

Crisis pregnancy centers create appreciation, controversy

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AUSTIN, TEXAS – When graduate student Mariel Lindsay returned from a summer study program in Paris, she discovered not only that she was pregnant but that the Frenchman she'd fallen for had no interest in maintaining the relationship.

It hit the 25-year-old hard.

"I had a big meltdown and my mom found me, so obviously my parents found out right away," she said in a recent interview.

After a quick computer search, her mother located a crisis pregnancy center not far from the family home in Austin.

"They told me I can do this," Lindsay said, recalling that first meeting more than three years ago. "They told me they are going to help me."

Crisis pregnancy centers are a focus of controversy in Texas—and across the country. They are often located close to an abortion clinic or made to resemble such a clinic. Many women enter them thinking they are visiting a medical facility that provides abortions and other health-care services.

Instead, CPCs are designed to persuade women to carry their pregnancy to term and give birth rather than have an abortion. The antiabortion message is overt and aggressive, and most of the clinics have religious affiliations.

Now with the United States Supreme Court poised this week to take up a case examining tough abortion clinic regulations in Texas, the event is shedding light on broader aspects of the state's antiabortion movement—including the expanding role of CPCs.

It is all part of a bold, long-term strategy by advocates who identify themselves as pro-life to eventually end abortion as an accepted and legal practice in America.

“My goal is not just to make abortion illegal, but it is really to make abortion unthinkable,” said Abby Johnson, a former abortion clinic director who is now an antiabortion activist and speaker.

Texas lawmakers are doing their part. House Bill 2, the state law under Supreme Court scrutiny, has caused the number of abortion clinics in Texas to drop from 42 to 19. If the high court upholds the Texas law only ten abortion clinics will remain in the entire state. More antiabortion regulations are on the way.

Lawmakers say the new regulations are designed to improve the standards of women’s health care in Texas. Critics charge the measure is designed to undercut abortion rights and shrink abortion access as much as possible.

While abortion clinics have been shutting down, scores of antiabortion CPCs have been opening up, many with the help of state subsidies.

It’s not just a Texas phenomenon. Estimates are that crisis pregnancy centers (also called pregnancy resource centers) outnumber abortion clinics roughly five to one throughout the U.S. In Texas, where the antiabortion campaign is particularly intense, that ratio is fifteen to one.

The primary tool in a CPC’s attempts to persuade is a sonogram. The centers offer a woman the ability free-of-charge to take a close look at the developing form in her uterus. In some cases, that image alone is powerful enough to cause a woman to immediately cancel plans for an abortion.

But it is not just about the picture, CPC workers say.

“We are not a medical facility at all; [the sonogram] is just an educational tool that we use so that they can see the development of the baby and the value of that life,” said Lori DeVillez, executive director of the Austin Pregnancy Resource Center, located a few blocks from the University of Texas campus.

The next step in the persuasion process, DeVillez said, is to link the sonogram picture to the life of the woman.

She repeated the general conversation she has with pregnant visitors: “You know your life has value. You were created in your mother’s womb for a purpose. . . .”

“Many times, right there in the sonogram room they will say, ‘Wow, I had no idea. I’ve only been told I’m an accident, they wish I wasn’t born.’ ”

To the right of DeVillez’s desk is a large picture of Jesus cradling a black sheep.

“We let them know their life does have value and we are here to help them with that purpose,” DeVillez said.

Across the room is a quote on the wall: “Children are a blessing from the Lord.”

Not all clinics are so overt with their religious messages.

Heather Gardner, executive director of Central Texas Coalition for Life, said she advises CPCs against posting religious statements on the wall.

“The target audience is teens and twentysomethings, and that does not appeal to them” she says. “It might be seen as pressure.”

Undercover investigation

Critics accuse CPCs of engaging in deceptive practices, of targeting women who are confused and frightened while pushing antiabortion messages and religious doctrine.

“As we’ve seen abortion clinics closing across the state because of the new restrictions, crisis pregnancy centers have been quick to take advantage of public confusion over which clinics are open by pretending to be abortion clinics,” said Zoey Lichtenfeld of NARAL Pro-Choice Texas.

