

Clinic Stories

The Story of Chicago

by Robin Marty

NOTICE
CLINIC
ENTRANCE

Municipal Code of Chicago
8-4-010 Disorderly conduct

A person commits disorderly conduct when he/she knowingly

(k) Either: (1) knowingly approaches another person within eight feet of such person, UNLESS SUCH OTHER PERSON CONSENTS, for the purpose of passing a leaflet or handbill to, displaying a sign to, or engaging in oral protest, education, or counseling with such other person in the public way within a radius of 50 feet from any entrance door to a hospital, medical clinic or healthcare facility, or (2) by force or threat of force or by PHYSICAL OBSTRUCTION, intentionally injures, INTIMIDATES or INTERFERES WITH or attempts to injure, intimidate or

Photos by
Wendi Kent

On the sidewalks of a Chicago clinic, a battle about how to end abortion

The activists standing outside Family Planning Clinic on North Elston Avenue often differ depending on the day of the week.

If it is a Thursday, Joe and Ann Scheidler, the founding couple of Chicago's pro-life movement, may be there with signs and pleas to patients entering the doors. On Saturday, it is far more likely to be Ryan Bouse, who cut his protest teeth in Joe Scheidler's office, but is now in the midst of writing his own script for ending abortion in the city.

Bouse and the Scheidlers represent two schools of tactics in the anti-abortion movement. While Bouse and his cohorts counter what they see as today's culture of biblical immorality with narratives heavy on sin and redemption, the Scheidlers are focused on the immediate "save" of pregnancies about to be ended.

Both, however, have made the clinic on Elston a regular stop when it comes to their mission.

"I need to come every Thursday to remember," said Joe Scheidler. "I need to come at least once a week to reaffirm the reality of abortion. This is a place where a woman is going in with a live child, and inside they will terminate that life."

It's hard to believe that Joe Scheidler, even at 87, is in danger of forgetting anything. When I visited his office at the Pro-Life Action League in August, it was a shrine to his more than 40 years of trying to stop legal abortion.

One wall was covered in pictures of popes, bishops and politicians supporting Scheidler's crusade and letters of commendation for his efforts in the pro-life movement. Directly behind his desk chair hung a large portrait of a brightly haloed Jesus.

A curio cabinet was filled with memorabilia from his decades palling around with and organizing the most notorious anti-abortion activists in history. On one shelf rested a coffee cup declaring "The World's Best Dad." Next to it: a copy of the infamous "Have a Blast!" photo from a 1985 Pro-Life Action Network conference in Appleton, Wisconsin, of which the Pro-Life Action League and Scheidler was the key organizer.

That photo depicts group members holding signs demanding the jailing of “baby-killers” while standing in front of a kiosk that read “Welcome Pro-Life Activists, Have a Blast!” It was one of many pieces of evidence in the landmark suit generally known as

[National](#)

[Organization for Women \(NOW\) v. Scheidler](#). In the case, Scheidler and other anti-abortion activists were accused of racketeering to intimidate and commit violence, including clinic bombings and arson, against abortion providers. After being decided in favor of NOW in 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the verdict in 2006.

“We’ve had trouble with other pro-lifers,” Scheidler said as we sat in his office and I looked through his extensive collection. “We had those who went off the deep end, and then started shooting and bombing and all that stuff. We knew these people, and we had meetings with them. We even have met them after they get out of prison, and so on. They’re still pro-life. They just went too far.”

In the corner stood a television and VCR and DVD player at the ready. With it, Scheidler shows guests tutorials about the “Chicago Style” of “sidewalk counseling,” the term abortion opponents have given to their attempts to talk a patient out of an abortion just before she enters a clinic. Other videos on his playlist include interviews with former abortion providers who have changed their minds, left their jobs and joined the pro-life movement. But Scheidler’s favorite, “Holy Terror,” is a mid-’80s NOW documentary about him and other Pro-Life Action Network members. He finds the film so enjoyable that he urged me multiple times to sit down and watch the whole thing.

“See, I am the ‘Holy Terror,’” he joked.

Before Roe

Abortion history runs deep and long in Chicago, not all of it legal. Before *Roe v. Wade*, the court decision that made abortion legal in all 50 states, Chicago was already becoming the destination for a clandestine abortion, due to its central,



Memorabilia on display in Joe Scheidler's office

Midwestern location easily accessible by train, bus and airplane. Abortion seekers also headed to the city because it was home to many people (not always medical professionals) willing and able to perform an illegal procedure. That availability grew with the organizing of the Abortion Counseling Service of Women's Liberation, later known as "The Jane Collective," which first served as a referral service using vetted providers and later began performing the procedures pre-*Roe*.

When *Roe* made abortion legal in Illinois in 1973, clinics replaced the bedrooms, empty offices and apartments that previously served as makeshift medical offices. Many women no longer had to consider what they hoped would be a safer, professional illegal abortion or trying to end the pregnancy themselves. Unfortunately, not every doctor offering abortion services was providing safe care.

