

*This story was originally printed in the July/August 2011 issue of New Earth, the newspaper for the Diocese of Fargo.*

## **On the side of truth: Speaker explains how easily Planned Parenthood can deceive people**

Tanya Watterud

During a recent public forum in Fargo, Abby Johnson shared her story of conversion from being a director of a Planned Parenthood facility that provided abortions to becoming a speaker for 40 Days for Life, a national movement focused on ending abortion through prayer, fasting, peaceful vigil and educational outreach.

Raised in a conservative, Christian home, Johnson said she never talked with her family about abortion, but it was understood that the expectation was to remain abstinent until marriage. Families might think “as long as [their daughter] holds that value deep in her heart, abortion will never be on the table,” so they don’t talk about it, but they need to, she said.

About 57 percent of college students begin college being actively prolife and only about 25 percent come out of college that way, she said. When at age 20, she found out she was pregnant, she asked her boyfriend what they should do about the pregnancy.

“He knew of an abortion facility in Houston because he’d taken another girlfriend there,” she said. He didn’t force her to get the abortion, but expected it. “I still had a choice and it was the wrong choice,” she said. That experience opened her up to the idea that abortion might be okay.

One day in college, she walked up to an information booth staffed by someone from Planned Parenthood. She was told about “the really great services they provided . . . testing and birth control.” Johnson said the pitch was positive — prevent abortions, reduce the number of abortions — and she began to think that she could support something that helped women in these ways. They asked her to volunteer at the local Planned Parenthood facility, and she signed up.

Over time, her volunteer work turned into a full-time job as director of a Planned Parenthood facility. She was the public figure for the organization, the one news reporters came to for information about their fund-raising efforts and other activities.

Johnson knew that abortions took place at the facility, but her goal was to focus on the other services so they could prevent and reduce the number. But then management doubled the number of abortions they required her facility to perform. “I thought maybe they meant to double my family planning numbers because that would make sense according to the mission,” she said. When she questioned that, she was told, “Your priority needs to be abortion because that’s where the money is.” “I didn’t understand it,” she said. “I was in it for the women.”

Johnson also talked about the people who protested and prayed outside the abortion facility where she worked. When she first began volunteering, the people were intimidating — one dressed as a grim reaper, some holding graphic signs or yelling.

"No women deserve this," she told herself. "That actually is what kept me coming back. I was confused about what I felt about abortion," but she was not confused about how she felt about "the circus out there." Her Planned Parenthood facility had very successful fund raising events in those days because people didn't approve of what protesters were doing outside of the facility.

"We had all the sympathy from the community," she said. But when the 40 Days for Life campaign was established in 2004 in her community of Bryan/College Station, Texas, the presence outside the facility changed.

"We didn't really like it because all the crazy people left," she said. It was good that the abortion facility clients were no longer harassed, but community sympathy diminished. The clients were actually stopping and talking to the people at the fence around the facility. "It was not only impacting our business . . . it was impacting our community support," she said. The local news media "turned around, too, and we were the bad guys."

Johnson also began establishing relationships with those praying at the fence — first with quick conversations, later by accepting a gift that helped lead her from managing an abortion facility to speaking about the gift of life at locations across the nation. Johnson's full story can be read in her book, "Unplanned."

David Bereit, co-founder of the 40 Days for Life campaign that has mushroomed into an international effort since its beginnings in 2004, also spoke at the public forum. "When we realize that abortion is first and foremost a spiritual crisis," Bereit said, then we know that we must seek spiritual solutions and combat it with prayer.

Joining Bereit and Johnson was Lawrence White, a Lutheran pastor with a powerful message that compared abortion to the Nazi holocaust. In both instances, he said, a pagan ideology was imposed upon a culture that had been Christian, resulting in a category of human beings being deprived of the right to life.

"We have become comfortable with evil," he said. An entire generation has grown up never knowing a time when abortion was not legal, or a time when it was not "culturally acceptable to murder unborn children." He urged those in attendance to think of "what could happen here, unless the people of God stand for life, for righteousness."

The 40 Days for Life campaign in North Dakota begins Sept. 28. Contact the Pregnancy Help Center at (701) 284-6601 or [phc@polarcomm.com](mailto:phc@polarcomm.com) to sign up to participate by praying outside North Dakota's only abortion facility in Fargo or praying from wherever you are. Donations toward the effort are also needed to help provide educational materials and events to inform the public about abortion. To learn more about the national 40 Days for Life, go to [www.40daysforlife.com](http://www.40daysforlife.com). Also visit the North Dakota website at [www.40daysforlifend.com](http://www.40daysforlifend.com).