Two years ago, NARAL’s Texas branch launched an undercover investigation of CPCs. They found that some CPC workers used delay tactics that pushed pregnant women closer the 20-week cutoff for a legal abortion in Texas. In some cases, women were told false information about the stage of their pregnancy, leading them to believe they had more time to decide what to do than they really did.

The NARAL report says CPCs try to take advantage of the legal requirement in Texas that a woman must undergo a sonogram or ultrasound and a counseling session at least 24 hours before obtaining an abortion. Abortion clinics charge for the sonogram. CPCs offer them for free.

Some women and teens assume that they can use the free sonogram and counseling session at a CPC to satisfy that legal requirement. They are wrong. The law requires that the woman or teen undertake the sonogram and counseling at the abortion clinic with the same doctor who will perform the abortion.

Instead of using the sonogram to calculate the stage of pregnancy, NARAL investigators concluded that it was being used as “an emotional manipulation tool” to instill feelings of guilt and shame in the pregnant woman.

The NARAL investigation also concluded that CPCs were spreading false information, suggesting that an abortion would make a woman more prone to future infertility, breast cancer, and emotional and psychological trauma. And they said some CPCs gave out incomplete, unreliable, or biased information about birth control.

“Crisis pregnancy centers put their visitors’ health at risk to advance their anti-abortion agenda,” Lichtenfeld said. “We would fully support a real pregnancy resource center that gave visitors accurate information about all of their options and connected them with resources, including information about how to get an abortion. . . . But the problem is that the crisis pregnancy centers’ goal is not to help the clients; it is to ensure that their clients don’t have an abortion.”

Emily Rooke-Ley is the director of client services at Jane’s Due Process, a group that helps pregnant teens in Texas who are considering getting an abortion.

She said her experience answering calls from pregnant teens on the group’s 24-hour hotline has left her with a dim view of CPC tactics.

“I’ve had so many young women call me with horror stories about going to those crisis pregnancy centers,” she said. “My impression of them is that they do not exist to help young women to continue their pregnancies; they exist to stop young women from terminating their pregnancies.”

Rooke-Ley said she received a call on the hotline from a pregnant 14-year-old. The girl said she went to a CPC and the staff gave her the impression it was an abortion clinic.

“They succeeded in waiting her out until she was past the legal limit” to obtain a legal abortion in Texas, Rooke-Ley said.

At that point the girl had only two options. The first was to travel with her grandmother to New Mexico, where an abortion can be performed up to 24 weeks into a pregnancy. But at that late stage of the pregnancy the procedure and associated travel was already too expensive for the family.

“Well, I guess I’ll just have the baby,” the girl told Rooke-Ley.

“That was really difficult to hear,” the hotline coordinator said. “Because in all the times we spoke before, she clearly did not want a baby.”

One client of Jane’s Due Process, who agreed to talk on condition of anonymity, said she was a 15-year-old high school student when she discovered she was pregnant. She did not want to tell anyone in her family for fear that her parents would force her to have the child. But she needed advice from a reliable adult.

She confided in her high school counselor. She told the counselor of her plan to get a judicial bypass around the Texas parental consent requirement and to eventually have an abortion.

The school counselor disagreed with this approach, but said she would help the teen. One afternoon, she drove the girl to a facility not far from the high school.

“I got an ultrasound and then we went into this room and we started praying,” the teen said. “The lady we were consulting had me read this little note card that says adoption is giving life and all positive things, and on the back it said that abortion is killing and all these negative things. She was trying to sway me to adoption.”

The teen continued, with a tone of irony.

“It hit me how weird everything was when we were suddenly in a room holding hands and the lady was just praying for me,” she said. “So when I got home I looked up the place and I was like, ‘Oh, this is a Christian clinic. OK.’ ”

The teen ultimately did get an abortion and is now a sophomore in college studying to become a teacher. She said she is still close to her high school counselor.

“She is very kindhearted, and I know she didn’t mean anything bad by it,” she said. But her visit to the CPC reinforced that she wanted an abortion.

Gardner with the Central Texas Coalition for Life admits there have been problems at some CPCs and that she and others are working to resolve them.