"Pregnant or not, women given abortions": The headline in the *Chicago Sun-Times* on Nov. 22, 1978, was one of the more inflammatory of the series dubbed "[The Abortion Profiteers](#)." A lengthy investigation of the expanding network of now-legal abortion providers, the series showed a stark contrast between safe, ethical providers and those who preyed on patients.

Reporters Pamela Zekman and Pamela Warrick teamed with the Better Government Association and spent months working undercover in six different abortion clinics believed to be taking advantage of patients. They saw numerous instances of medical abuse ranging from abortions performed later in gestation than was allowed outside of hospitals; hurried procedures done without anesthetic; and in some cases, abortions on women who weren't even pregnant.

"[W]orking undercover at the Water Tower Reproductive Center... [Better Government Association] investigator Mindy Trossman counted 81 abortion procedures performed on women with negative pregnancy tests," wrote Zekman and Warrick. "Women innocently underwent abortions they didn't need and, as a result, suffered massive infections, bruises, wrenching cramps, severe bleeding."

The undercover investigation caused Chicago politicians to crack down on unsafe clinics and doctors clearly out to profit from terminating pregnancies while endangering the health, future fertility and even lives of their patients.

It also brought into the spotlight the best practices of safe abortion providers such as the Health Evaluation and Referral Service [HERS] or the Chicago Planned Parenthood Association. Those facilities and others didn't pay for referrals, didn't rush clients to an abortion immediately after receiving their test results, and addressed the patients with respect and care.

But it wasn't just in the abortion clinics that reporter Pamela Warrick went undercover. She also did a stint with Friends for Life, where she met Joe Scheidler, a former monk who chose not to take his vows. Instead, Scheidler went first into journalism and became the director of the Illinois Right to Life Committee. Scheidler had recently been booted from his position at the organization.



Joe Scheidler, founder and National Director of Pro-Life Action League

“I was fired,” he told me, laughing. “Same with Friends for Life. They were too afraid of lawsuits. I told them eventually there would be a lawsuit, but I wasn’t going to stop. What they would do is try to rein me in, say, ‘Well, you’re going to have to confer with the board members, let us see your plans for pickets, protests, going to Springfield to lobby.’ But I had to do these things quickly. I didn’t have time to call the board. I would do it and tell them about it later. So I told them to pay me my overtime, which was about a year’s salary, and I started my own organization [the Pro-Life Action League].

“ ... And now I am chairman of the board.”

Even in the fledgling stage of running his own advocacy organization, Scheidler made no bones about the fact that he would be extreme, offensive, and do whatever it took to end abortion. “You can try for 50 years to do it the nice, polite way. Or you can do it next week the nasty way,” Scheidler told members of Friends for Life at one meeting Warrick attended.

It’s that no-apologies attitude that lives on in the Pro-Life Action League, which Scheidler founded in 1980.

The birth of ‘sidewalk counseling’

Long before Operation Rescue began blockading clinic doors with human or actual chains, the Pro-Life Action League was on the sidewalks of the city's abortion clinics, employing the "Chicago Method" of "sidewalk counseling."

Priests for Life, the national anti-abortion action group led by Father Frank Pavone, describes the method — and its effectiveness — [on its website](#). "Through the use of a unique sidewalk counseling technique known as the 'Chicago Method,' hundreds of pregnant mothers have been turned away from Chicago area abortion centers. You too can be trained to save babies using this method."

The "method" entails approaching any patient about to enter a clinic and informing her about any medical issues or lawsuits involving the clinic or its doctors. The tactic relies on the use of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) documentation; the investigation of doctors' licenses and searches for malpractice and injury suits; non-abortion-related arrests or tickets; and other court records about a physician, a clinic, or the clinic's owners. During the '80s and '90s, abortion opponents would carry detailed lists to the clinic and additional copies that could be provided to a potential patient or her companion.

"Repeat this information until it produces the desired effect of disturbing them," advises the site. The counselor then follows up with information about a nearby crisis pregnancy center that offers pregnancy tests and, ideally, the counselor escorts her to the center.

It continues: "It is absolutely vital to the success of the technique that you not disclose that you are an anti-abortionist or that the agency you are taking your clients to will not give them an abortion or a referral. You need not lie to accomplish this. Just reveal as much of the truth as you need to and no more," the website explains. "If a woman asks you whether the alternative center does abortions, say something like, 'They'll give you all the help you need. They give abortion information and confidential medical referrals. They'll be glad to talk to you about it, and their services are free.' This is precisely the truth."

While the "Chicago Method" has its own strict rules, I saw a modified version of it at the back gate of Elston on the Saturday I visited. There, a man dressed in blue plaid stood by the entrance to the parking lot, shouting what he claims were the details of four lawsuits against the clinic in an endless loop. "They kill women inside!" he added. "They kill them!"

