

On the Sidewalk: Part I

“A time to rend, and I time to sew; a time to be silent, and a time to speak.”

Ecclesiastes 3:7

In October 2012, a month before pro-choice incumbent Barack Obama would defeat his Republican challenger in the 2012 presidential election, a devote Catholic at Texas State University found herself in a [predicament](#). Diana was pregnant, and without the support of the father or her parents, she decided to terminate the pregnancy. This decision did not come easily to Diana, and after feeling unwelcome at the abortion clinic, she received a sonogram from a local Catholic crisis pregnancy center that offers free assistance to pregnant women. She decided against the abortion upon seeing her child and hearing his heartbeat. This decision, however, would not last long, as Diana’s mother pressured her into going back to the abortion clinic. Everything that was supposed to save Diana’s pregnancy—her Catholic faith, her parents, and the support of a crisis pregnancy center—had seemingly failed as she arrived at the abortion clinic for the second time.

For anyone who regularly drives past a Planned Parenthood facility, the sight of protesters on the public right of way outside the clinic is not an unusual sight to behold. Often missed, however, are the “sidewalk counselors” standing at the entrance to the clinic. [Sidewalk counselors](#) are trained volunteers whose objective is simple: to get as many cars that are entering Planned Parenthood to turn around as possible. To pro-life activists, sidewalk counselors are the last chance they have to save women and their unborn children from abortion, and in Diana’s story, they were. As Diana arrived at the abortion clinic, a woman she knew was working as a sidewalk counselor. After hearing her story, the counselor was able to help Diana obtain the

support and resources she needed to continue her pregnancy and deliver a healthy baby boy. This story, and stories like it, drives many pro-lifers to the sidewalks outside of abortion clinics across the country, where they stand in prayer, protest, and in the hope that they will be able to save women like Diana from terminating their pregnancy.

In the seven years after a sidewalk counselor prevented Diana's would-be abortion, the national conversation around abortion has changed dramatically. Pro-life Republicans now control the US Senate, occupy the West Wing, and have nominated and confirmed a conservative-leaning Supreme Court. The Trump administration has implemented a gag rule banning clinics that receive [Title X](#) funding from referring patients to abortion clinics, and as a result nearly 900 women's health clinics across the country have lost access to federal funding. In 2019, the state of Missouri was on the cusp of becoming the [first state without a functioning abortion clinic since *Roe v. Wade*](#), with only one Planned Parenthood location in St. Louis still providing the service. Following a series of regulatory measures designed to restrict or inhibit abortion in the state, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services conducted an audit of the sole Missouri abortion clinic in March of 2019, and since then the clinic's fate has been ambiguous at best. For many pro-life activists, however, the legal status of abortion in the country is not of immediate concern. For those who stand outside Planned Parenthood, the fight is about saving women like Diana from abortion, regardless of whether or not the practice is legal. For these pro-life activists, the battle against abortion is not won or lost in the legislature or in a courthouse, but on the sidewalk.

As cars arrive at the last abortion clinic in Missouri, a counselor in a pink vest rushes to the side of their car, prompting most drivers to jerk to a stop in the Planned Parenthood driveway.

The sidewalk counselor, then begins talking to the driver, beginning with a warm, cordial greeting. The counselor moves on to provide them with pamphlets and other information in an effort to discourage them from driving through the gates of the rod iron fence that surrounds the Planned Parenthood facility and parking lot. More often than not, they are unsuccessful, as most cars either do not stop at all or just listen to what the counselor has to say until they can continue on without being rude. Only rarely did I observe a car reverse out of the Planned Parenthood driveway upon talking with the counselor, but this did not seem to diminish anyone's enthusiasm or their willingness to approach every car with the same chipper attitude.

