Sign In | Register now

boston.com

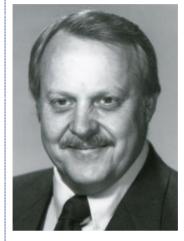
Local Search Site Search

HOME TODAY'S GLOBE **NEWS** YOUR TOWN BUSINESS SPORTS LIFESTYLE A&F THINGS TO DO TRAVEL CARS REAL ESTATE

Globe Sports Magazine Metro Nation World Globe Business Opinion Obituaries Photography Classifieds Regional editions Ideas

HOME / GLORE / OBITUARIES

Dr. William Harrison, 75; defender of abortion rights



DR. HARRISON

MOST E-MAILED »

- 1. Report: Warrant Issued for Roggie's Bar Owner
- 2. Map of Greater Boston Farmers Markets
- 3. Boston Pops Concert Move Keeps the Beach Boys, Ditches Joey

ADVERTISEMENT

- 4. We Tried Out Those New Solar Benches
- 5. New England's top outdoor water parks
- 6. Drink of the Week: Mojito Italiano
- 7. Lawmakers pass compounding pharmacy oversight bill

FOLLOW THIS LIST ON TWITTER: @BOSTONPOPULAR

By Douglas Martin

New York Times / September 29, 2010

Print I

Reprints I

Text size

NEW YORK — "Oh, God, doctor, I was hoping it was cancer."

Be the first of your friends to like this. Tweet Yahoo! Buzz ShareThis

Those words so affected Dr. William Harrison that for years, he said, he could not repeat them. They made him break down in tears.

The woman who spoke them - black, poor, and middle-aged — had come in 1967 to the Arkansas

hospital where Dr. Harrison was a medical student in obstetrics. The doctor who had examined the woman's swollen belly had told her she was pregnant.

Dr. Harrison, who went on to perform 20,000 or so abortions over three decades, became a frequent target of abortion protesters and spoke out forcefully in national forums. In the 1980s, when the abortion wars raged most fiercely in Arkansas, his clinic, the Fayetteville Women's Clinic, was firebombed, picketed, blockaded, and vandalized. Death threats became routine.

In essays, articles, and interviews, he castigated abortion-rights opponents as "right-wing crazies." They responded just as fervently, calling him a murderer, particularly after he gained wide attention for offering free abortions to survivors of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Dr. Harrison felt compelled to perform abortions after many doctors in northwest Arkansas had stopped. For decades, he was the only doctor in the region willing to provide the procedure. In typically flamboyant language, he said, "I have chosen to ride this tiger unquietly, raking its side with verbal spurs, swinging my hat, and whooping like a cowboy."

Dr. Harrison, who had leukemia, died Friday at age 75, according to the Nelson-Berna Funeral Home in Fayetteville.

Dr. Harrison readily admitted that he destroyed life, but denied that he killed babies. His view was that an embryo was far from being a human being with a brain. The higher moral value to him was salvaging the future of an often disadvantaged girl or woman.

But he drew a line at performing abortions in the third trimester of pregnancy, partly, he said, because they made him uncomfortable and partly because he felt he lacked the expertise.

William Floyd Nathaniel Harrison, the son of small-town teachers, was born in rural Faulkner County, Ark.

As more abortion patients knocked on his door, he said, he began recalling the woman who would have preferred cancer to pregnancy. He also recalled the many women who had come to the hospital seriously injured by illegal abortions.

After delivering more than 6,000 babies, he gave up the practice and devoted himself to abortions, saying that if he wanted them to be legal, safe, and available, the moral and ethical course was for him to do them.

© Copyright 2010 Globe Newspaper Company.

Home | Today's Globe | News | Business | Sports | Lifestyle | A&E | Things to Do | Travel | Cars | Jobs | Real Estate | Local Search

CONTACT BOSTON.COM | Help | Advertise | Work here | Privacy Policy | Your Ad Choices | Terms of Service | Newsletters | Mobile | RSS feeds | Sitemap CONTACT THE BOSTON GLOBE | Subscribe | Manage your subscription | Advertise | Boston Globe Insiders | The Boston Globe Gallery | © 2020 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC