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ON HOSTILE GROUND

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By [Maria Garcia](#) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

On Hostile Ground follows the lives of three medical professionals committed to providing abortions. One is a Rochester, New York doctor, **Morris Wortman**, radicalized in 1998 by the murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian, a long-standing target of right-to-life groups. Wortman says when Dr. Slepian was shot, he stopped calling himself a gynecologist who performs abortions, and started calling himself an abortion provider who happens to be a gynecologist. Another doctor, **Richard Stuntz**, 76, travels 500 miles to Alabama from his home state of Maryland to perform abortions. A physician's assistant, **Susan Cahill**, practices in Montana; she and her husband, Dr. James Armstrong, fought to overturn Montana's law prohibiting PAs from performing abortions.

The heroic efforts of the film's subjects are apparent, especially since the number of doctors performing abortions has dramatically declined since the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973. However, this quiet brand of heroism, in the hands of first-time filmmakers Liz Mermin and Jenny Raskin, doesn't come into sharp focus, partly because the film is so poorly edited. Interviews with Cahill, Wortman and Stuntz often meander, making it difficult to determine the point of any given sequence. Aside from Cahill, whose warmth renders her the film's most compelling subject, the lack of editing means even the high points are diffused. The filmmaker also conducts interviews with spouses, unidentified staff members, and right-to-lifers who have become fixtures outside the abortion clinics. While some of the staff members make compelling observations, their effectiveness is diminished by the filmmakers' inability to properly introduce their subjects.

The best moments in the film come at the end, during one of Cahill's interviews, when she tells the story of a patient whose husband asked her about Dr. Slepian's murder. Cahill explains that she hadn't realized, until that moment, how much pent-up anger she felt. Embarrassed by the violence of her reaction to the question, she nonetheless responded candidly. Telling the story, Cahill begins to lose control of her emotions, her voice cracks, and she finally cries, illustrating the power that moment still holds for her. Cahill explains that the incident actually dissipated her anger over Dr. Slepian's death, as well as her anger over the lack of appreciation her patients have for the danger she and her family experience as a result of her work. Now, she says, she no longer questions her commitment.

Mermin and Raskin's instincts for character development are evident throughout the film. They capture Cahill's capacity for intimacy, Wortman's bedside humor and Stuntz's tenacity, but undercut the effectiveness of their insights with their lack of directorial control. A case in point is

an interview with a right-to-lifer who explains that she prays for Dr. Wortman, and that she worries about him. We're caught off-guard by the woman's evident sincerity; then, instead of cutting away, Mermin and Raskin hold the scene while the woman's male colleague begins a predictable explanation of his presence outside the clinic. Our reaction to the woman, a powerful point in the film, is diminished by the man's fundamentalist prattle.

Regardless of its flaws, *On Hostile Ground* makes an important statement about the dangers abortion providers and their families continue to face. It is less effective in presenting the dilemma we have not yet resolved: While *Roe v. Wade* guarantees women the right to an abortion, it is still incredibly difficult, and in some cases impossible, for women to exercise that right. While Mermin and Raskin identify part of the problem--that abortion providers live in danger, and so many doctors are reluctant to perform abortions--they only skim the surface.

--Maria Garcia