

Dr. William Harrison, Defender of Abortion Rights, Dies at 75

By Douglas Martin

Sept. 25, 2010

“Oh, God, doctor, I was hoping it was cancer.”

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. A doctor, after examining her swollen belly, had told her she was pregnant.

Dr. Harrison 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 fiercest 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 abandoned the practice. 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 died on Friday at the age of 75, the Nelson-Berna Funeral Home in Fayetteville said. He had received a diagnosis of leukemia in May.

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 Dr. Harrison was salvaging the future of an often disadvantaged girl or woman.



Dr. William Harrison

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. He sent those who wanted one to his friend Dr. George Tiller in Wichita, Kan., an expert surgeon who was assassinated in his church by an anti-abortion zealot in 2009. Dr. Harrison often gave those patients money for gasoline for the trip to Wichita.

William Floyd Nathaniel Harrison, the son of small-town teachers, was born in rural Faulkner County, Ark., on Sept. 8, 1935. His mother would say that she knew he was destined to become an obstetrician because he essentially delivered himself as his father rode on horseback to fetch the doctor. He grew up going to Methodist and Baptist churches (his mother played piano at both), and twice read the entire Bible at 12, ending up, he said, thoroughly unimpressed with the God it described.

By his account, he piled up D's and F's at what is now the University of Central Arkansas in Conway before enlisting in the Navy at 17. He later enrolled at the University of Arkansas, where he studied business until he fell for Betty Waggoner. She was dating a pre-med student, he said, so he switched to that to impress her. They were married for 50 years.

In addition to his wife, Dr. Harrison is survived by his daughters, Amanda Robinson and Rebecca Harrison; his son, Benjamin III; a brother, Ben; two sisters, Mary Harrell and Martha Harrison; and seven grandchildren.

Dr. Harrison received his undergraduate and medical degrees from the University of Arkansas and did his internship and residency there. He and a colleague set up the Fayetteville Women's Clinic in 1972.

Dr. Harrison performed his first abortion in 1974, a year after they became legal, and found himself doing them sporadically while his clinic was booming delivering babies. But by 1984, as older doctors retired and younger ones shied from offering abortions, often fearing being ostracized or attacked, he became the only doctor in his area performing them.

As more and 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.

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

As for the protesters frequently outside his clinic, he often said they were splendid advertising, drawing women in need to the clinic who might otherwise have not known where to go.