

ANTI-ABORTION PROTESTERS BLOCKADE CLINIC IN VA.

By Lynne Duke and Michael Abramowitz October 30, 1988

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More than 200 anti-abortion protesters were arrested yesterday after they blockaded a Falls Church women's clinic during a "Day of Rescue" demonstration in which protesters pleaded with women to complete their pregnancies and children sang about babies being killed.

Falls Church police said 238 protesters, including three juveniles ranging in age from 14 to 16, were charged with trespassing and unlawful assembly. All were released from the Arlington County Detention Center after signing summonses to appear in Falls Church General District Court Nov. 23, authorities said.

The demonstration, estimated by police to include 500 protesters, was one of 26 held in cities around the country. Although each protest was organized by local groups, all were inspired and loosely coordinated by Operation Rescue, which mounted an anti-abortion campaign in Atlanta that has resulted in more than 1,200 arrests since the Democratic National Convention there in July.

Police and pro-choice groups in the Washington area had prepared for yesterday's demonstration, believing that protesters might strike at more than one local abortion clinic. District police posted several officers outside abortion clinics in the city, but the anticipated demonstrations never happened.

In Falls Church, the protesters converged about 6:30 a.m. on the **Commonwealth Women's Clinic at 916 W. Broad St.** The clinic, which provides abortion and contraceptive services, has been a frequent target of protests by Sanctity of Life Ministries, a group led by ChristyAnne Collins of Springfield, Va., an outspoken abortion opponent.

The protesters blocked the clinic's entrance, forcing women who had appointments to wait in parked cars until police cleared the way for them to enter. Volunteers from the clinic and several advocacy groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, were on hand to escort the women inside.

After dragging and carrying the protesters by their arms and legs to waiting police wagons and school buses, police blocked the driveways to prevent other protesters from approaching the clinic. Staff members and patients, who had been waiting outside for several hours, entered the building about 10 a.m. and business returned to normal. Police said the crowd dispersed by 1 p.m.

"They failed in their mission to close the clinic," said Nancy Dickinson, the clinic's administrator. "No one was denied access today to the clinic or any other clinic in the Washington area."

Dickinson criticized the protesters' tactics, saying, "This is definitely harassment."

Around the country, anti-abortion activists staged similar protests, sitting in at clinics in Pittsburgh, New York, Dallas, Boston, San Francisco and other cities. More than 2,000 people were arrested nationwide, said Mary Ann Baney, a spokeswoman for Operation Rescue in New York.

"We put our bodies between the abortionists and their victims," Baney said.

Until early yesterday morning, the identity of the targeted clinic in the Washington area remained a closely guarded secret among demonstration leaders.

Several hundred protesters met for a rally Friday night at a Bethesda church, where they were briefed on plans for the demonstration but were not told where it would take place, according to participants. After gathering before dawn yesterday at several sites around the Capital Beltway, the protesters drove en masse to the clinic, arriving more than an hour before it was scheduled to open at 7:45 a.m.

Jean Gett, a patient escort at the Commonwealth clinic, came to work early yesterday -- a little after 6 a.m. -- aware that there could be trouble. "They came right at 6:30," she said. "They started swarming out of the cars."

The protesters sat in front of the clinic's three doorways, singing hymns. As they sang, dozens of supporters ringing the property shouted encouragement, while other protesters picketed on the sidewalk in front. No patients were inside at the time, though several waited in cars in the parking lot.

Rachel Caulk, a 9-year-old from Arlington, and several other children in an adjacent playground sang a song that likened abortion to a holocaust.

"I'm here to stop babies from being killed," she said. "Sometimes they're just sucked up into pieces or sometimes they're electrocuted or put in this salt solution that kills them. I've seen pictures and my mother told me about it."

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Collins, in an interview on the clinic's back steps, said she was facing her 31st arrest for protesting at an abortion clinic. "As long as children are being killed by the inaction of the state, we'll be doing this," she said.

A colleague, Geoff Chapman -- who through a bullhorn urged the crowd not to yell or be antagonistic toward clinic patients -- said the demonstrators had no particular reason for targeting the Falls Church site.

"It didn't make any difference," he said. "We just wanted to shut one down. We wanted to stop the killing."

However, clinic officials and police said they believed the site was chosen because of the relatively small size of the Falls Church police force. Falls Church police Lt. Greg D. King said the force includes 30 officers, two-thirds of whom were called on duty for yesterday's event.

"We had a feeling it would happen in our jurisdiction," King said. "Only one or two people gave us any problem. I can honestly say they {the protesters} were cooperative most of the time." None of the police officers or protesters was believed injured, he said. The Falls Church contingent was assisted by officers from the Virginia State Police, Arlington County police and the state corrections department, he said.