

The Clinic: A Photoessay

Photographs and Text by Lydia Polimeni

Every Saturday morning, a small group of people gather on the sidewalk in front of 1400 Spring Street in Silver Spring. Some of them hold up signs, pray, and occasionally interact with the other people on the sidewalk - mostly college-age women in orange vests that read "Pro-Choice Clinic Escort." Protesters sometimes refer to them as "death-scorts." The building behind them holds the local Planned Parenthood clinic, which provides in-house abortions along with other reproductive services for women. The clinic also provides escorts to accompany patients inside the building if they do not wish to speak with the protesters.

Olga Fairfax, a particularly vocal pro-life activist, tries her best to reach out to the patients entering the building, despite the presence of the escorts. Sporting a red "Pro-Life" tee-shirt and carrying a sign depicting infant body parts, she is a staple on the corner of Spring St. and 1st Avenue, setting up large graphic signs and protesting every Saturday, as well as some week days. Dr. Fairfax, who holds a Ph.D in Counseling, says her main message is that "[abortion] is an exploitive situation that helps no one. There is a better way."

On a recent Saturday, Dr. Fairfax successfully convinced a potential clinic patient to go instead to the nearby Centro Tepeyac Women's Center, a nonprofit Catholic agency which seeks to provide an alternative to abortion through such services as free testing, referrals, counseling, and providing parenting information.

Recently the Montgomery County Council passed a bill requiring the center to post a disclosure sign alerting patients that it is not a medical facility and lacks medical staff. All services at Centro Tepeyac are free, which Dr. Fairfax compared to the Planned Parenthood clinic, where

she says doctors "kill for money." She also asserted that the clinic pays the escorts for each patient they successfully bring in, a claim disputed by an escort who wished only to be identified as Paul.

According to Paul, the escorts are "invited guests" of the clinic and come from an all-volunteer organization, the Washington Area Clinic Defense Task Force (WACDTF). Despite the controversy of the situation, he said they try to stay focused on their core message, "which is that women are entitled to access to these clinics for legal reproductive health care."

If a patient is intercepted by a protestor, escorts will let the patient know that she does not need to speak with the protesters unless she wishes to, and will offer to walk the patient to the building door. While WACDTF has a strict non-violence policy, Paul says that there have been a few "nasty" verbal confrontations between the two opposing factions sharing the sidewalk, and passersby have occasionally called police.

Mary-Ann Hendler, another pro-life activist, attempts to take a gentler approach. She tells the escorts that she is praying for them, and even invites them to lunch with her. Asked about her goal in protesting at the clinic, she said, "We are trying to help women see other alternatives - other things they haven't thought of, such as adoption. Nobody can deny the truth of what's happening, the reality of it. They are also putting their souls at serious risk of being lost forever." Also showing their concern for the fate of souls, a group from St. Bernadette Catholic Church joins in prayer in front of the clinic on a weekly basis.

On any given Saturday morning, actual patients entering the clinic are sparse in number, but the few who do arrive can expect to be met by both activists and escorts, all of whom feel it is their duty to be present when needed.



On left, an escort of the Planned Parenthood Clinic. On right, members of the St. Bernadette Catholic Church praying.