



What Happened When an Anti-Choice Catholic Woman Needed an Abortion at Dr. Tiller's Clinic

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Posted on December 6, 2009, Printed on December 7, 2009

<http://www.alternet.org/story/144396/>

At the home of Gail and Robert Anderson, a large statue of the Virgin Mary sits in the yard, welcoming guests into the home while protecting the family that lives there. Next to the statue of Mary, inside a labyrinth of daisies, daffodils, tulips and roses is a stone engraved with the word grace. For the Andersons' grace is not just a word or a concept taught through their strong Catholic faith, but the name of the daughter their hopes and dreams hung onto. It is the name of the daughter they said goodbye to in the Kansas office of a man named Dr. George Tiller.

Both coming from large families with faith deeply rooted in the Catholic Church, the Andersons looked forward to starting their own family with great anticipation, eagerly awaiting pregnancy test results each month in hopes that they would discover they were to become parents. The April morning that their hopes were realized is described by Robert as being one of the best days of his life. After breakfast, they went to the local bookstore together to purchase books on pregnancy, for him and for her, and celebrated by inviting their parents to dinner, sharing their news between the gumbo and the dessert.

"We were the first of our families to marry and were the first in our families to have children. With our parents around the table, we celebrated a generation being added - being first-time parents and first-time grandparents. It was a moment of love, hope and joy," Gail says, thinking back to the day that was to change their lives forever, not knowing exactly how much would change.

Their world was now filled with routine doctor visits, baby name books and trying to decide what color to paint the nursery. With no complications known to them, the Andersons enjoyed their last moments together as husband and wife before they would also become mother and father.

It was during a routine ultrasound, Gail's first, when concern was raised over the

development of the child. Told by their doctors that there was no cause for alarm, the Andersons were referred to specialists who referred them to another set of specialists. Finally, at 27 weeks, a doctor out of Baton Rouge gave them the honesty they had needed, informing them with regret that cystic masses were covering the child's left lung, forcing pressure on a heart that had not fully developed.

Gail would be forced to deliver her child through c-section, as the stress of a traditional birth would be too much for their baby's body to handle. Their baby would need to be on life-support machines for months until able to have the surgeries required that could repair the damage of the child's suffocated heart and remove the masses from the undeveloped lung. As painful as it was for the Andersons to hear that this child they wanted so badly might not live even after the surgeries intended to repair damage, they were forced to make a decision that not only challenged their personal strength, but where they fit into their Catholic faith.

After a frank discussion with their specialist, they decided that not only did the quality of life of their unborn child need to be questioned, but the life expectancy even if surgeries were successful. There were no guarantees and one day, one month or one year could be added to the life of their child, but not much more than that. After discussing every option available to them, the decision to visit Dr. George Tiller's office in Kansas to have a late-term abortion was made. Both Andersons sunk into a depression, feeling as if they were losing both their child and their religion.

"We are Catholic. We are supposed to be against abortion, but the church teaches mercy as well. The church examines quality of life. It isn't a black and white issue as so many like to make it," Robert says, looking away while fondling with his fingers the golden crucifix he wears around his neck.

As they packed their car to travel to Wichita, Kansas, members of their parish came, trying to talk them out of their decision. Unable to deal with the confrontation, Gail admits she almost called the trip off at the last minute, unsure of how she would be able to sit next to these women in mass. These were the same women she had gathered with outside of a clinic that performed abortions in Metairie, Louisiana, once a month, coming together, praying for the souls of the unborn babies; for the souls of those making this choice. They traveled in silence, both trying to come to terms with their own perceived failures in the choice they were making.

"It was the longest car ride I had ever been on. I didn't know what to say to my wife.

I didn't know what to think for myself," says Robert, recalling the trip that led them from Louisiana to Kansas, finally reaching the one-story, beige Women's Health Care Services building where Dr. Tiller practiced.

"Dr. Tiller was a very gentle man to my husband and me. He wasn't the villain that people, me included, had often painted him. He was soft-spoken. He held our hands while we mourned our loss. He even prayed with us."

Explaining the procedure to the Andersons and the efforts the clinic would make to help them memorialize their child, Dr. Tiller showed the Andersons the compassion and support they so badly wished they had received from their neighbors and friends.

The next day as they arrived at the clinic, they found themselves surrounded by protesters chanting, begging the Andersons to change their mind and group of children holding a pro-life model of a fetus while calling the Andersons murderers, telling the Andersons that God would not save their souls for taking away the life of another. What was already a traumatic experience was now infused with guilt, panic and fear.

"The staff was respectful and allowed me to have a little bit of dignity where I didn't think I had any left. It made me sad that I didn't get that from my friends or my religious community, but from strangers in a hospital setting. To this day, I am bitter about that," Gail confessed.

On the wall of their living room, next to a crucifix and a painting of the Virgin Mary and St. Brigid of Ireland, is a plaque that holds on it two tiny footprints.

"They do not just look at this as being abortion mills - the staff," Robert says, looking up at the footprints of their baby Grace.

"She was real. They made her real for us. Those footprints were Dr. Tiller's idea. He wasn't a man with crazed eyes anticipating the kill like some anti-abortion activists would like you to picture. He understood the difficult position we were in. He allowed us to still have a piece of the family we wanted. He even called the baby by

her name, by Grace."

It was very difficult for the Anderson family to learn of the murder of Dr. Tiller. Because he was one of the few individuals who showed them understanding, he became an unofficial member of their family, the quiet uncle that sits in the corner, observing, quiet except for a few pieces of sage advice.

"The people who praised Dr. Tiller's murder - they are the real monsters."

The Andersons have not left the Catholic Church, still strong in their faith, believing that the church has begun to rely too much on the word of man rather than church teachings, becoming dangerously involved in politics and losing sight that the world simply is not black and white.

They continue forward, despite for some calling for their removal from the church, because they know that they are not alone. They move forward because it is their hope that other Catholics faced with similar situations will realize that they are not alone. They move forward by the Grace of their daughter. They move forward, with two beautiful boys, ages five and four, who send kisses to their sister in heaven each night, their head held high, believing their only crime was showing mercy to the meek.

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