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Durango's most controversial doctor

As “Trapped,” a documentary about abortion screens at the Animas City Theatre this week, we spoke to **Dr. Richard Grossman about performing abortions in Durango** and the hostility his profession provokes.

By: [Anya Jaremko-Greenwold](#)
DGO Staff Writer

ENTERTAINMENT

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Tags: Dgo Yeah , Movies

Go!

Event: Documentary “Trapped” with panel discussion led by Dr. Richard Grossman

When: 7 p.m. Monday, April 18

Where: Animas City Theatre, 128 E. College Drive.

“Trapped” will also play without the panel at 2:15 p.m. April 19 and 5:15 p.m. April 20 and 21



Courtesy of Trilogy Films

Gloria Gray is the director of the West Alabama Women's Center in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and is interviewed in a scene from "Trapped," a film about medical professionals who work at clinics that perform abortions and are subject to TRAP laws.



Courtesy of Trilogy Films

Clinic escorts gather to pray at Reproductive Health Services in Montgomery, Ala., in a scene from "Trapped," a film about medical professionals who work at clinics that perform abortions and are subject to TRAP laws.



Courtesy of Trilogy Films

Dr. Willie Parker is one of two doctors who perform abortions in Mississippi. He says that it's hard for many protesters to accept that he performs abortions because he is Christian. Parker is featured in "Trapped," a film about medical professionals who work at clinics that perform abortions and are subject to TRAP laws.



Courtesy of Trilogy Films

A nurse at Reproductive Health Services clinic in Montgomery, Alabama, comforts a patient in a scene from “Trapped,” a film about medical professionals who work at clinics that perform abortions and are subject to TRAP laws.



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When I went to interview Dr. Richard Grossman at Planned Parenthood Durango, there were two anti-abortion picketers strolling back and forth across the parking lot entrance. There also was a truck parked next to the lot decorated with signs reading, “We will help, not judge” or displaying the large image of a fetus, clearly intended to arouse distress. A Planned Parenthood “escort” walks women from their cars to the center, in case protesters yell things or get rowdy. Imagine enduring verbal abuse walking into a doctor’s office for a checkup. Now imagine how the women who walk in for abortions feel.

You have to be buzzed into the center. My bag was checked, too, “because of the incident in Colorado Springs,” the security guard told me. He’s referring, of course, to the Colorado gunman who shot and killed three people inside a Planned Parenthood last November. The organization has been the target of long-standing threats and violence, owing to its role in

providing health care and abortions, in addition to lobbying for women's reproductive rights. The nerve.

Richard Grossman will lead a panel discussion at the Animas City Theatre on Monday after a screening of "Trapped," a documentary about abortion and women's health care directed by Dawn Porter. The film follows the trials and tribulations of clinic workers and lawyers who are locked in an ongoing battle, fighting to keep abortion safe and legal for American women (many of them poor and uninsured). Since 2010, hundreds of laws regulating abortion clinics have been passed by conservative state legislatures, especially in the south. These restrictions are known as TRAP laws (or Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers), hence this doc's title. As both the costs of reproductive health care and the vehemence of anti-abortion protestors increase, "Trapped" tracks the conflict all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Grossman has lived in La Plata County for 40 years, and he writes an opinion page column for The Durango Herald titled "Population Matters!" the column discusses how best to prevent overpopulation. "The reason I went into medicine with OB-GYN specialty was concern about population issues," Grossman said. He retired from office practice in 2014 but still works at Planned Parenthood. There's only one other doctor in Durango who performs abortions, and two who live in New Mexico but commute here to practice.

What's impressive about Grossman isn't that he performs abortions. It's the human decency he exudes, the calm tolerance with which he regards people who rally against him and his life's work. "I can see the standpoint of people on the other side," he said. "But I think the reality is, even if abortion were illegal in the United States, like before Roe v. Wade, women would still get them."

A newly established state law has made it increasingly difficult and expensive for Texas women to obtain the procedure; as a result, Grossman recently had a patient come all the way from Austin (a 14-hour drive) because the wait was too long and the cost too high in her home state. Most women cannot wait to have this done because time is of the essence. "I grew up in the era when abortion was illegal, and women still found ways," Grossman said. "And they suffered. Psychological abuse, physical abuse, infections afterwards, problems with heavy bleeding and hemorrhaging. Some of them died. That was an era I hope we never return to. But abortion may become available only to rich people again."

Grossman was raised a Quaker and remains a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers don't have a creed; some are pro-choice, some anti-abortion. "Nobody tells us what to believe," said Grossman. He has come to certain conclusions from prodigious research over the years: "Very few people recognize how many of the problems we face are caused by the

increasing number of humans,” he said. “Fifty percent of all pregnancies in our country are conceived by mistake. So many are unwanted. That’s part of the reason for our high abortion rates as compared to other rich countries.”

Many people additionally fail to realize how often children who aren’t wanted end up the products of neglect or abuse. Their parents weren’t prepared to have them or just didn’t want to. These kids might never receive the love or financial security they deserve. “I certainly believe in adoption – but there are so many kids who need to be adopted already,” Grossman said.

You might think doing a public service that requires knowledge, training and people skills would incur praise – but Grossman has experienced more significant opposition. One particularly vocal local resident sat outside his house and called out, “Your husband is a baby killer!” when Grossman’s wife returned home. “But I reported that to a friend of mine who is anti-abortion, and he interceded on our behalf,” Grossman said.

In fact, he said that although nationwide there has been an increase in anti-abortion sentiment, here in Durango people are pretty polite. He maintains a peaceful and diplomatic relationship with those neighbors who disagree with him, fostering friendships with anti-abortionists and delivering their babies (OB-GYNs do a lot of that, too).

“I believe in religious freedom,” Grossman said, “and at the beginning of my own peculiar religion, people were killed and imprisoned because of their beliefs. I remember that history.” It sounds strange, but Grossman feels protected by the picketers he’s familiar with, and he doesn’t believe any of them would harm him. It’s more likely to be someone outside the community, like the loner in Colorado Springs. The leader of a Durango anti-abortion group once sent Grossman an email explaining why he shouldn’t perform the medical acts he performs, and he wrote back, asking whether he might accompany her to church in an attempt to better understand her religious beliefs. They went to Mass at St. Ignatius Church together, but she never asked Grossman to tell her more about Quakerism.

“This is a statistic I had to read several times to believe: One of the most carefully done global studies on abortion states that it’s actually more common in countries where it’s illegal,” Grossman said. Similarly, in countries where citizens receive human sexuality education from a young age, abortion happens less – because unwanted pregnancies are far fewer. In the U.S., women’s reproductive health can seem like a catch-22; many politicians don’t want women having easy access to contraception, abortions or welfare checks to feed the kids they can’t afford but are forced to keep. What options does that leave? “Contraception is one of the most amazing public-health interventions,” Grossman said. “It saves money, allows people to

continue their education and empowers women in many different ways.” Let’s hope human beings like Dr. Grossman continue to encourage such empowerment.