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The Beginning of the End of the Abortion Industry?

Over the past five years, growing numbers of US abortion workers have left the industry.

By Tim Drake

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For former Planned Parenthood director Abby Johnson, the turning point came when she was asked to assist with an ultrasound-guided abortion.

"Abortions are typically performed blind," explained Johnson, who served as health director for Planned Parenthood in College Station, Texas. "The doctor takes the suction instrument and probes until he thinks he's gotten everything."

On this particular day in the fall of 2009, "the visiting physician wanted to use an ultrasound as a teaching tool to show us what an abortion looked like," recalled Johnson. "I was excited about the prospect of learning something new. My job, during the procedure, was to hold the ultrasound probe on the patient's abdomen."

What Johnson saw on-screen would forever change her life.

"I saw a 13-week-old child struggle and fight for its life during the procedure," said Johnson. "It was shocking for me because the most common question we were asked in the counseling room was, 'Will my baby feel this?'"

“Planned Parenthood had come up with a scripted answer that we were to give women,” said Johnson.

“Our answer: No, the fetus has no sensory development until 28 weeks,” said Johnson. “I wholeheartedly believed that.”

So Johnson was stunned when she saw the child on the ultrasound screen trying to get away from the intrusive instruments bent on its destruction.

“I went back to my office, and for the first time during my eight years at Planned Parenthood, I wondered if this was where I wanted to be for the rest of my life,” said Johnson. “I sat down and prayed for the first time in many years. All I knew was that I couldn’t do this anymore.”

On October 6, 2009, one week and two days after participating in the abortion, Johnson left Planned Parenthood and approached those gathered outside the business who were in the midst of a 40 Days for Life campaign—volunteers devoted to a prayerful, peaceful presence outside abortion businesses.

“I broke down and told them, ‘I know what I’ve been doing is wrong, and I want out,’” said Johnson.

Damascus Road

Johnson isn’t the first to have experienced a Saul-to-Paul-like moment leading to a departure from the abortion industry. In the decades since abortion’s legalization, abortionists and abortion workers such as Dr. Bernard Nathanson, Carol Everett, Anthony Levatino, and others were convicted by what they were doing and experienced profound conversions. Some went on to publicly share their testimony, such as Nathanson did in his 2001 book *The Hand of God: A Journey from Death to Life by the Abortion Doctor Who Changed His Mind*.



Johnson’s story is eerily similar to that of the late Joan Appleton’s 1989 departure as head nurse of the Commonwealth Women’s Clinic in Washington, DC. Appleton, too, had witnessed an ultrasound-guided abortion.

“I handled the ultrasound while the doctor performed the procedure and I directed him while I was watching the screen,” Appleton said of her experience. “I saw the baby pull away. I saw the baby open his mouth. I couldn’t deny what I saw on the screen.”

In 1998, Appleton went on to co-found the Society of Centurions of America with Canadian psychiatrist Dr. Philip Ney. The organization was the first outreach designed for former abortion workers.

In recent years, however, the exodus from the abortion industry has increased. Over the past five years alone, at least 70 abortion workers have had a change of heart and mind and left the industry.

“That is one statistic we wouldn’t have predicted,” said Shawn Carney, campaign director for 40 Days for Life, which has kept track of the abortion-industry departures.

“We hoped that mothers would choose life and that abortion businesses would close, but the abortion workers were another story,” said Carney. “They’re the ones who, on paper, are supposed to be our enemies, and yet the difference has been that the prayer and the peacefulness of our campaigns really wears on the workers.”

Why they stay

Once they are hired on, it’s often difficult for staff members of abortion businesses to leave. Financial considerations and social pressures make it very hard for workers to depart even when they begin having doubts about their work.

According to the testimony of those who have worked at abortion businesses, a common hiring practice is to hire young women and single mothers—many of whom are post-abortive themselves.

“[We would hire those who] needed us and needed the money,” said Joy Davis, a former Birmingham, Alabama regional director of six abortion businesses for abortionist Thomas Tucker. “That way, I knew that I would have their loyalty and that they would stick with it no matter how tough it got.”

The financial fear is great. Many are told that they will not be able to find work elsewhere.

“They feel trapped,” said Johnson. “Planned Parenthood hires young women who use the job as a stepping stone to another job. When they decide to leave, they’re told, ‘Good luck finding a job. No one is going to hire someone who has worked in the abortion industry.’”

Johnson used the analogy of working at Planned Parenthood to the stigma that might be attached to working at a puppy mill.

