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Woman recounts abortion at Brigham's New Jersey clinic

BY DAVID BRUCE david.bruce@timesnews.com [more details]

Published: September 19, 2003 12:44AM

STATE COLLEGE — One day later this month, Andrea Staargaard will mark what could have been her child's second birthday. Staargaard bought a birthday cake in September 2002, but the Pennsylvania State University student couldn't bring herself to eat any of it. She aborted the fetus in January 2001 at Steven Brigham's Voorhees, N.J., medical office. "My boyfriend and I even named the baby. It's quite common," Staargaard said as she sat on a bench near the college's student union. "We named him Connor." A high school junior when she became pregnant, Staargaard didn't know what to do. Her boyfriend called Brigham's office in King of Prussia, near Staargaard's home in West Chester, south of Philadelphia. When a counselor learned Staargaard was only 16, the counselor told Staargaard's boyfriend to take her to Brigham's office in Voorhees, N.J., a 90-minute drive from West Chester. New Jersey law does not require minors to have parental permission to receive an abortion. Linda Locke, Brigham's chief operations officer, said Thursday she did not hear the telephone call and did not want to comment specifically about it. Clinic personnel discuss state abortion laws and advise patients about them when questions are asked, she said. "A week later we told my parents we were going to Philadelphia for some dim sum," Staargaard said. "They dropped us off in the city, and we took a taxi to New Jersey." Brigham's Voorhees clinic is located on the second floor of an office building, similar to the Professional Building in downtown Erie. A receptionist told Staargaard that an abortion would cost \$400 and suggested that she sign in with a false name. Staargaard said she doesn't know why the receptionist didn't want her to use her real name, but she wrote "Margaret Lansing." "Margaret is my middle name, and Lansing, well that's the name on my boyfriend's speakers," Staargaard said. As Staargaard filled out her paperwork, she began crying. The receptionist handed her a box of tissue and said, "Don't worry, we're used to it." A nurse gave Staargaard a urine test to make sure she was pregnant. She then was guided to a waiting room, where she and other women waited to have ultrasound exams. "I finally was taken into the ultrasound room, but they wouldn't let me see the ultrasound," Staargaard said. "The technician said it was against their policy." Staargaard chose to receive a medical abortion. Though Brigham's Yellow Pages ad said the clinic's staff was all female, she said the doctor was a man. Dr. Vikram Kaji injected Staargaard with a drug that stops the embryo from growing and prescribed eight vaginal suppositories that helped her body expel it. The teenager again asked for the results of her ultrasound exam. She finally received

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them and left with her boyfriend."I was 16 years old, five weeks pregnant, and not once did anybody at the clinic say that I should think this decision over," Staargaard said.Staargaard said she felt in a state of shock the entire way back to West Chester. She told her parents that she had eaten some bad dim sum.Over the next couple days, Staargaard said, she felt terrible cramps that made it almost impossible to stand up. She returned to the clinic two weeks later for her follow-up visit. A nurse told Staargaard that she was fine."I didn't feel fine," she said. "I missed a month of school. English class seemed stupid after what had happened. I watched a lot of television. 'Cider House Rules' (a movie that deals with abortions) was on a lot that month, and I watched it over and over again."Staargaard later talked about the abortion with a friend, who invited her to Catholic Mass. Staargaard eventually became a Catholic and told her parents about the abortion. She has joined several faith-based organizations at Penn State, including Students for Life, a group of Penn State students who oppose abortion. She wears a tiny cross in the upper cartilage of her right ear."I have a lot of debt to work on," Staargaard said.DAVID BRUCE can be reached at 870-1736 or by e-mail.

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