



Pro CHOICE Voice

NEWSLETTER OF THE BROOKLYN PRO-CHOICE NETWORK

FALL 1999

For almost ten years, the Ambulatory Surgery Center has been the daily target of anti-choice demonstrators and “sidewalk counselors,” who approach patients and their companions arriving at and leaving the center. Trying to convince them to have their babies instead, they offer help at a “crisis pregnancy center” advertised in their literature. Meanwhile, a large sidewalk display in front of the center shows gory pictures, that often frighten and disturb patients. Every few months, a much larger march and prayer vigil in front of the clinic, is led by Brooklyn’s Bishop Thomas Daily.

The Helpers of God’s Precious Infants are not just a small local group of ultra-religious people. Rather, they are the original chapter of a large and growing clinic-harassment network, and Brooklyn is their headquarters. HOGPI is active at several other New York clinics, and has branches in many U.S. cities as well as several foreign countries. Although they claim that they are always “peaceful and prayerful,” they are closely connected to the Pro-Life Action League of Chicago, directed by the notorious clinic blockader Joe Scheidler.

As long as the anti-choice forces have been there, so has BPCN. Every Saturday, and sometimes during the week, in cooperation with Refuse & Resist! (a national organization devoted to opposing the “politics of punishment, poverty, and patriarchy”), our escorts provide a welcoming and calming presence to patients who are frightened, disturbed, or confused by the aggressive “sidewalk counselors,” the prayer vigils, and the uniformed police on the clinic street. We also inform patients of their legal right to ignore the “counselors.”

Patients’ companions sometimes ask us “*Is that legal? Can’t somebody get them out of here?*” Pro-choice people often ask “*Why do we still have this situation if we have clinic access legislation?*”

One answer is that **existing legal protections are only as good as their enforcement.** The police and legal system do not take the threats to clinic access seriously, and often simply ignore them. While the law provides penalties for physical clinic blockades, there is little recognition of the psychological stress on patients created by the “counselors” and demonstrators. HOGPI’s association with the organized Catholic church (especially Bishop Daily) provides a powerful atmosphere of respectability around activities that would not be tolerated in other settings. The demonstrators “right to present their views” is often seen as more important than the right of patients to enter and leave health-care facilities without interference.

The Federal Access to Clinic Entrances Act (1994, introduced by our own Senator Charles Schumer) and New York City’s Access to Reproductive Health Services Act both prohibit activities that unreasonably block access to clinics.

New York Police Department policy allows local precincts to establish buffer zones around clinics when violations of the law can be shown. However, our clinic’s precinct has been reluctant to enforce these provisions of the law, despite the everyday presence of one or more police officers at the clinic, and despite repeated requests from the clinic.

In late 1998, the clinic took decisive action, filing suit against the Helpers of God’s Precious Infants. The suit sought a preliminary injunction to establish a buffer zone around the building, on the grounds that patients’ access to the clinic is being limited by the presence of the Helpers’ “counselors” and prayer groups.

This spring, the request for a preliminary injunction was turned

down in state court. The case is now being re-argued in search of a permanent buffer zone as well as damages against the demonstrators.

So why is BPCN still at the clinic, ten years after the appearance of the Helpers? Because we make a difference that we are proud of.

First, we are a service to the patients, who appreciate it. Not only do we help individual patients, but our presence serves to keep the Helpers’ behavior in check.

Second, while we deal with the “problem” every week on the sidewalks, we’re also part of the eventual “solution.” Several escorts have been able to provide legally sworn reports of access violations they have observed. These reports have played an important part in documenting the inability of the NYPD to handle the situation, and thus the need for the buffer zone around the clinic. Third, we provide an important show of support for the clinic’s staff, who must deal with the demonstrators themselves every day, as well as reassure their upset patients. We have been impressed with the clinic’s caring staff and well-organized medical services, and they have thanked us in many ways for

WHY WE’RE THERE



The Oct. 9th prayer vigil in front of the clinic included Brooklyn’s Bishop Thomas Daily and The Helpers of God’s Precious Infants

our support.

Finally, we organize pro-choice counter-demonstrations against the bishop’s prayer vigils at the clinic. These show that most Brooklynites are not going to stand by while women’s rights are violated.