It was hard to imagine anyone taking him for anything other than an "anti-abortionist."

From 'rescues' to 'truth tours'

More than 35 years have passed since "The Abortion Profiteers" was published, and abortion provision itself has changed dramatically in that time. Home pregnancy

tests and better technology make it simpler to confirm a pregnancy even before a person sets an appointment at a clinic, and an abortion on a nonpregnant woman is a near-impossibility today. Medication abortions and vacuum aspirations in the first trimester have dramatically dropped the number of patients who need [second-trimester procedures](#), according to the Guttmacher Institute, which tracks abortion statistics. The offices of the infamous “profiteers” have all shuttered, and complications are rare.

The world of activism has also changed drastically since the League began working in Chicago. Long gone are the days when Joe Scheidler would record an outgoing message on the office answering machine, alerting supporters to actions against clinics or news within the pro-life community. Email lists and Facebook posts have become much more effective means of communication and have allowed the League to be even more influential nationally.

But although technological evolution has created a completely new landscape in a few decades, of the 99 tactics listed in Joe Scheidler’s 1985 handbook [“Closed: 99 Ways to Stop Abortion.”](#) all but four can be — and in many cases, still are — currently used by abortion opponents.

In the handbook, Joe Scheidler directly addresses abortion-rights activists. “If you are an abortionist and favor the killing of the unborn and you want to know what pro-life activists have in store for you and the abortion industry, this book is also for you. Read it and weep.”

Some techniques, such as jamming phone lines and filling up the clinic answering machine so no new appointments can be scheduled, have been discarded due to changes in technology. Others, such as the “Truth Team,” have also died out. That tactic involved sending a fake couple into a clinic, then having them loudly “fight” about whether to have an abortion, and publicly hashing out the ways the woman could be harmed by the procedure. Finally, the potential patient would “change” her mind and leave, encouraging others in the waiting area to leave with her. Patient pre-screening procedures have since eliminated the “Truth Team” as an effective tool.

Sit-ins and “rescues” — the act of shutting down a clinic by blocking doors or destroying equipment, thereby “rescuing babies” to be aborted that day — now draw harsher punishment under the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances [FACE] Act, a 1994 federal act that stops protesters from physically blocking doors or using other tactics the keep clinics from operating.

Violence, of course, is actively and vocally advocated against among all but the most extremist of the anti-abortion groups. Every other tactic in the book, however, is fair game.

I first met Eric Scheidler, Joe and Ann Scheidler's eldest son, at a 2013 sidewalk counseling symposium hosted by Pro-Life Action Ministries, a Minnesota anti-abortion group that works closely with the Pro-Life Action League. I asked him about evolving tactics in trying to close clinics over the years, based on the Pro-Life Action League's more than three decades of experience in the movement.

Eric Scheidler serves as the executive director of the organization as his father, Joe, now scales back his efforts. The younger Scheidler grew up steeped in anti-abortion protest, and he remembers holding signs at events or attending rallies led by his dad. He also remembers his father by his frequent absence, and he sets daily reminders in his phone to "log out" of being an activist to ensure he's a constant presence in his own family's life.

While abortion opponents held classes on sidewalk counseling or brainstormed best practices for shutting down clinics, Eric talked mostly about how he has seen his own side's activism change in recent decades. I asked Eric what does and doesn't work now that the FACE Act eliminated so many of the tactics that made his father famous.

That, according to Scheidler, is one of the reasons that graphic anti-abortion photos are being used almost everywhere in public now.

Well, maybe not a sporting event.

"We are often invited to do so and do not," said Eric. He told me the prohibition on graphic signs at family events is due to the influence of his mother, Ann.

"She really believes that family is sacrosanct. People should be able to go to the museum, to Soldier Field or something with their children, and not have to see abortion and other controversial things." But with clinic "rescues" and blockades no longer a legal option, there has been a renewed effort to ensure that the public sees the "truth" about abortion, especially via graphic imagery like their own Face the Truth tours.

Like many anti-abortion activist groups that are becoming more aggressive in their stand on behalf of "the unborn," Eric Scheidler sees graphic imagery as a public service rather than forcing objectionable pictures on unsuspecting, uninvolved individuals on the street.

"I'm not comfortable with the word 'forcing,'" Scheidler countered "We, in fact, do put up warning signs whenever possible in front of the displays. We're not talking about every moment of every day. We are talking about perhaps a minute and 15 seconds out of a year where you happen to see a display like this."

Yet he does agree that coming into contact with graphic abortion images is also sort of the general public's penance if they choose to allow abortion to be legal.

"In the case of abortion, though, I do feel like if our society is going to tolerate abortion, our society needs to own that. I do think that abortion is not a private

issue. It is a public one because our laws have been modified to allow for it. So we have to accept that.”