“Even though the medical community supports Planned Parenthood, it’s looked at kind of as if you wanted to be a respectable dog breeder, but had on your résumé that you worked at a puppy mill,” explained Johnson. “Because abortion businesses aren’t regulated, they hire shabby physicians, and they often skirt the law, working at one is like a black mark on your résumé. Finding another job is a real fear.”

Workers also feel trapped psychologically by the lies they are told, and end up believing themselves.

Jewels Green, a former abortion worker at the Allentown Women’s Center, said that the greatest obstacle preventing abortion workers from leaving is deception.

“The veil of lies is so thick,” said Green. “The euphemisms that surround the culture of death make it psychologically accessible.”

Another reason that many remain is that they carry the guilt of having aborted children of their own.

“I was coerced into having an abortion I didn’t want, when I was 17,” said Green. “Weeks later, I tried to take my own life. Within months after recovering in an adolescent treatment unit, I marched in a pro-abortion walk and began volunteering as an escort. I was trying to reconcile my guilt.”

“I describe my decision as *reaction formation*,” said Green. “I knew what I did was wrong, but to be okay with it, I became a staunch supporter of abortion rights. It was an attempt to mask my own feelings.”



Such a reaction is quite common. At its 2009 convention, Planned Parenthood revealed the results of polling it had conducted. The results: approximately 70 percent of the organization’s workers were post-abortive.

“While I was working for Planned Parenthood, I didn’t get that abortion was killing children,” said Catherine Adair, a former Boston Planned Parenthood worker. “I didn’t get that a baby was involved.”

Adair says that her own abortion at the age of 19 had created a “veil” that prevented her from seeing the truth.

“Once I got married and had children of my own, the veil was lifted,” said Adair. “It was then that I finally understood the grief and the sadness that I was carrying because of the abortion.”

Why they go

There are myriad reasons why abortion workers decide to leave the industry. The turning point differs for each individual.

“It seems that the departures are becoming much more frequent,” said Carney. “I think it’s because many workers are being asked to do things they never thought they would do, and that forces them to ask what the organization stands for.”

That certainly was the case for Sue Thayer.

Thayer was fired from Planned Parenthood of Storm Lake, Iowa after 17 years.

“In mid-2008 Planned Parenthood of Greater Iowa announced that they would be offering telemed abortions,” said Thayer, who served as center manager.

A telemed abortion involves an off-site physician who pushes a button unlocking a drawer at a distant abortion business. The patient takes the first set of RU-486 pills, found in the drawer, and is then sent home to take the remaining medication and wait to pass her aborted child.

Thayer was being asked not only to supervise the procedure, but also to perform an invasive vaginal ultrasound to confirm pregnancy, and to train others in the procedure.

“Planned Parenthood of the Heartland wanted to be the first in the nation doing this, and make it available to other centers as a way of offering abortion on every corner without the need for surgical equipment,” explained Thayer.

“I didn’t have any medical training,” said Thayer. “I voiced my concerns about it. I believed we were about prevention, and said we didn’t do abortions.”

In December 2008, Thayer was fired.

For Jewels Green, the change came when she heard the story of a friend of a friend, a gestational surrogate who was forced to abort the child she was carrying when the child tested positive for Down syndrome.

“That was when the light switched on and I said, ‘This is just wrong,’” said Green.

Not long after, Abby Johnson’s book *Unplanned* was published, and Green came across a video of Johnson on YouTube.

“I couldn’t believe that there was someone else out there like me—another abortion worker who left,” said Green.

Catherine Adair said that she was converted through the undercover work the organization Live Action. Founded by Lila Rose, Live Action went undercover videotaping the fraudulent and illegal actions of Planned Parenthood employees across the country.

“I was present when young girls came in with their abusers and Planned Parenthood gave them abortions,” said Adair. “When Rose came out with videos of that, I felt vindicated. I knew it to be true, and they showed it to be true. That allowed me—for the first time—to tell others what I had experienced.”

40 Days for Life, which operates a fall and spring prayer campaign annually, has also positively influenced several who have left the industry.

“The 40 Days for Life movement has changed the hearts and minds of not just those outside the abortion business, but inside as well,” said Green. “For those who work inside, they feel what’s going on outside the door. That makes it easier to leave, if you know that you’ll be accepted into open, forgiving, and loving arms outside.”

Two years and nine months after being terminated by Planned Parenthood, Sue Thayer headed up a 40 Days for Life campaign outside the same abortion business where she had once worked.

