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Abortion foes take national battle to neighborhoods Local group protests at doctors' homes

October 11, 1993 | By Sandy Banisky | Sandy Banisky, Staff Writer

The war over abortion is being fought on a grand scale all over the country: in Congress, in courtrooms, in front of clinics. And then there are the occasional volleys heard here at home -- in leafy Mount Washington and suburban Baltimore County.

On a recent October morning, that's where the campaigners against abortion took their fight.

"It's a civil war," said Don Treshman, the national director of Houston-based Rescue America, who was in Baltimore last week to address the anti-abortion group Defend Life. "And the strength is in the local skirmishes."

For most Marylanders, abortion is a personal issue that was settled politically in last November's referendum, when an abortion-rights statute became law.

But for the members of Defend Life, the fight goes on.

Mr. Treshman believes in taking the battle to the doorstep of abortion doctors, protesting and handing out leaflets in their neighborhoods. Nothing, he says, has been more effective in convincing doctors to stop the work.

So this month, Defend Life targeted two doctors who perform abortions -- **Dr. Richard Stuntz**, who lives in Mount Washington, and **Dr. Julio Novoa**, a Lutherville resident.

The turnout was small, about a half-dozen protesters. Defend Life had hoped to attract Catholic students from Loyola College. But only four cars gathered on the campus for the trip to Mount Washington and then on to the suburbs.

"College students have so many obligations, and I think they're put off by the early hour," said Eileen Bolgiano, a Defend Life volunteer. And the small numbers don't matter, she said. "We have a commitment."

Three of the cars made it to the leaflet site. The fourth car, carrying Mr. Treshman, got lost and never caught up, searching the streets of Mount Washington in vain for half an hour.

As the protesters arrived, neighborhood joggers continued their regular runs, apparently unaware that Defend Life had determined this to be a war zone.

Indeed, the cars parked along Mount Washington's streets appeared to mark the neighborhood as one filled with supporters of legal abortion: Most vehicles sported bumper stickers with such declarations as "Pro-Family. Pro-Child. Pro-Choice."

But Defend Life's volunteers weren't daunted. They began hustling up and down the streets, leaving on each porch a leaflet that featured Dr. Stuntz's photograph and the headline, "Know Your Neighbor."

Already positioned in Mount Washington were a man and a woman, armed with a video camera, who said they were from Planned Parenthood. The anti-abortion protesters parked and set off about their work, with the abortion-rights duo in pursuit, video camera running.

But the video camera didn't seem to be Defend Life's biggest worry. The "pro-aborts" follow the protesters "and they take our leaflets off the porches," Mrs. Bolgiano said, though she didn't see such activity that day.

How the Planned Parenthood representatives had found the demonstration site was an issue as well, as Defend Life had not advertised which doctor it was targeting.

"The pro-aborts," Mr. Treshman said, probably had people in the audience at his anti-abortion speech at Loyola the night before. He lapses easily into military terms. It's common, he says, for agents of the "pro-aborts" to "infiltrate our meetings."

An hour later, the group moved to Baltimore County, where it unfurled a blue-and-white banner that read "Julio Novoa Kills Babies for Money" at the curb in front of the doctor's home.

Defend Life has been demonstrating there regularly. This time, at the suggestion of Mr. Treshman, the group hammered seven small wooden crosses into the grass that fronts the street.

"It's a powerful psychological symbol," Mr. Treshman said. Next time, he recommended the group have about 200 crosses to plant before the doctor's house.

A Baltimore County police car sat in Dr. Novoa's driveway. The protesters stood quietly, chatting among themselves, for about an hour.

A few neighbors drove by -- the Novoa home is on a quiet street without through traffic -- but none seemed to acknowledge the protesters.

Abortion-rights backers say Defend Life's demonstrations drew little response because most Marylanders believe abortion is a personal decision and because they're tired of the protests.

Not so, Mr. Treshman says. "It's the lack of understanding of what abortion really is by Ma and Pa America. They'd rather watch a football game, sit there with a can of beer than help somebody."

Mr. Treshman's visit to Maryland is of concern to abortion-rights activists. After Dr. David Gunn was shot dead last March outside a Florida abortion clinic, Mr. Treshman said, "While Gunn's death is unfortunate, it's also true that quite a number of babies' lives will be saved."

He was roundly criticized for the quote, which he said this week he worded very carefully to be provocative. "I was trying to get the emphasis back on the babies. I didn't trivialize [the doctor's murder]. I said it was unfortunate.

"I think it's a war. It's a civil war that's raging," he said. "We're not interested in working for a 20-year plan to **stop** abortion. We want to stop abortion now."

Mary Ellen McNish, of Planned Parenthood of Maryland, said that her group will closely watch Defend Life's visits to doctors' **homes**.

"They don't have agreement from a majority of the public, so they resort to vigilante tactics to terrorize physicians who provide a very much needed health **service** to women," she said.

Dr. Novoa said the protesters come to his home almost every Saturday. "They send me letters every day. They come to my office."

After the first demonstration at his home about a year ago, he said, "a neighbor I really don't know called me and said, 'I have met with all the neighbors and we support you 100 percent.' So I felt very good."

Dr. Stuntz wasn't home during the leafletting. But since then, he said, he's received 30 or 40 phone calls from neighbors -- with only one of them negative.

"A woman said she knew where I lived and I better get out quick," Dr. Stuntz recalled. But other women called and offered to come protect his home in case of future protests. And a neighbor doctor called to ask how he could help.

"I'm not embarrassed or ashamed of the fact that I do abortions," Dr. Stuntz said. "In fact, I feel the community has supported me so much that I feel better than before they came."

And the **photograph** on the leaflet isn't bad, Dr. Stuntz says. "The first thing I thought when I saw it was, 'Boy, I'm glad they didn't use my passport picture.' "