating itself at other clinics, in other towns, in other states.

Yesterday's Misunderstanding

"I remember thinking, 'They're all nut cases,'" said Forney. "Those tactics were so intimidating to me as a woman, and especially as a woman who had had an abortion. . . . I wanted to stay as far away from that extreme anti-abortion stuff as I possibly could. It was all dangerous, as far as I was concerned."

Then her spiritual walls began to collapse. She had a daughter, and this reminded her again of the daughter lost in her 1976 abortion. Eventually Forney had a soul-shaking experience of grief, reconciliation, and healing. By the late '90s she was a leader in the National Organization of Episcopalians for Life. But she still could not embrace the tactics of the Operation Rescue era.

Nevertheless, Forney was one of many who cheered after the U.S. Supreme Court's 8-1 decision that the federal Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organizations Act could not be used against groups that protest at abortion facilities. While the cases—Scheidler v. NOW and Operation Rescue v. NOW—

stirred up the usual combatants, the anti-abortion coalition also drew wide legal support from other activists who saw the importance of this legal precedent for all forms of protest. Among those showing support were People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Greenpeace, the Seamless Garment Network, Citizens United for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, and Pax Christi USA. Actor Martin Sheen and the activist priest Daniel Berrigan even signed on.

This decision may have closed the door on an era in which anyone who wanted to oppose abortion had to worry about being associated with illegal forms of protest.

Finally, an intimidating link to the past is gone, said Forney. The emphasis now is on finding ways to reach women before and after their abortions. In January, she helped lead a "Silent No More" campaign in 46 states built on the testimonies of women who have had abortions. They held quiet demonstrations at state capitols and other public places, holding black-and-white "I regret my abortion" signs.

Today's Opportunities

"After 30 years, we have to try to teach our choir a new song," she said. "We can't keep using the same pro-life words and images that we've always used. We have to talk to the women and try to see things through their eyes. We have to let women know that they deserve something better than abortion."

Meanwhile, there are still legal issues to be resolved about the legal rights of

those who still want to pray, preach, and protest on public sidewalks, said Joe Scheidler, the activist whose Chicago-based Pro-Life Action League was caught up in the Operation Rescue-era legal wars.

After all, the 1994 Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act calls for sanctions against those who conduct "threatening" protests in or near the "safety zones" around abortion clinics. And after this Supreme Court decision, NOW President Kim Gandy vowed to see to it that "religious and political extremists do not resume their reign

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of terror at women's clinics. We are looking at every avenue, including the U.S.A. Patriot

Act, in order to protect women, doctors, and clinic staff from these ideological terrorists."

No one expects conflicts to cease near abortion facilities, said Scheidler. But the momentum is behind those willing to find ways to do sidewalk counseling, hold vigils, and distribute information—even coupons for free ultrasound tests—without inspiring fear or lawsuits.

Nevertheless, one person's free speech may be another's harassment.

"I don't know how often we've been outside Planned Parenthood saying the Rosary and then suddenly four squad cars roll up," said Scheidler. "The cops say, 'We got a call saying you have weapons.' So we hold up our Rosary beads. . . . For some people, saying the Rosary can be a form of intimidation." ■

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