The counselors I observed were there for a forty day Christian campaign called [40 Days for Life](#), in which pro-life activists and volunteers hold a peaceful vigil outside abortion facilities across the world twice per year, once in the fall and once during the 40 days of the spring Lenten season. The vigils are accompanied by prayer and fasting, and the program as a whole aims to [“raise awareness, save lives, bring healing, and lead \[the United States\] to repentance for the sin of abortion.”](#) The counselors and vigil-goers stand on the sidewalk that intersects the driveway to the Planned Parenthood parking lot, waiting for cars to turn into the clinic. Most of the volunteers that are present do not aim to intercept vehicles, but rather stand in prayer or hold signs towards the street. All but one of the counselors I observed were female, and all the counselors I observed wore a pink reflective safety vest. The color pink is commonly associated with women's rights, particularly following the Women's March on Washington in 2017. Many Planned Parenthood employees wear pink clothes to work, so the pink vest could make the sidewalk counselor, who is standing at the entrance to Planned Parenthood, look more like a Planned Parenthood greeter than a pro-life activist aiming to divert patients away from the clinic.

In pictures posted [online](#) of sidewalk counselors at this location, they also wear baby blue vests, which is the same color as the Planned Parenthood signage at this location. As counselors confidently approach cars adorned in colors commonly associated with Planned Parenthood, they likely appear to the unsuspecting driver to be a clinic employee, tricking some drivers into thinking they need to stop. It is for this reason I think so many cars continue through to the clinic unphased by the efforts of the counselor, because they never intended to listen to a pro-life activist in the first place. The counselors, however, still hold hope that they will be able to convince someone to turn around and save a life.

During Planned Parenthood's operating hours during 40 Days for Life, two volunteers alternate with each other to cover the role of sidewalk counselor. Whichever volunteer is not actively approaching cars sits in a folding chair while recording information on a tablet in a spreadsheet. I was not able to get a close look at the spread sheet, but in conversations with volunteers I understood that they do this to keep track of the number of cars that enter, the number of cars they approach, and the number of cars they convince to turn around. They also record some information about the vehicles that drive into Planned Parenthood, specifically the make of the car. Also, during one of my visits, they had positioned a GoPro camera on the curb, angled at the cars that were pulling in. Based on its angle, it was unlikely that it captured anything above the knee of the sidewalk counselor, but its presence raises a few questions. If the point of the sidewalk counselor is to ["educate women about their choices"](#) what is the purpose of data collection? Sidewalk counselors are motivated by a desire to save women from abortion, but their objectives seem much broader than that. It could be argued that their presence at the Planned Parenthood entrance, seemingly tricking Planned Parenthood patients into stopping, is a

form of harassment or intimidation, as it discourages people from receiving healthcare services from the provider they have chosen. They proudly proclaim they have a right to stand on the sidewalk, but do they have a right to interfere in the healthcare decisions of strangers?

On the Sidewalk: Part II

“If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first.”

John 15:18

As cars whisked by the St. Louis Planned Parenthood facility in late October 2019, they were smiled at by the fifteen or so pro-life activists that lined the sidewalk outside the building. It was a particularly brisk October day, the first truly cold day of the year, and the pro-lifers were prepared. They were covered in coats, gloves, and hats and frequently drank from a seemingly never-ending supply of coffee and hot chocolate. The sidewalk outside Planned Parenthood receives little foot traffic on most days, but anytime somebody walked by, they were greeted warmly by the crowd. This warmth, however, was often left unreciprocated, and met only by a brief greeting before they diverted their eyes to the ground and sped up their walking pace. When cars stopped at the light at the intersection, their passengers avoided making eye contact the same way they do when they are stopped by a homeless person asking for spare change. As Planned Parenthood employees walked in and out of the clinic, they were greeted by almost everyone they walked by, but almost never returned the greeting in kind. Nobody seemed to want to acknowledge what this group was doing, much less accidentally get roped into a conversation with them.