Like many in his movement, who are embracing anti-abortion activism as a fight for civil rights, Scheidler uses slavery analogies to express his mission.

“We wouldn’t today fault anyone for standing at the dockside of the slave ships with ugly pictures of slaves that had been beaten and abused. We would recognize it as being incumbent on our society to face the injustice that it is tolerating.

“I know we take a PR hit every time we go out to the streets with these graphic abortion signs, and believe me, I ask myself, ‘Do we really need to do this? Is this really the right thing to do?’” he said. “Simply holding a sign on the street is fine; whether it is a good idea or not is a separate question. What I come back to every time is that I’m much more troubled about the idea of these pictures being hidden away and never seen than I am by any harm that could be done to people’s attitudes towards pro-lifers.”

Scheidler knows that the images are unpopular, and that for every person it may convince to join forces with their group, it probably inspires far more to donate to Planned Parenthood instead. Still, he would never consider quitting.

“If a thousand conversations are started by those pictures with the words, ‘You wouldn’t believe what those crazy bastards are doing downtown today,’ but then a conversation about abortion happens, I’m fine with that.”

Like other groups, such as Ohio’s Created Equal or the Abolish Human Abortion Societies across the country, the Pro-Life Action League sees high schools as a key market for this sort of protest. Eric Scheidler said high school students are “indoctrinated by Planned Parenthood’s attitudes about sexuality and abortion and contraception” and vulnerable to “considering abortion,” making them a necessary audience.

Scheidler clarified that the League doesn’t do too many high schools, primarily because that could potentially expose a younger child, traveling with his or her parent during a pickup or dropoff; the League also avoids daycare centers and preschools. Still, if a young child is exposed to the images, that’s a necessary evil.

“I’m not going to stop showing abortion signs to anyone ever because a child might see them. I don’t think that’s fair to the unborn child,” he said.

How far is ‘too far’?

For Eric Scheidler, much like his parents, there are few lines that can’t be crossed when it comes to protecting the unborn. But violence against a doctor is still one place where he is certain that no one in the movement should go. He does allow, however, how such violence might prove tempting to anyone who truly believes that abortion is the taking of an innocent human life.

“Any act of violence is to be not only avoided but reviled,” Scheidler said. “My heart sinks when I hear about any act of violence. Particularly when Scott Roeder shot

George Tiller, I was just dismayed. I mean, I know [Operation Rescue president] Troy Newman pretty well, and I knew the work that he was doing and how that was all just completely undone.”

“This guy who should have had his license revoked and his abortion business shut down and then be thrown in prison is instead suddenly a hero. So that’s one line [we won’t cross], certainly. Or anything coming close to it. Threats, language, something like that. So there’s that line.”

Scheidler considers deciding which tactics to use a purely pragmatic issue. “Will this tactic work or not? Will this turn people off so much, including supporters and donors?” he asks himself.

Is it still valid to picket a provider at home? To follow him or her to a country club or show up in the front row of a lecture, such as Joe Scheidler suggests in his chapter titled “Adopt a Provider”?

Eric Scheidler paused to think. “We’re not doing a lot of that at the Pro-Life Action League. But that may just be because there are only so many hours in the day.”

Scheidler said he has never picketed a provider’s home, and that many of the scenarios I asked about simply never occurred to him to actually do. But he makes his decisions based on the negative repercussions of an action and whether those outweigh the gains.

And, yes, that applies to violence as well.

“I’m treading on thin ice here, I realize, but I hear people say that anti-abortion violence should be unthinkable. I don’t really buy that,” he said. “I think you have to think about that. I think you have to say to yourself ‘Look, this guy is walking into a building to kill people. Why don’t I shoot him?’”

Scheidler was quick to add that violence was still a line that shouldn’t be crossed. “I don’t think it’s a gray area,” he concluded. “I think it’s crystal clear that at the end of the day you can’t do that because two wrongs don’t make a right. Violence begets violence. It’s immoral. It’s wrong. But you have to struggle with that question at some point if you are going to be really serious.”

How to address a woman or girl entering a clinic, on the other hand, isn’t a question he struggles with at all. According to Scheidler, the Pro-Life Action League and the other national groups they train are there to counsel and persuade patients gently. There is no place for shouting or harassment.

We discussed the type of “sidewalk counseling” training happening at the hotel, which, he insisted, would focus on kindness; compassion; an offer of assistance; and an avoidance of shame, blame or biblical reprisals.

“Who did Jesus yell at to repent?” asked Scheidler. “I always go back to the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. Jesus doesn’t mince words with her. He knows the disorder in her life, the men she’s been with and the guy she’s not married to now. He doesn’t tell her it’s OK, but his interaction with her is very tender. He meets her

where she is at. That should be our model as pro-life activists dealing with the abortion-minded woman.”

I asked what happens if the woman says “No thanks, Jesus, I don’t want to talk.” Does Jesus keep following her, continuing the conversation even after she has said she isn’t interested?

