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Dr. William Harrison, 75; defender of abortion rights



DR. HARRISON

By Douglas Martin
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NEW YORK — “Oh, God, doctor, I was hoping it was cancer.”

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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.

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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. ■

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