“Planned Parenthood hates 40 Days for Life,” said Thayer. “For the first time, we had churches working together—evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants. What happened was truly a miracle.”

A miracle indeed. Four months after the 40 Days for Life campaign ended, the Planned Parenthood of Storm Lake closed its doors permanently.

“It was all God’s work,” said Thayer. “He brought people together; he filled the prayer vigil hours. He closed it.”

Carney said that of all the workers who have left the industry, the majority do so in the final two weeks of the 40 Days for Life campaign, or at the very end.

“The first week, they don’t like us...they’re agitated and we sense hostility,” said Carney. “During the second week, that escalates. They mock us. They laugh at us.”

As time goes on, a relationship, of sorts, develops.

“The workers see a lot of the same volunteers. They notice that they’re praying before they get there, and they’re there as they leave,” said Carney. “They can’t ignore the presence—how long they’re there, through the rain and the heat. There’s a seed of respect that is sown. By week three or four, they stop looking at these people as the enemy and have to refocus on the reality of what’s going on inside their walls. I think it’s the peaceful nature of the vigil that gives the worker the avenue to leave when they have a moment of conscience and they choose to leave.”

That certainly was the case for workers such as Ramona Trevino and Abby Johnson.

“I didn’t know where to go or what to do,” said Johnson. “All of my friends were involved in the abortion movement.”

Still, she felt she could trust those praying on the other side of the fence.

“They had always told me, ‘If you ever want to leave, we’ll be here for you,’” said Johnson. “I decided to put them to the test.”

“When I told them I wanted out, they just looked at me and said, ‘We’re here to help you.’”

A way out

Following the publication of her 2010 book about her experiences, *Unplanned*, Johnson was contacted by 17 abortion workers who wanted to leave their place of employment. She and her husband financially helped to support these individuals so that they could make a transition from the abortion industry into other work.

“When I looked at the pro-life movement, I couldn’t believe that there were no ministries for abortion workers,” said Johnson. “This is the missing gap.”

Johnson ended up founding And Then There Were None, an outreach ministry for abortion workers desiring to leave the industry. It’s designed to offer assistance to former abortion workers as they transition out of the abortion industry and into a new line of work.

Since the ministry’s official launch on June 4, 2012, an additional 13 workers have left, bringing the total that Johnson’s ministry has helped to 30 in the past year alone.

“It’s beyond anything we could have imagined,” said Johnson.

Johnson explained that they offer four streams of assistance.

“We offer three months of financial support, and job placement support until they find gainful employment,” said Johnson. “We’re also providing prayer and spiritual support, getting them in contact with pastors, priests, or spiritual directors. The majority of the 30 who have left have self-described as Catholic.”

The non-profit has also partnered with the Scottsdale, Arizona-based Alliance Defending Freedom to offer free legal assistance and access to an attorney for those leaving the industry.

In addition, they are offering the extensive emotional support needed by former abortion workers, and developing a workbook to help in their emotional recovery.

All of the workers mention the importance of talking with others.

“Originally, when I left, I said, ‘It’s over. I won’t talk about it again,’” said Adair. “That’s a way of coping with the trauma. Abortion is a sickness in our culture; for a woman to kill her child goes against every fiber of our humanity.”

“Abby Johnson made it much easier for others to tell their stories,” said Adair. “The more of us there are, the less others can call us liars.”

The need for support is high, especially in the initial stages of conversion.

“Once, my husband went grocery shopping,” recalled Green. “When he returned, he had gotten everything on the list, including new rubber gloves. When I put them on, I started to shake and cry. The gloves were yellow, but when I put them on, all I could see was the blood. They were the same color as the gloves we had at the clinic. I had to throw them away. Triggers like that will always be there. When things like that happen, you need support.”

“They’ve experienced serious trauma,” explained Johnson. “They’ve seen and heard and experienced things most people cannot imagine. In the first couple of weeks after leaving, they need to talk to someone every day.”

“Our primary goals are for healing, stability, and recovery,” said Johnson. “We want them and their families mentally and physically healthy.”

In addition to And Then There Were None, Rachel’s Vineyard offers retreats specifically designed for post-abortive women and men.

“I’m excited to be a part of filling this gap in the pro-life movement,” said Johnson. “This ministry is saving people from a road of darkness and pure evil, and bringing them hope.”

“Workers coming out could be the demise of the abortion industry,” said Johnson. “It takes a lot of courage, but as people start coming forward, others realize that they can do it. This really could be the beginning of the end for the abortion industry.”

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