“When you are talking about trying to save a life, when do you give up?” he answered. “As long as a woman is in earshot, you have to keep trying, hoping eventually something you say will catch.”

Friends of the Pro-Life Action League

When I first met with anti-abortion activist Jill Stanek, I was in Chicago speaking at the National Organization for Women’s 2013 annual conference. Unable to get off-site long enough for an interview, I asked her to meet me at the hotel restaurant, as long as she promised not to crash the event or agitate any attendees. Later, she posted a picture online of graphic anti-abortion drop cards she left in the bathroom, but otherwise had made her presence unknown to the group. For a woman known for her confrontational tactics, it was, no doubt, a remarkable act of restraint.

Stanek, a Chicago native who testified before Congress supporting legislation involving fetuses who survived abortion attempts and lived briefly after birth, doesn’t necessarily consider herself a local activist these days. But she has been long allied with members of the Pro-Life Action League and always up for promoting its efforts. She helped the League with [their initial demonstration at Dr. Cheryl Chastine’s private practice in Chicago](#) after abortion opponents learned Chastine was the new provider at the Wichita clinic where George Tiller once practiced. Chastine was soon let go after continuing protests by the Pro-Life Action League to pressure the office into firing her over her Kansas work.)

Like her compatriots at the Pro-Life Action League, Stanek, too, is a big fan of using graphic posters in public to provoke abortion debate.

“Social justice movements have been propelled by graphic images,” explained Stanek. “Right here in Chicago, Emmett Till’s open casket and the photos published in *Jet* could be said to be responsible for the modern civil rights movement. Eisenhower had them take photos of the death camps [after the Holocaust] before they were cleaned up so no one could say that this never happened.”

“Abortion is genocide, and the only people who are helped when the pictures aren’t shown are the abortionists,” she said firmly.

I asked Stanek if displaying graphic abortion photos in high-traffic public areas other than the clinics where people would be more likely to expect them, isn’t a bullying tactic. “Aren’t you saying, ‘If you don’t like these photos, then end abortion and we’ll take them away?’” I asked.

“Yeah. That’s exactly right,” she agreed. “It’s a tactic. We hate showing the pictures, but it’s a collateral damage from having a neighbor who is an abortionist. It adds to

the stigma, too. You can't just say that you are pro-choice and get away with that. You have to know what you support. And a lot of people don't really know the truth. This is the truth."

After seeing Stanek assisting the Pro-Life Action League with protesting Dr. Chastine's private practice, I couldn't help wondering if she would be on board with some of the other tactics recommended in Joe Scheidler's *99 Ways*. For instance, would she follow a doctor home?

"Following an abortionist home would be too creepy," she said. "But protesting in front of their houses? Sure. I've done it, here in Chicago."

"That's because you like protests, I've heard," I joked.

"I do," she said, nodding seriously. "I think they are effective, and I'm a more in-your-face person. That kind of stuff doesn't bother me. And I think it's effective, and I think it's fair."

At the clinic fence

The parking lot for Family Planning Clinic on Elston Street is surrounded by an 8-foot high chain link fence. To ensure the privacy of both patients and staff, canvas covers the fence itself, with just a few inches at the bottom and top peeping through.

That space on the bottom, a mere 6 inches or so off the pavement, is a favorite spot of "The Pooper," as clinic escorts jovially dubbed one anti-abortion activist due to his tendency to squat down to yell through the gap to the car wheels and feet he glimpses in the lot.

If you spend enough time talking to the escorts at Elston, you'll learn all the nicknames they've created for their "regulars" and get to know the general pattern of a day outside the clinic.

It starts with "The Sign Guys," who walk around with anti-abortion posters on extremely tall sticks, tall enough to be seen over the privacy fence and inside the parking lot. There will be a display of "Our Lady of Hope" (one escort referred to it as "Mary in a Bathtub"), a period of prayer, and then they all go back to the crisis pregnancy center two blocks away. Meanwhile, a few protesters will stand by the front entrance and the back entrance, shouting to those in the parking lot not to go into the clinic, telling them it is unsafe inside, or urging them to "Be a man" or "Don't kill your baby."

Not every person on the sidewalk shouts, of course. As I walked to get coffee before conducting interviews, an older, red-haired woman handed me a blue plastic rosary and offered to pray for me. But as the morning passed, the faint "Hail Marys" were replaced by street preaching and even arguments as anti-abortionists and patient companions got into confrontations.

The next generation?

Although most of the abortion opponents outside the clinic are primarily Catholic and often middle-aged or older, there's a newer, younger, (and clinics escorts say often louder) Protestant evangelical presence, too: the Abolitionist Society of Chicago, a local affiliate of the larger Abolish Human Abortion movement.