“The pro-life side is not completely innocent,” she said. “There are too many instances where pregnancy centers have been untrained and given out misinformation to women, which they shouldn’t do.”

Gardner said she participates in training programs to help educate CPC volunteers about how to respond appropriately to a woman who wants an abortion.

“You are not there to coerce her, you are not there to make her choice for her,” Gardner says she tells the volunteers. “You are there to give her the facts and offer her solutions, and let her make that choice.”

DeVillez said that her mission at the Austin center is to follow the teachings of the Bible without actually preaching to visitors.

“The way I like to explain what we do is living out the scriptures such as Matthew 25, which asks the question, ‘When did I see you hungry and feed you, when did I see you thirsty, when did I see you naked and cloth you, or sick or in prison and visit you,’ ” she said.

She said she lives out that biblical invocation by providing support for those who need it. Her center includes a room filled with supplies offered free-of-charge to expectant mothers and new parents. There is baby formula, diapers, clothing, cribs, and other baby furniture. They can come once a month and take what they need, she said.

It all has been donated for the purpose of helping people bring new life into the world, she said.

DeVillez said she sees 2,500 clients a year and that there is nothing about her center that is deceptive.

“You can clearly see that we are what we say we are; we don’t hide it,” she said. “People we see are really hurting, they need help, and we’re here to do that.”

One thing she is also clear about is that in helping her clients she will not, under any circumstances, refer someone to an abortion clinic.

“Most of them already have their appointment [for an abortion] when they come here, so it is not like I am denying them anything,” she said. “But I have to be clear with my message and my mission.”

In her moment of crisis, Lindsay, the graduate student, was driven by her mother to a CPC connected to the John Paul II Life Center in Austin.

As suggested by the name, the pregnancy center is Catholic-affiliated.

Lindsay said she felt like a trapped and desperate animal that would do anything to survive.

“You are not even thinking straight,” she said. “You are just so overcome with anxiety and grief and terror.”

Different friends offered different advice with some suggesting abortion, others suggested motherhood.

She had three separate appointments at a Planned Parenthood abortion clinic. One of them was made by a friend because at a certain point Lindsay said she was unable to verbalize the word “abortion.”

Her parents were firm.

“They did tell me that ‘we always said if you got yourself into a mess like this we were not going to support you, so you are going to need to do adoption,’ ” she said.

“I was basically [thinking], ‘I’m going to have this baby, and then I just want to die. I just want to kill myself.’ It was like it was over for me,” she says.

She contacted an adoption agency and went through the entire process, even selecting a family to raise the child. “But the same way I wasn’t able to show up to my appointments [for an abortion], I wasn’t able to make that phone call to the family and say, ‘Hi, I’d like to meet with you about my baby.’ ”

This wasn’t the life she was planning.

“I never wanted to be a mom, like ever, even though I love kids,” she says. “For me it wasn’t like this was a bad time, it was: this isn’t supposed to happen to me. This isn’t what I want for my life.”

She received plenty of advice. “My pro-choice friends were like abortion is what you need to do. But when I said I thought I was going to do adoption, they were horrified and said, ‘I would never do that to my own baby.’ . . . I never got a judgmental vibe from my pro-life friends when I was going down the adoption route. They were like, ‘Whatever you do, it is going to be OK.’ ”

One particular friend, and the crisis pregnancy center, helped her through the ordeal, she said. She is still in regular contact with people at the CPC.

It has been more than three years since that car ride with her mother to the John Paul II Life Center.

“At the time, it was the worst thing that ever happened to me; I didn’t even know I could be that miserable,” she said. “But now, looking back, it is very clichéd to say, but it is the best thing.”

Lindsay makes the comment while in a playroom bursting with toys at a CPC in downtown Austin. A few steps away, a toddler picks up a toy train and holds it over her eyes as if she is hiding from someone. She starts to giggle and then laughs. Her laughter fills the room. Her name is Sofia. She is two-and-a-half years old.

“I just feel like I have a little best friend for life,” Lindsay said of her daughter. “We share everything together. I don’t feel like I sacrificed anything. Everything that I love I share with her, so it’s doubled.”