Want to help? Here are some things you can do:

- (1) Volunteer for an activity such as staffing an information table, working on the newsletter, fundraising, helping with publicity for demonstrations.
- (2) We always need more escorts. You are expected to escort only a few times a year, and will be matched with a more experienced volunteer.
- (3) Visit our Web site (<http://www.echonyc.com/~bpcn>) for updates, news, suggestions for phone calls to make and letters to write.
- (4) Send us your e-mail address so we can put you on an “alert” list to notify you of upcoming pro-choice events. Write to us at: bpcn@echonyc.com
- (5) Note our address, with slight change:

BPCN
172 Fifth Ave., PMB#122
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11217

New Faces on the Block with BPCN

Since last October, a group of young women, and a few young men, have been escorting week days at Ambulatory. We learned from the clinic staff that having escorts on Saturdays was a big help in how patients felt entering the clinic. After a couple of week-day visits ourselves, we saw how the anti's "owned" the clinic's entrance and gathered around patients. NYU students have taken the lead in going as often as 3 days a week. Most are members of the new NYU Refuse & Resist! chapter. Over the holidays when the students were gone, members of the Refuse & Resist! Youth Network filled in, bringing young men, friends, and a mother to help. They don't have a set schedule, and keep the anti's off-balance. When they're there, they make sure they don't get to encircle the patients. Contact Refuse & Resist! at 212-713-5657 if you or someone you know, of any age, would like to help out during the week.

What do the weekday escorts think about it? The following comes from a young woman organizer:

"Some times you don't realize the kind of effect you

have on the patients coming in and out, but then, when you least expect it, a patient or her mom will smile at you briefly and say, 'Thanks.' Of course, a good percentage of the time, we're getting into great discussions, as well, about who the Antis are, and why we volunteer. The look of fear and anger on the faces of the Antis when they see us enjoying what we're doing, and the climate of resistance and sense of "I DON'T have to take THIS" that is created among the patients give us all such a sense of excitement that is really too difficult to explain to people who've never done it before. So we bring more and more people with us each time. We're taking back that corner! Neighbors and even delivery boys welcome us! People we talk to who know Refuse & Resist! is not an escorting group, ask us why we do this. The simple answer is this: we want to change the whole climate around abortion so that women and their partners can walk into clinics with their heads held high. Not to mention the thrill of it!"

BPCN AT THE CLINIC

It was a cold, rainy Saturday afternoon in Brooklyn, but that didn't keep nearly 20 escorts and volunteers from joining the staff of the Ambulatory Surgery Center in Sunset Park for an afternoon open house. The event, initiated by the Center Administrator and the Brooklyn Pro Choice Network (BPCN), was a valuable opportunity for the volunteers to become more closely acquainted with the clinic, and for clinic staff to express their gratitude for the vigilance of the volunteers. Surprise guests in neon polyester dresses and a nun's habit added an important dose of off-beat humor and high spirits to the event's agenda.

Volunteer escorts from the Brooklyn Pro Choice Network have escorted clients at the Ambulatory Surgery Center for over ten years. The slaying of Dr. Barnett Slepian in Buffalo last fall reminded all of us of the tremendous dedication of clinic staff. In turn, the open house was an opportunity for the staff to demonstrate their appreciation to the volunteers whose presence minimizes the disruption caused by the anti-choice demonstrators. "You really make a difference," the Clinic Director consistently assured the assembled volunteers. Perhaps the most compelling testimony came from the Center's two social workers, who described the emotional trauma their patients experience as they pass through the gauntlet of demonstrators on their way into the building. The social workers described the thorough evaluation they conduct with patients to help them arrive at the choice that is right for them. They discussed the options available to pregnant women at the clinic, whether they decide to terminate their pregnancy or continue it and seek prenatal care. The Nurse Practitioner also described the range of medical care available at the clinic, from plastic surgery to podiatry care.

Next it was time to attend to BPCN business. Attorney Ed Land, who is trying the clinic's case in a civil suit against the Helpers of God's Precious Infants provided an update on the court action. Volunteers and clinic staff were amazed to hear his tales of the complex process and devious maneuvers on the part of Kathleen O'Connell, the Helpers' attorney. Offering valuable insight into the policies and rules which currently define the fragile power balance

outside the clinic, Ed assured the volunteers that documentation of suspicious or questionable events continues to be of utmost importance. Finally, two members of BPCN's steering committee, gave an overview of those policies, again emphasizing the importance of reporting suspicious events.

Meanwhile, curious glances drifted towards the ladies in colorful polyester who graced the back of the room. At last it was time for the special guests to perform: Church Ladies for Choice! Led by Sister Mary Cunnilinges, this historic group nearly stole the rest of the afternoon with classic hits such as:

*This womb is my womb / It is not your womb
And there is no room / for Bishop Daily
From Pennsylvania on down to Guam
These wombs were made to be free.*

This stunning and fabulously talented group added an important sense of fun to the BPCN open house, and managed to highlight the ridiculous nature of the anti-choice cause.