Abolitionist Society of Chicago (Ryan Bouse, far left)

Escorts told me the group started showing up two years ago, as part of a larger delegation from [Metro Praise](#) International Church. Their presence is felt by everyone — patients, escorts, Pro-Life Action League supporters, even the neighbors in the houses near the clinic or the people walking the sidewalks to get to area businesses.

“The first day the Metro Praise church came, I had to call the cops on their asses,” said Jo Beth, a longtime clinic escort. “They were hovering around us, hanging. They didn’t believe the bubble [the 8-foot wide protective zone] applied to [the escorts].”

“They are significantly more aggressive,” said Amanda, an Elston escort. “They’ll stop anyone, including neighbors, who obviously aren’t intending to use the services of the clinics. These people are here to proselytize to everyone.”

Schisms among anti-abortion opponents have existed for as long as legal abortion has. There has nearly always been a “moderate” and “extreme” side to the movement. Incrementalists have argued for tempered, measured steps to ensure that laws that are passed don’t inadvertently backfire and reinforce abortion rights; they’ve also sometimes advocated for minor exceptions for rape and incest in their bills to make them more palatable to the general public. Meanwhile the more

aggressive activists will demand immediate, no-exceptions bans for every stage of embryonic development, and they'll reject those who think they need to take things slowly.

While legislative and religious differences have divided the movement for decades, the war over strategy has escalated recently as newer anti-abortion factions even reject the pro-life movement itself, [calling it just an extension of the pro-choice movement](#).

"The Pro Life Movement has shown great success for the Pro Choice Movement because the Pro Life Movement is a deliberate extension of the Pro Choice Movement," [writes Abolish Human Abortion](#). The group calls high profile members of the pro-life movement "careerist figureheads... who convert public problems into personal careers," and accuses them of profiting from abortion remaining legal. "They have marches for life, they have campaigns for 'pro life' politicians. Many of them get paid insane amounts of money to speak at various engagements. As long as abortion stays around, the Pro Life Movement is a very lucrative business."

"I actually came out of the Pro-Life Action League," Ryan Bouse, the leader of the Chicago Abolitionists, said. "I learned a lot from Joe Scheidler. I was with him for a couple of years out here."

While the Pro-Life Action League says its goal is to minister to patients and try to coax them out of abortion, Bouse and his Abolitionists are far more confrontational. Clinic day is an opportunity to street preach. Their favorite spot is at the back fence, often blocking the cars of patients heading in and out of the parking lot.

"It's not an evolution [of pro-life tactics], it's a devolution," said Bouse. "We've gone back to what you would see in the states before *Roe v. Wade* and legal abortion. You'd see evangelical Christians preaching the gospel. Even before that, in Rome, you'd see people preaching the Gospel when people were abandoning babies in heaps and practicing child sacrifice. We're just going back to the basics, which is that the legality is a moot point. Something that is illegal doesn't mean people won't do it. So instead we focus on the hearts and minds of individuals."

The hearts and minds that the Abolitionists argue over are just as likely to be the clinic escorts or even the sidewalk counselors as it is the patients. They seek conversion of anyone whom they believe isn't fighting to end abortion by promoting repentance and [acceptance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ](#). That's just one of the reasons that many traditional members of the pro-life movement consider AHA groups to be divisive and harmful to the movement.

Anti-abortion activist Josh Brahm, president of Equal Rights Institute, which specializes in "training pro-life advocates to think clearly, reason honestly and argue persuasively," [wrote in his blog that the tactics AHA uses](#) are far more likely to shut off dialogue than promote an open discourse. "If you really think the most effective way to persuade a pro-abortion-choice atheist is to quote Psalm 139 and Jeremiah 1:5 at them, be my guest. I've seen it done. I just haven't seen it be very effective."

Bouse disagrees, saying the movement was polarized long before AHA broke away. In his account, it was divided by those who sought a gradual approach to ending abortion and those who wanted to end it immediately, and with no exceptions.

“I was part of the pro-life movement. Most of us were. The difference is, we saw these divisions, and most of them were like, ‘Don’t talk about them.’”

In fact, Bouse actually finds clinic “saves” the least effective way of ending abortion. “It’s the last ditch effort to save an individual child. Saving one at a time — you can keep dragging them out and dragging them out, but they are going in so much faster than we can drag them out.”

“We can sit here and say we are focused on saving that one individual baby, but what does that actually do?” he argued. “The pro-life movement likes to use the starfish story and yes, it mattered to that one. But you can only toss so many starfish back into the sea. At some point, you are going to have to focus on all of the ones you can’t save.”

Escorts at Elston ask ‘What bubble?’



Anastasia, an Elston clinic escort, “What bubble?”

Family Planning Clinic on North Elston opened its doors in 1988, but it wasn’t until 2010 that the staff decided to engage clinic escorts to help get patients inside. In the fall of 2009, Chicago passed a bubble zone ordinance which prohibits abortion opponents from getting within 8 feet of a patient when that patient is within 50 feet of a reproductive health clinic entrance, unless the patient expressly consents to contact.

