

The Opinion Pages

The Chosen Life

Op-Docs

By DAWN PORTER JUNE 16, 2016

I first met Dr. Yashica Robinson while I was in Huntsville, Ala., filming a feature documentary about the impact of regulation on abortion clinics in the South, called “Trapped.” I’d heard about her but never met her, and finally we were introduced by another abortion provider in the South, Dr. Willie Parker.

I was really excited to meet Dr. Robinson. I’ve read that only roughly 2 percent of doctors are African-American women, so to find someone with that profile working in a city where so many of the women seeking care are also African-American was special. I wondered what motivated her, what sustained her. And after I learned more about her story, I wondered how many physicians had grown up as Dr. Robinson had, sometimes wondering where her next meal would come from.

The day we were in the clinic was very busy, and my first impression of Dr. Robinson was that she was always in motion and all business, her mouth often set in a determined line. But once the last patient had been taken care of, and she joined us around 2:30 p.m. for what appeared to be her first full meal of the day, I saw a different side to her — a relaxed woman with an infectious laugh. I watched her face light up as she and Dr. Parker discussed a new medical protocol, and I was struck by how much they both enjoyed just discussing medicine.

This was noteworthy because in most of the abortion clinics I’ve been to — a considerable number — the discussion is rarely about medicine. It is about

harassment, safety, finances, legal challenges. Sometimes it is simply about how long the providers can endure, with each day bringing a new threat. The day we met, Dr. Robinson asked me not to film her, and I respected that. I knew she had just spent an exhausting year fighting a criminal indictment, which she believes was politically motivated as a result of her work as an abortion provider. I also knew that providing abortion care is dangerous, and even deadly — there's no way I wanted to put her in a spotlight without her consent. But I kept thinking about her and her practice, and the challenges she faces as the state's only abortion provider with hospital privileges. Essentially, this makes her a huge and lonely target.

Abortion providers do not often speak about their work in public, because they tire of the consequent harassment or ostracism, and as a result the public's impression of them is largely shaped by the horror stories swiftly disseminated by anti-choice activists. In this profile, as with "Trapped," I wanted to frame the discussion around Dr. Robinson's reality. The truth is, she has to make a great many sacrifices to continue to be an abortion provider in a state that continues to pass anti-choice laws. It would clearly be easier not to provide abortions, not to work so many hours a week, to confront the protesters, to always think about who or what lies around the next corner.

If the current hostile climate continues, I fear that calm, caring physicians like Dr. Robinson won't choose to remain as providers. The life is too difficult, and those of us who support abortion rights silently from the sidelines are asking too much of them. No one should feel this alone.

Dawn Porter is a documentary filmmaker whose first feature, "Gideon's Army," received the Sundance Film Festival Editing Award in 2013, along with nominations for an Independent Spirit award and an Emmy. This film was inspired by her feature "Trapped," which premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Special Jury Award for Social Impact Filmmaking, and which will appear on PBS's "Independent Lens" on June 20. This film is part of a series by independent filmmakers supported by **Chicken & Egg Pictures**.

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