Six other organizations joined BPCN for a counter-demonstration against Bishop Daily's prayer vigil at the ASC on Oct. 9.

BCPN NEEDS YOU !

Brooklyn Pro-Choice Network needs some new volunteers. Lives change - people move, get new jobs, have babies. Due to all of the above, some of our dedicated long-term members who escorted, stuffed envelopes, staffed tables, and put out the newsletter have had to cut

back in the time and energy they give to BPCN. We hope this is a time that some of you can increase your involvement. Please fill out the form slip below and tell us what you would like to do.

Name: _____
 Address: _____
 City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____
 Evening Phone: _____ e-Mail: _____

- ____ Staff an information table
- ____ Escort at the clinic
- ____ Work on newsletters
- ____ Attend monthly meetings
- ____ Help out at mailings
- ____ Make telephone calls to plan BPCN activities
- ____ Other: _____

I can't give more time right now, but I am sending a donation to help BPCN keep up the fight for reproductive rights, especially safe, legal and accessible abortions.

\$10 \$25 \$50 \$100 \$_____

mail to:
BROOKLYN PRO-CHOICE NETWORK
 172 Fifth Avenue (PMB # 122)
 Brooklyn, NY 11217

Pro-Choice on the Web

In a previous newsletter, we brought you “World Wide Wackos,” a description of anti-choice websites. This time, we’re bringing you a list of useful pro-choice websites. Next time you need information to support your views, or want to find out the latest news, or (better yet!) find out what you can do, check some of these! You can find links to many of them (as well as a collection of clippings about our activities) at BPCN’s own website: <http://www.echonyc.com/~bpcn>

General activist groups:

—**National Organization for Women** (<http://www.now.org/>) has some reproductive rights pages (<http://www.now.org/issues/abortion/>). They are primarily focused on NOW activities, but they are also extensively interlinked and do offer much basic information.

—**Feminist Majority Foundation** (<http://www.feminist.org/>), which has extensive pages on reproductive rights (<http://www.feminist.org/rights/intro.html>). These include surveys, press releases, and transcripts monitoring a wide range of activity in both government and in the field, plus extensive links to other reproductive-rights and information sites.

—**The very political Refuse and Resist!** (<http://mojo.calyx.net/~refuse/altindex.html>) a page on reproductive rights (<http://mojo.calyx.net/~refuse/ab/index.html>)

calyx.net/~refuse/ab/index.html) with over 50 fervent announcements and news flashes.

—**The National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL)** (<http://www.naral.org/>) has an extraordinary amount of information in a richly designed site.

—**NARAL NY** (<http://www.naralny.org/>) is a new site, includes news and action alerts, focusing on choice in New York State.

—**The very local New York Clinic Defense Task Force** (<http://www.echonyc.com/~nycdf/>) has not been revised since 1996.

—**Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice** (<http://www.rcrc.org/>) includes 20 short articles with a clerical emphasis.

Online resources:

—**Body Politic Net News** (<http://www.bodypolitic.org/>) has continuously updated news and has the best online directory of pro-choice organizations. Some articles from “The Body Politic” magazine are online at this site.

—**The ProChoice Resource Center** (<http://www.prochoiceresource.org/>) sells organizational material to grassroots groups, and has little free material on its snappily designed site.

—**The Abortion Rights Activist** (<http://www.cais.com/agm/main/index.html>) is out of date but contains much archived material, including resources for activists and clinics.

—**Yahoo: Pro-Choice: Organizations** (http://dir.yahoo.com/Health/Reproductive_Health/Abortion/Pro_Choice/) has a small and very out-of-date list. They haven’t responded for months to our requests for inclusion.

—**The Abortion Law Homepage** (<http://hometown.aol.com/abtrbng/index.htm>) is a neutral helpfully interlinked set of pages that surveys the law in welcome depth.

—As a single case, Roe v. Wade is best presented online at **Oyez Oyez Oyez** (http://oyez.nwu.edu/cases/cases.cgi?case_id=334), which includes both transcripts and audio records of the oral argument and reargument.

Providers:

—**Planned Parenthood** (<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>) the largest, best known, and most politicized of the providers. Its site has an excellent frequently-asked-questions page (<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/abortion/abortquestions.html>) and has a wide range of simply organized, client-oriented pages.

—Almost 90 percent of all abortions in this country are provided by independent clinics. Two provider organizations are the **National Abortion Federation** (<http://www.prochoice.org/>) and the **National Coalition of Abortion Providers** (<http://www.ncap.com/>). The first site has extensive information simply organized in list form. The latter site includes little information besides that of NCAP, and is several months out of date.