Standing among the vigil-holders outside the clinic, I felt judged by people driving and walking by, and I found myself unconsciously doing things to make it clear to others that I was not a part of the group. I stood further away from people than I needed to, and I tried to make it obvious that I was a researcher by holding a notebook or camera or by standing on the outskirts of the crowd. I asked one of the pro-lifers if he felt negatively judged by others as he stood

outside Planned Parenthood, and he conceded that he did. He continued to say that this judgement did not affect him or his desire to act, as he truly believed that what he was doing was right and something he was called to do. In standing up for what he believed in, he felt closer to Jesus, who, in his view, spent a lot of time praying and was not afraid to speak out against injustices when he encountered them. This attitude was not unique among those standing outside Planned Parenthood, as many found their strength in both their own convictions and in the fact that Jesus too was persecuted for his beliefs in his day. The ministry of Jesus was not easy for Jesus to perform, nor was it quick in effect. Similarly, the pro-lifers do not expect their actions to change the legal status of abortion or the nation's attitudes towards it overnight, nor do they expect the process to be easy. If anything, they seem to expect, or even crave, the difficulty of the fight. It's a source of pride, and a chance to live their faith as Jesus lived his.

Changing the laws to make abortion less common or outright illegal is surely on the mind of every pro-lifer, but that did not seem to be anybody's immediate concern on the sidewalk outside Planned Parenthood. In my conversations with the volunteers, not one person brought up a piece of legislation or a current event in abortion access, like the [Planned Parenthood center](#) that opened 18 miles away in neighboring Illinois, outside the grasp of an increasingly pro-life Missouri government. Everyone's concern was on the present, on the potential mothers-to-be going into Planned Parenthood, even if they were not seeking an abortion. Within the pro-life community, Planned Parenthood is seen less like a healthcare provider and more like a villain, an enemy of life itself, seeking to kill as many unborn babies as possible. Stopping people from going into Planned Parenthood is a matter of life and death, regardless of what service is desired. For many, the potential to "save even one life" provides the impetus to stand outside in the cold,

in the heat, and in the face of the judgement of others. People don't stand on the sidewalk in hope of some abstract change in people's hearts or the seemingly far-flung chance that abortion will cease entirely. Rather, the goal is concrete and simple: to stop the destruction of life there and then, regardless of what was happening elsewhere.

The 40 Days for Life campaign is not of a particular Christian denomination, but the vast majority of volunteers I spoke to identified themselves as Catholic. The Catholic Church holds that life ought to be cherished, and legally protected, from the point of conception until natural death, so the definition of "pro-life" can be ascribed to several political positions beyond abortion. ["That the life of every human person, from conception to natural death, might be enshrined and protected in our laws."](#) In theory, then, every Catholic standing up against abortion should be equally against euthanasia, suicide, homicide, and capital punishment, yet pro-life rallies outside state penitentiaries to save death row inmates from their scheduled unnatural death are unheard of. Why, then, has abortion become the predominant pro-life issue, the only one that drives people of diverse faith backgrounds to the sidewalks outside abortion clinics across the country?

One possible reason for the prioritization of abortion as the chief pro-life issue is that the unborn, unlike those who face unnatural deaths later in life, are voiceless. They have no way to speak for themselves. Proverbs 31:8 says, "Open your mouth on behalf of the mute," so the goal of speaking for those who are literally without a voice, like the unborn, is in line with scripture. However, there are certainly other groups, such as death row inmates, that are voiceless and whose lives too are under threat from unnatural death, so this explanation falls short. Furthermore, the verse in Proverbs finishes, ["Open your mouth on behalf of the mute, and for the](#)

[rights of the destitute.](#)” so people of Christian faith are called to speak up for the rights of many, not just the unborn.

In my conversations with pro-life activists, their passion in the abortion debate did not seem to stem solely from a belief that all life was sacred, or from the belief that the unborn were more deserving of protection than any other human life. Rather, there was a sense that there was something they could do, as individuals and as a collective group, to stop abortions from happening in their own community. One pro-lifer I spoke with, a middle-aged man, argued that because women are able to become pregnant, they have a special role in God’s creation, and because this pregnancy was contained within their body, the “choice” to continue their pregnancy was entirely theirs. Of course, he was not suggesting that abortion is morally justifiable, but rather that, due to the current state of abortion availability, women are faced with a choice nonetheless. His role in creation he claimed, echoing traditional gender roles, is to protect the mother and the child, so he felt called to stand outside Planned Parenthood, not because he sees abortion is the highest evil, but because he is able to do something about it each time he goes to the clinic. As a man, he will never be able to “chose life” for the unborn, but he feels that by helping women chose life, he is playing a role in God’s creation.

