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Forcing women to have children is akin to slavery, says a devoutly Christian abortion doctor

By ROBIN ABCARIAN
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Dr. Willie Parker chats with UCLA physicians Dr. Lisa Nicholas, left, and Dr. Angela Chen. (Robin Abcarian / Los Angeles Times)



Willie Parker is a 54-year old physician, nattily dressed, standing in the sumptuous backyard of a large home in the Glendale Hills. Parker is surrounded by people from a neighborhood that is the envy of many, as if

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Here, Parker is worlds away from his workaday life, which takes place in the besieged abortion clinics of Mississippi and Alabama, states that have done their utmost to regulate abortion out of existence. He is an outspoken abortion doctor driven by his deep Christian faith, and as such, has become an unlikely new hero of the abortion rights movement.



"I believe that as an abortion provider, I am doing God's work," writes Parker in his new memoir, "Life's Work: A Moral Argument for Choice." "I am protecting women's rights, their human right to decide their futures for themselves, and to live their lives as they see fit."



That is why he's been invited to California on this lovely Tuesday evening. Parker has come from Alabama to accept a Person of the Year award from a 26-year-old abortion rights group that is not famous, but certainly deserves to be.



The group is the Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project, or WRRAP. Founded 26 years ago by Joyce Schorr, a former sales executive for Reynolds, WRRAP gives money to women who can't afford to pay for their abortions. (Previous winners include Gloria Steinem, Dr. George Tiller, Sarah Weddington ... and Kelsey Grammer, who was for abortion rights before he was against them.)



Since the early 1990s, Schorr estimates, the group has helped 40,000 women, chipping in relatively small sums, usually between \$200 and \$500.

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Parker grew up poor and fatherless in Birmingham, Ala. At 15, under the tutelage of a coach who was a Pentecostal minister, he became a born-again Christian. The first member of his family to attend college, he carried a Bible door to door in his dorm, spreading the gospel of Jesus. After he became an OB-GYN, he refused to perform abortions for religious reasons, but would refer women to doctors who did.

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Joyce Schorr, right, founder of the Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project, with Linda Leibovitch, who hosted WRAPP's fundraiser at her Beverly Hills home on May 16. (Robin Abcarian / Los Angeles Times)



Eventually, though, as he practiced at the Queen's Medical Center in Hawaii, he started to see abortion as a critical part of his patients' care, its restriction as a profound injustice.

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Christian, to perform abortions? But rather, is it right for me, as a Christian to refuse to do them? Now I saw, without doubt, fear or ambivalence, that it was appropriate, even ethical for me to provide this care."

In his book and in conversations — including a recent appearance on "The Daily Show" — Parker compares forcing a woman to bear a child to slavery. It's generally unwise to compare anything that is not slavery to slavery, but Parker is unbowed.

"I know it's a powerful analogy to draw, and people are skittish," he told me, "but if you look at what was evil about slavery and what happens to women when they are forced to give birth, it's apt. When we make fetuses 'people' and demand that women be subordinated in servitude to them... women become a means to an end. It's no different from slavery."

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The conventional wisdom is that to be devoutly religious is to be antiabortion — but like Parker's epiphany, Schorr's impulse to help women obtain abortions also has spiritual roots, though perhaps in a more roundabout way.

Her moment came in 1991, as she watched an episode of the "Phil Donahue Show." His guests were Quaker women who ran a kind of underground railroad for women needing abortions in the years before the Supreme Court legalized abortion. "In 1969, when I was in college, my best friend had almost died from an illegal abortion," Schorr told me. "It just triggered me: I can't let this happen. We need to help these women get abortions."

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She approached the National Council of Jewish Women in Los Angeles and was given permission to start WRRAP under its auspices. Four years later, WRRAP became an independent nonprofit, run by Schorr, who has never collected a salary. About 50 volunteers help out.

There is no physical location; two volunteers take calls from clinics for five hours each day. "We fund anyone who calls us," Schorr said. In the beginning, she said, she took calls from desperate women, but discovered it was far more efficient to have clinics call on behalf of patients. (Patients — and donors — can make direct contact through the group's website.)

Until recently, WRRAP's annual budget had been about \$35,000. "We finally caught the eye of some very big donors," she said. In the last two years, these anonymous philanthropists have given a total of \$550,000.

The money will enable Schorr, who at 65 is nearing retirement, to finally hire an executive director, and put a succession plan in place.

The abortion debate in this country waxes and wanes. The fundamental precept enshrined in Roe vs. Wade, that women have a fundamental right to control their own bodies, still stands.

But we appear to be in a moment when the antiabortion forces are ascendant, both in statehouses, which are defunding critically important abortion providers like Planned Parenthood, and at the federal level, where the Trump administration is systematically dismantling America's commitment to family planning programs around the globe.

Heroes like Willie Parker and Joyce Schorr, and the people who work in the trenches with them every day, give me

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