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On the front line

Abortion rights doc a thoughtful look at volatile issue

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"I don't think I'll ever be remembered as somebody who did anything other than abortions. And honestly, that does sadden me sometimes." **Dr. Morris Wortman, one of three abortion providers** interviewed in the documentary *On Hostile Ground*, voices some of his misgivings about a procedure that has come to define his entire medical career and personal life.

Only one part of his OB/GYN practice, abortion is an act Wortman performs for complicated reasons having to do with his mother's difficult life and a sense of responsibility to his patients. And yet, it's an act that also compels him to carry a gun to protect himself as a figurehead of immorality to his opponents.

Liz Mermin and Jenny Raskin's riveting documentary focuses on some of the less obvious issues typically ignored in the inflamed abortion debate. By focusing on the men and women who still perform the procedure at enormous personal risk, this documentary humanizes a subject without the generalizations and hysterics common to both sides. Demystifying the people involved, and even the procedure itself — which is performed on film — is certainly part of the filmmakers' objectives.

The filmmakers work hard to dispel the view of abortion providers as money-blind opportunists sowing the seeds of human tragedy. Montana physician's assistant **Susan Cahill** is especially effective in this regard, coming close to tears as she describes the man accompanying his wife to her clinic who talks about his children, his grueling work week, one-bedroom house and a family strained to the breaking point.

"Life is not easy for most people and they need to have some choices," says Cahill. It's one of the most understated and one of the most profound comments made in the film.

To its credit, the film also includes the opinions of some of the anti-abortion demonstrators who wait outside Dr. Wortman's office. For every zealot waving a full-color poster of a dead baby,

making death threats or stalking doctors at their homes, there are others who make their opinions known without threats or violence. Especially touching is protester Mary Burke, another human face behind the movement, who stands quietly outside Wortman's clinic. In her daily encounters with the doctor, Burke seems to have come to respect his personhood — just as Wortman does hers — while holding fast to her beliefs.

While *On Hostile Ground* strives to offer a more compassionate approach to the abortion issue, by at least refusing to utterly vilify the anti-abortion side, the

film isn't unbiased. Though *On Hostile Ground* is stylistically undistinguished (save for a moody score by Tom Verlaine), the film is well served by its sobriety, giving a measured, respectful treatment to the abortion issue.

Informed by the realities behind the daily-threatened lives of Dr. Wortman, Cahill and **Maryland doctor Richard Stuntz**, *On Hostile Ground* expends most of its energy showing the utter commitment such abortion providers give to their patients and to a procedure important enough that they risk their lives to perform it. Several also comment upon the hypocrisy of not only their medical colleagues who refer patients to them (then publicly condemn them for providing abortions), but also that of the general public.

"People come to me when they want me," says Cahill, "but they don't support me otherwise." That the workers and doctors who offer this legal medical service wear bulletproof vests to work and carry guns to protect themselves gives the film a measure of its quiet outrage.

Between 1990 and 1999, the filmmakers note, there have been 97 arsons, 15 bombings, 16 attempted murders and seven murders at American clinics where abortions are performed, statistics that reveal the climate of fear that affects everyone even tangentially involved in the business of abortion. Even one of the contractors helping build the office where Dr. Wortman is relocating is accosted by a protestor who asks if he knows he's working in a building where abortions will be performed. If there is such a thing as comic relief in this fairly grim but sensitive documentary, it comes in the man's working class shrug of, "All I know is drywall and this is what I want to do."