There is a view within the pro-life community that Planned Parenthood and all facilities that provide abortions are desolate, unwelcoming places that pressure women onto cold tables to terminate their pregnancy without a shred of compassion or concern for their emotional or physical well-being. For this reason, a few of the pro-lifers I talked to felt like pregnant women going to Planned Parenthood were a vulnerable population deserving of special attention, and they felt like they had the compassion necessary to provide that attention. There is a certain sense

of duty in the process. By offering women alternative services and informing them about their options, they feel like they are helping women in need in a deeply impactful way. For them, unexpectedly pregnant women form a population deserving of compassion and care, and outside Planned Parenthood is where this compassion is most needed.

The pro-lifers, as valiant as are, are still often unsuccessful in getting people to turn away from Planned Parenthood, so it is likely that abortions are still occurring, even while they stand outside the clinic in prayer and protest, which is why I think several of them became emotional as they talked to me. It is an emotionally laden setting for them, and the emotions they feel are not rooted in anger or judgment, but rather sorrow and disappointment. Not one person I talked to expressed anger at the women receiving abortions, or the Planned Parenthood staff leaving and exiting the clinic, but rather sorrow over the destruction of human life and the disappointment in our society for allowing this to occur. The people I talked to seemed to go out of their way to make it abundantly clear that they did not judge women for wanting or receiving abortions, but felt that all women, including those considering an abortion or those who have gotten an abortion, deserve the same compassion and respect they aim to afford to every unborn child. The pro-life movement I saw does not want to be framed as political or spiteful, but rather as the most nurturing position in a debate over what they see as a grave injustice, and they do not care if they are hated for their beliefs, as Jesus was for his.

On the Sidewalk: Part III

“I will bring rain down on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and so I will wipe out from the face of the earth every being that I have made.”

Genesis 7:4

The St. Louis Planned Parenthood facility sits at a busy intersection with much vehicular traffic and very little foot traffic, so the pro-lifers in the 40 Days for Life campaign rely on signs to get their message out to the general public. The organizers of the vigil offer volunteers a plethora of plastic, printed signs to hold contained in a large plastic crate, each of which has several prayers on the back. Many volunteers, especially those who frequently participate, have their own handmade signs on poster board, paper, and plywood. Expressions like “abortion is murder” and “dead baby” frequent the homemade signs, but the printed signs provided for the volunteers tend to be less attention grabbing. Phrases like “Pro-Woman, Pro-Baby, Pro-Life” or other positive phrases that are less graphic appear on the provided signs. It is clear that the 40 Days for Life campaign at this facility is well organized, with carefully crafted messages on signs and a highly structured volunteer schedule. Coalition for Life St. Louis is the organization behind this event, and they are highly organized. Only weeks after a new Planned Parenthood location opened across the Mississippi River in Fairview Heights, Illinois, Coalition for Life began promoting vigils at both locations for the spring campaign. On their website, the organization allows interested volunteers able to sign up on an online calendar or “adopt” an entire day for their church or organization in order to ensure the location is staffed with volunteers during the entire campaign.

Coalition for Life St. Louis is a St. Louis-based 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to ending abortion in St. Louis. According to their website, the organization is engaged in three projects. They operate a crisis pregnancy service that offers pregnancy tests and pregnancy counseling along with a paid internship for undergraduate and graduate students. The 40 Days for Life campaign itself, which is internationally coordinated by a Texas-based group, is managed at the local level by Coalition for Life St. Louis. According to the 40 Days for Life [website](#), their vigils have saved 16,742 lives, closed 104 abortion facilities, and caused 196 abortion workers to quit as of December 2019. The organizers of the campaign, like the participants, see their efforts as lifesaving in the most real way possible, and have the numbers to back it up.

