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Morris Wortman, MD

Visible and Active

As people across the country focused on why physicians who provide abortions continued to practice after the murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian in 1998, **Dr. Morris Wortman** decided it was time to explain. Dr. Wortman, director of the Center for Menstrual Disorders and Reproductive Choice in Rochester, New York, gave an incredibly moving account of his untiring resolve to provide women the full range of reproductive health services in a column published by Newsweek. After years of being known for his expertise in hysteroscopic surgery, he was suddenly receiving letters from all over the country in support of his continued provision of abortion, despite the violence.

A family tradition of survival and determination helps Dr. Wortman persevere in the face of protest. Both of his parents were Holocaust survivors who lost their entire families. “They learned many tactics to survive, but they never gave up their faith or pretended to be someone different from themselves,” he recalls. “They lived a simple life and stressed the importance of holding firm to one’s convictions.”

It is this family history of courage that informs his reaction to the case, tried in Oregon in 1999, against the so-called “Nuremberg” website. “The Holocaust was about many things—but mostly about ethnic cleansing. Let’s call the ‘Nuremberg’ website what it was—it was an anti-choice, anti-Semitic ‘hit’ list,” he says. “The trial in Oregon showed that the ‘Nuremberg’ website was not an exercise in free speech, but rather nothing less than a terror tactic.” Dr. Wortman refuses to let this or any other tactic control his medical practices and commitments.

Dr. Wortman’s first experience providing abortions is directly tied to the legalization of abortion. “I actually performed my first abortion in July 1973 as a second-year medical student at the University of Rochester. I was assigned to several faculty advisers who were interested in studying attitudinal changes among obstetricians/gynecologists toward the (relatively) recent New York State abortion law,” he says. “As part of my training I was also asked to participate in several first- and second-trimester abortions. I remember being struck by the helplessness of these young girls who were corralled into a pre-anesthesia area in the operating room. I tried to

console the ones I was able to talk to. I remember feeling helpless myself, as if there wasn't enough I could do."

Dr. Wortman's advice to medical students reflects this experience and shows his tremendous tenacity: "Abortion providers who persist are rugged individualists. We get our rewards by giving what we believe is a desperately important service. Our rewards come every day from the patients we serve. However, the intimidation and threat to your own life is real. My best advice? Be in a very supportive relationship or marriage—you'll need it!"

This demanding work is rewarded not only through patient support and family inspiration. Dr. Wortman was honored at the annual National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League luncheon celebrating the 26th anniversary of Roe v. Wade in 1999, a ceremony at which First Lady Hillary Clinton announced legislation to increase security funding for clinics where abortions are performed. Dr. Wortman was thrilled to be part of this exciting event and says of the experience, "I think this sends a very strong message to abortion providers. It is heartening to hear that our government is interested in preserving us!"

As a vocal member of PRCH, Dr. Wortman thinks that more physicians must add their voices to the abortion debate so that members of Congress, the media and the public understand how essential this kind of support truly is. As Dr. Wortman contends, "In addition to networking, it's important to get involved. Each of us has to seek his or her own level of involvement, but it isn't acceptable to sit on the sidelines during this critical phase in the history of legal abortion in the United States."