

Roe v. Wade lives on through demonstrations

BY HEATHER TURNER
Staff Reporter

For some area residents, there is one policy that literally is a matter of life and death.

Pink and blue flags numbering in the thousands checker the lawns of area churches, homes and businesses to bring attention to what continues to be a controversial subject: the Roe v. Wade decision of 1973.

The local Right to Life chapter works with area organizations, including student groups and individuals, to promote events every January for the Sanctity of Human Life month as well as to bring attention to the anniversary of the 35-year-old Supreme Court decision.

Dennis Smith, chaplain at the Northeast Regional Medical Center and director of the Kirksville Right to Life chapter, said displays have gone up in Kirksville and surrounding areas for the past 10 years. They include large banners and signs alongside the small groups of flags.

"The signs that we put out, what we try to do is communicate just what this is," Smith said. "What we say is there are approximately 4,000 abortions a day ... nationwide."

Smith said he coordinated the displays and sites for Right to Life with the help of his wife Sharon. The displays usually stay up for two to three weeks in January, depending on weather conditions.

Sharon Smith said the displays have expanded in reach, growing from just a few sites to the 48 that now pepper the area with 6,665 flags.

The Smiths said area churches, a coalition of Evangelical, Catholic and Baptist groups, have been instrumental in helping Right to Life organize the displays.

Pastor Curtis Ferguson said Right to Life approached the Rehoboth Baptist Church about seven years ago. This year the church's display includes one of the larger banners featuring an embryo in the womb.

He said the churches work past their doctrinal issues to come together to promote the pro-life message.

"We don't intend for it, I know that some people take it as this glaring condemnation, you know, against people in general," Ferguson said. "And it's not like we're trying to point fingers at people and say 'You're bad people.' We just think this particular action is wrong, and we can't afford to not say it's wrong."

Some churches in the area have chosen not to show the displays. Pastor John Dorgan of First Christian Church said there are both strong pro-choice and pro-life members in his congregation.

"We don't really have a comment or a position on the issue," Dorgan said. "Our church intentionally does not take a stand on political issues."

Members of pro-life groups said the displays generally have been well received,



Pink and blue flags such as these outside of Rehoboth Baptist Church stand as a reminder of the controversial Roe v. Wade trial. Though the case was settled in 1973, local organizations continue to raise awareness about this important issue.

with the exception of a vandalism incident that occurred three years ago, when materials were destroyed and removed from the sites, resulting in hundreds of dollars of damage.

Dennis Smith said the police never were able to figure out who was behind the vandalism and that the displays have remained effective in piquing the interest and curiosity of area residents.

"I've heard many times in other settings individuals saying, 'What were those blue and pink flags, my child asked about it?'" Dennis Smith said. "It's a good opportunity for the one generation to be able to pass down to the other generation just what is going on."

Local pro-choice organizations have taken note of the displays as well.

"Over the years I've noticed the little flags," said Linda Seidel, English professor and coordinator of the local National Organization for Women chapter.

Seidel said she thinks people who favor reproductive rights also should raise awareness of their position.

Several organizations including VOX, NOW and Planned Parenthood collaborate on forums and demonstrations throughout the year. For the last couple of years,

Planned Parenthood and NOW have stood out in a Choice-Chain demonstration at the same time pro-life groups gather to demonstrate for Lifechain in October.

"I haven't counted [Lifechain's] numbers," Seidel said. "They probably have more people standing with a sign outside. Sometimes we ask people to give honks if they are for choice going by on the road and quite a few people do. Other people give us the finger, you know."

Seidel said that last semester, the groups sponsored a Roe v. Wade forum that attracted a crowd in Baldwin Hall 218. She said that although most of the attendees supported reproductive choice, there were a few who did not.

A Roe v. Wade Day Forum took place Tuesday on the anniversary of the decision, a collaboration of Medical Students for Choice, VOX, NOW and Planned Parenthood. Students and community members could attend the open-panel discussion. The forum came just as local pastors were asked to bring attention to the pro-life message from their pulpits.

Sherie Eklof, production director for local station KLTE 107.9 FM, allowed Right to Life to put up a display at her home in

Kirksville. She said that every year, a week in January is reserved for emphasis.

"Pastors are asked to preach that life begins at conception and the importance of respecting life," Eklof said.

Eklof said the pro-life message also is supported by individuals who don't necessarily follow the faith.

"There are pro-life people who aren't Christians," Eklof said. "There's a whole organization nationwide: Feminists for Life."

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, also a national organization, exists for those whose positions do not fall along ideological lines.

Bertha Thomas, dean of multicultural affairs and board member of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, said organizations such as Planned Parenthood are concerned with abortion issues as well as sexuality information to help young people and adults think about values surrounding sexuality and parenthood.

"I would honestly say in all my years I've never met someone who wanted to have an abortion," Thomas said.

Pro-choice organizations tackle the issue of trying to minimize the need for anyone to have an abortion through preventative measures and comprehensive sex education, Thomas said.

A local agency offering alternatives to abortion as well as abstinence education gives residents with unexpected pregnan-

cies a lifeline. Lifeline Pregnancy Resource Center offers free assistance with material belongings and pre-natal and post-natal education for parents.

Senior Jennifer Jackson, nursing student and director of the center, said Lifeline discusses all of the alternatives with clients: adoption, abortion or keeping the baby. The center works with Right to Life on fundraisers and also enjoys support from other agencies.

Jackson said that for about a year, the center has received funding from the state through a program called Alternatives to Abortion, boosting the assistance programs Lifeline is able to offer to its clients to help them carry out their pregnancies if they are considering abortion.

"We've never had that kind of assistance before, so that's kind of new and pretty rare," Jackson said.

Jackson said Lifeline does not refer for abortions, but does offer support for those who make the choice.

"If [clients] go and choose abortion, which happens now and then, we may actually see them back again for a subsequent pregnancy or counseling after that abortion," Jackson said. "We are totally open to that."

Jackson said most women choose to get an abortion because of outside factors, such as parental pressures, fear or the feeling that there aren't other options.

State Rep. Rebecca McClanahan said that she has heard the issue of poverty discussed in regards to abortion rates.

"There was a report released [last] week that the rate of abortions is down across the nation," McClanahan said. "And this is consistent with a downward trend I have understood since 1990. I think we can all feel positive about that information."

She said, however, that rates still are increasing among the poor.

McClanahan also said she is pleased with what seems to her to be a broadening of the discussion. She said that during the last couple of years the dialogue about abortion has tended to be focused on what divides pro-life groups and pro-choice groups rather than common goals they share.

"I personally believe that there are many things even on the issue of life and choice on which we can agree and that would really make a difference in the health of women and the health of babies," McClanahan said.

She said that because she approaches the issue this way, she will file legislation during the current session that will expand pre-natal care to every woman who does not have access to affordable insurance.

"I think when we can move beyond some of the politically charged and emotionally charged issues we can have a real impact," McClanahan said.

According to the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, there has been a steady decline in abortions in the state since the 1990s.

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Dennis Smith
Director of Kirksville Right to Life Chapter



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