The bubble, according to both sides, is an abysmal mess to enforce. It requires too much subjective debate. What exactly qualifies as an entrance, and where does it officially begin? What does 8 feet look like? What constitutes “consent” and even who it officially applies to — patients, staff, escorts or everyone?

Amanda (who, like all clinic escorts in this story, asked that their last names not be used), was one of the first volunteers to come onboard through the Illinois Choice Action Team (ICAT) network.

“For the first few years, it was just Pro-Life Action League, and they had free rein. They could walk through the parking lot, they could move in and out between cars,” Amanda said. “They were obviously really upset with us when we came.”

In the early days of escorting, even with a bubble zone in place and the FACE Act on the books, a few abortion opponents still crossed the line legally.

“We had a gentleman who came in the front door and asked to see the director. We had to have the police escort him out. The director now has a restraining order against him,” said Amanda. “People came in and prayed in the waiting room and had to be removed by police. But most of them just sit on the corner and pray, and, frankly, that’s okay. My real issue is just when they stop the patients. There’s just a small number of the Pro-Life Action League supporters who do that now.”

To the sidewalk counselors, a person taking a brochure or rosary from their hands is agreeing to engage in conversation. Clinic escorts note that many people take things offered to them automatically, politeness being ingrained into them. An abortion opponent may see a person rolling a car window down as initiating a conversation, while an escort will point out that that same patient will be attempting to roll the window back up but can’t because the activist has stuck her body through the opening in the door to talk.

“It doesn’t surprise me to hear that someone has to actually say no to not give consent,” said Amanda. “From my perspective, if someone is walking away from me, that’s a no. If you are trying to have a conversation, and I walk away, that’s a no. If someone cracks their window and you force a pamphlet through, is that consent?”

“What bubble?” asked Anastasia, who has been escorting at Elston since October



Escort and protester face off at the property line

2012. “The police don’t enforce it, they’ll say as long as they aren’t actually blocking traffic, or as long as the patients can get [clinic access], they won’t do anything about it. Even if they do enforce it, the antis don’t even care. Antis often don’t give up until the patients do engage.”

Jo Beth carries a tape measure in her car to prove how far away 8 feet needs to be. Some of the people she encounters will even reach over her to get at patients and will touch the patients without consent, too.

“There’s one woman who comes during the week, I call her ‘The Grabber.’ She’ll grab a patient’s arm as she’s talking to them,” said Jo Beth. “I’ll tell her she can’t do that and she’ll say, ‘But it says no unwanted touching!’ And I’ll say, ‘Do you really think a stranger wants you to grab them?’”

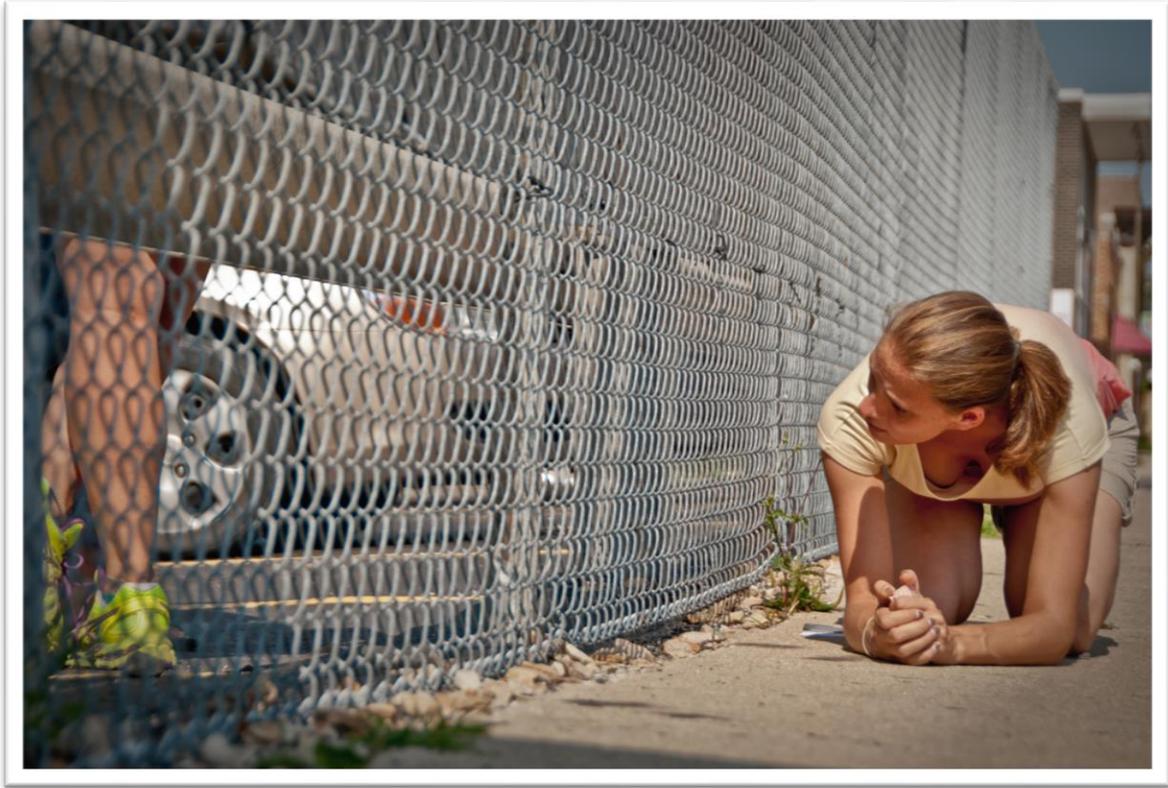
Anastasia and Amanda often end up guarding the private property line at the back of the clinic or keeping traffic moving when a car is trying to enter the lot. When anti-abortion activists jump off the grass curb and head toward cars entering the lot, they are the ones who make sure they remain behind the official property line, which often leaves protesters shouting past them to the patients parking inside.