As patients are confronted by the sidewalk counselor, they are forced to make a choice on whether or not to continue on into Planned Parenthood. The decision patients make is dependent on several factors, but the health belief model of decision making can be applied to this process. In the field of public health, the health belief model is applied to immediate health decisions related to a specific condition, like getting a vaccine or being screened for a particular disease. It focuses on how the individual perceives the benefits and barriers to engaging in the particular behavior, as well as how they perceive their own susceptibility to the disease and the severity of the disease itself. This model can also be applied to a patient's decision to seek services from Planned Parenthood, as the patient weighs the benefits and barriers of going to the clinic. The sidewalk counselors' efforts to change people's minds about going to Planned Parenthood therefore can be likened to an intervention aimed at addressing the health belief model.

The sidewalk counselors hand most patients a pamphlet with the words "Free Resources Inside!" loudly on the front cover. Upon opening the brochure, the driver will find a list of

resources including free pregnancy testing, free ultrasound, free STD testing, and free supplies. The word “free” is plastered all over the brochure, aiming to promote a benefit of leaving Planned Parenthood and getting healthcare services somewhere else. Under the heading “Looking for birth control?” lies a section on natural family planning, which is certainly not an equal alternative to the [resources](#) offered by Planned Parenthood, but it is marketed as “100% natural” and as having a “99.6%” success rate, again promoting the benefit of a free alternative to the services Planned Parenthood offers. With the exception of one sliding scale clinic, all of the services included in the pamphlet are free and heavily advertised as such, while Planned Parenthood’s services are not always free. This especially promotes a benefit to leaving Planned Parenthood to those without health insurance or those with limited financial resources.

One of the service providers listed in the pamphlet, ThriVe St. Louis, operates a fleet of [mobile medical centers](#), one of which was present across the street from the Planned Parenthood location while the sidewalk counselors were operating. I saw multiple sidewalk counselors point to it while talking to patients, pointing to a convenient alternative healthcare provider. ThriVe is a Christian anti-abortion group and service provider that receives state funding to operate crisis pregnancy centers, which provide healthcare services to women. On their [website](#), their “pre-abortion screening” is the second option on the menu, offering pregnancy confirmation, fetus viability testing, and STD screening and testing. ThriVe is the subject of some [controversy](#) due to their secretive Best Choice sex education curriculum taught in St. Louis area public schools, and [crisis pregnancy centers](#) themselves are viewed in the pro-choice community as deceptive, faux health centers that trick women in an attempt to prevent them from getting an abortion. Sidewalk counselors standing outside Planned Parenthood aim to reduce the barriers to

receiving alternative services and promote the benefits of turning away from Planned Parenthood and towards another resource, especially a resource that is parked only a block away.

The 40 Days for Life campaign publishes a quarterly magazine called *Day 41*. The issue is stocked for volunteers to take from the same plastic crate as the signs, and it reflects many ideas that are prevalent in the pro-life community. Sidewalk counselors also hand it out to some cars, but not as frequently as they give out the brochure and other materials related to alternative sources of care. In the Summer 2019 issue they were handing out, there is an article about abortion clinics having quotas written by a former Planned Parenthood center manager, now the director of outreach for 40 Days for Life. She claims that Planned Parenthood centers have a target number of abortions or abortion referrals and argues that abortion is a moneymaker for Planned Parenthood. The article asserts that Planned Parenthood aims to perform a certain number of abortions, suggesting that they pressure women into abortion in order to meet their quota. As the driver is presented with a choice on whether or not to continue into the clinic, the sidewalk counselor, in offering them this publication, asserts the idea that going into Planned Parenthood for treatment is risky as they pressure women into abortions. The aim here is to change the patient's perceived severity of the risk of using Planned Parenthood for any healthcare service, ultimately influencing the patient's decision in their healthcare.

The *Day 41* publication also featured the story of a former Planned Parenthood employee that quit her job following an abortion of quadruplets that went awry. She is quoted as saying, "You can go to Planned Parenthood the sweetest person on earth, but that environment turns you into this cold, emotionless person." This quote, though specifically referencing Planned Parenthood employees, echoes another idea prevalent in the pro-life community: that the

atmosphere of Planned Parenthood could make someone more willing to get an abortion. This can change the patient's perceived susceptibility of being coerced into an abortion, thus decreasing the chance that they will rely on Planned Parenthood for their health needs. Planned Parenthood offers a wide variety of services beyond abortion, but the volunteers I talked to were entirely focused on abortion. One of the volunteers said, "I think they have other services," and I found that to be representative of the attitude of the group as a whole. They stop every car, regardless of what service they are seeking, just in case that patient is pregnant and possibly seeking abortion. Although the organizers of this event do not offer other contraceptive services, the volunteers I talked to did not seem to have a problem with patients seeking birth control from Planned Parenthood. In their eyes, every Planned Parenthood is a threat to every unborn child that enters it, and they aim to stop as many as possible during their forty day campaign.

On the Sidewalk: Epilogue

"It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard."

Acts 4:20

My intention with this series was to highlight the motivations and actions of the people that stand outside Planned Parenthood, not to pass any sort of judgement on them or their beliefs or to take a stance on abortion itself. Abortion is a complicated issue that is often painted as two-sided, but in reality there are countless stances to take on abortion, even within the pro-life activists I spoke with. My goal when starting this project was to gain a better understanding of how their religion brought them to the sidewalk, and how their beliefs manifested into action. I was initially more interested to see what other issues they cared equally about, what other issues they would be willing to stand on a street corner for, but that gave way to aiming for a better understanding of their individual motivations and how they view the abortion debate as whole. They don't see their actions as taking away a woman's right to do anything, and they seemed far less politically motivated than I expected. Their goal is to simply save lives.

In any discourse, I think it is important that people of all positions are at least able to articulate fully the positions of their opposition. In the abortion debate, I think the pro-life case is too often presented nationally by politicians and individuals with multi-faceted agendas, and not real-life people with simple and genuine beliefs. Pro-lifers live in a country where something they perceived as murder is legal and even celebrated by some, and I think it is hard for people that are pro-choice to wrap their heads around that perspective. In my conversations with the pro-lifers, I couldn't help but be taken by their bravery and their conviction. They believed that what they were doing was right and that it needed to be done. They were not afraid of disapproval from others or of possible negative ramifications for themselves. There can be

something commendable about standing up for a strongly held belief, even if it is one that we don't agree with.

I found myself somewhat inspired by the motivations of the people I interviewed, but I did find their actions questionable personally. As a student of public health and aspiring physician, I think a person has a right to choose the healthcare they receive, and I think the sidewalk counselors encroach on this right to some extent. In offering alternative services to all potential Planned Parenthood patients, I think the counselors are possibly directing vulnerable patients to lesser healthcare services in an effort to win a moral fight. Who are they to say that ThriVe is a better healthcare choice for the patient than Planned Parenthood, especially when the patient clearly chose Planned Parenthood in the first place? Who are they to offer natural family planning as an alternative to medical contraception to all women that drive through? Who are they to provide unsolicited health advice? Though the volunteers are trained in sidewalk counseling, I cannot imagine they are qualified to provide medical advice, especially to women that are facing an unplanned pregnancy and are vulnerable to persuasion. The oldest sidewalk counselor I observed was a graduate student seeking a degree in clinical counseling, and the rest were all college-aged or younger, hardly qualified to provide unsolicited medical advice. I think it is admirable to stand up for your beliefs, but I find interfering with the health of others, especially when the interference is not sought, to be objectionable at best.

While dialogue is important, compromise in the abortion debate seems unlikely. Many pro-lifers believe that abortion is a form of murder, immoral and unjust, so it is hard to imagine a world in which they would be satisfied than anything less than a total ban on abortion with exceptions in certain cases. That does not mean, however, that the debate around abortion should

devolve into a spiteful debate. Engaging in this project has certainly changed the way I think about abortion. In a free democracy such as our own, I think we need to continue to better understand the opinions of others, especially those that oppose us. Not so that we may become convinced that our opinions are wrong or that we need to compromise our beliefs for the sake of some greater good, but because understanding the view of another can help us clarify our own beliefs and see the humanity that exists in views that differ from our own.