“AHA does screaming, a lot of ‘Mommy, Mommy don’t kill me!’ and a lot of proselytizing,” said Anastasia. “They tend to get increasingly louder as the morning goes on.”

By noon on the Saturday I visited, about the time that most of the intake for abortion patients is wrapping up, the Abolitionists were the only protesters still there. Bouse’s wife, Carol, who was somewhere in her second trimester of pregnancy, had been on the ground by the gap in the canvas in the parking lot for much of the last hour. She crouched on her hands and knees, shouting to those on the other side. At one point, a male companion of a patient angrily confronted one of the female Abolitionists, and she began yelling back. In an instant, every escort in the lot turned and ran, determined to de-escalate whatever was happening on the sidewalk outside the fence.

The companion calmed down and walked away from the situation. The Abolitionists continued to preach at the parking lot, undeterred.

I asked if this was typical for a Saturday at the clinic and was told it wasn’t much different from any week. “Today was a little bit louder than normal,” said Christine, who will have been escorting at Elston for two years this fall. “We had the one guy who has been shouting all day and blocking the entrance to the lot. He seems to be really aggressive, and this is only the second day he’s been here.”



Carol Bouse pleads with people in the parking lot

Thursdays, according to Jo Beth, are a little bit calmer. “Thursdays are the PLAL [Pro-life Action League] days,” said Jo Beth. “They like to come with their signs. It’s not quite the yelling that [AHA] does with the yelling scriptures. But it’s the ‘We’ll help you! We can help you, we have a clinic!’ What I do is I continually talk so they don’t have to actively listen to them if they don’t want to. There’s a lot of ‘God wants you to keep your baby.’”

New faces, no changes in mission

For the more than 40 years abortion has been legal in Chicago, abortion opponents have grown more, not less, dedicated to seeing it end. While the days of “The Abortion Profiteers” are long past, the belief of the anti-abortion movement — that abortion is just as dangerous and unnecessary as it was when *Roe* was first handed down — remains unchanged.

Just as unlikely to change is the predictable presence of Chicago’s most committed anti-abortion activists. Whether Joe Scheidler is paying his Thursday visit for “remembrance” or Ryan Bouse’s team is preaching their Saturday morning gospel

against a culture that allows abortion to continue, neither will be leaving anytime soon.

At the same time, it is just as unlikely that many, if any pregnant women will be deterred from entering the clinic, despite the pleas, posters or protests. Especially not as long as there are clinic escorts waiting to help them navigate the fray.

Don't expect that to dissuade activists like the Scheidlers. In fact, that may just inspire them to look for new ways to make waves.

"At the end of the day, we are not just talking about an ideology or an idea or a concept about which we have some sort of disagreement," said Pro-Life Action League's Eric Scheidler. "We are talking about killing people. Killing people. Legally. That requires us to be bold."

Author's note: *This story is the first in a series of articles examining abortion clinics, activists and opponents across the country, and was supported by over 100 generous donors. To donate and support this continuing series, please visit the project's [Rally fundraising](#) page. Interviews for "The Story of Chicago" were conducted in Bloomington, Minnesota in July of 2013 and Chicago, Illinois in July of 2013 and August of 2014. For historical context provided in portions of the story, the author was influenced by James Risen and Judy Thomas's "Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion Wars," The Chicago Sun Times series "The Abortion Profiteers" and Joseph Scheidler's "Closed: 99 Ways to Stop Abortion." This article could not have been finished without the miraculous editing assistance of Cynthia Greenlee.*

Photographs were provided by Wendi Kent. For a photo documentary of a day on the sidewalks of the Elston clinic, visit [HER PAGE AS SOON AS SHE GIVES ME A URL FOR HER PART](#)