

# William Floyd Nathaniel Harrison (1935–2010)

William Floyd Nathaniel Harrison was an obstetrician/gynecologist, **abortion** provider, congressional candidate, and author. During his career, he became locally and nationally known as an outspoken pro-choice physician.

Born on September 8, 1935, in **Vilonia (Faulkner County)**, William Harrison was the fourth of Benjamin G. Harrison and Mattie E. Powell Harrison's five children. His parents were teachers. His family attended both **Methodist** and **Baptist** churches. Educated in the public schools, he attended Arkansas State Teachers College (now the **University of Central Arkansas**) in **Conway (Faulkner County)** in the early 1950s but did not complete a degree. He served in the U.S. Navy in the late 1950s. Entering the **University of Arkansas (UA)** in **Fayetteville (Washington County)** in 1959, he studied pre-medicine and graduated in 1963. In 1960, he married Betty Waggoner, who was from Texas, and the couple had three children.

In 1964, he entered the University of Arkansas Medical School—now the **University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS)**—in **Little Rock (Pulaski County)** and graduated in 1968. By 1972, he had completed an internship and residency in obstetrics/gynecology at the university hospital.

His medical career began before the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973, which legalized first-trimester abortions. In the 1960s, Arkansas's 1875 abortion law, which criminalized all abortions except those physicians determined were necessary to save lives, remained in effect. Harrison explained that, earlier in his career, he would have described himself as pro-life, until an encounter with a pregnant patient in 1967 first "forced [him] to rethink his position on abortion." In the encounter, his patient, an impoverished single mother, told him that she had hoped her condition was cancer rather than another pregnancy. He also treated patients seriously injured by illegal abortions. Such experiences, he wrote, "rendered me vehemently resolved to do what I [saw] as my duty toward my patients." After 1969, he and the other UAMS residents, most of whom had performed a few therapeutic abortions under the 1875 law, began to provide abortions under Arkansas's revised abortion law.

Returning to Fayetteville in 1972, he joined another physician—one who did not perform abortions—in obstetrical/gynecological practice. After earlier referring his abortion-seeking patients to other local physicians who offered the procedure, he later began performing a few in-hospital abortions for patients who refused to be referred. In 1979, he and a new partner began to offer in-office abortions at their newly opened Fayetteville Women's Clinic.

The ascendant **Republican** politics of the 1980s, of which many opponents of legal abortion were a part, disturbed Harrison. At the time, anti-abortion violence began to discourage physicians from providing abortions. By 1984, he was Fayetteville's only remaining abortion provider. Spurred into action, he wrote an explanation of why he provided abortions, which was published in the *Arkansas Gazette* as an opinion column in 1985. He defended first- and second-trimester abortion but maintained that he believed "very strongly that abortion after fetal viability [was] murder." He reminded readers that "legalization...did not initiate the practice of abortion"—rather, it only made it medically safer. Shortly after his column appeared, anti-abortion activists began picketing his clinic, which was damaged in an arson attempt later that year. He, his family, and his patients were harassed and threatened, and his clinic was targeted not only by anti-abortion picketers but also by vandals and burglars.

He continued to provide abortions and defend abortion rights, speaking about abortion's ethical and political aspects at colleges and universities, including the Fayetteville campus. In 1992, he unsuccessfully sought the **Democratic** nomination for U.S. congressional representative from Arkansas's Third District. His novel, *There Is a Bomb in Gilead: Tales from an Uncivil War* (1999), detailed the challenges faced by a fictional abortion-providing physician.

Until Dr. George Tiller's murder in 2009, Harrison sent his patients needing later-term abortions to Tiller's clinic in Wichita, Kansas. In a 2009 *Arkansas Times* cover article, he eulogized Tiller and accused Wichita officials of failing to protect his friend. He counted the National Abortion Federation, an association of abortion providers, among his professional memberships and supported Medical Students for Choice, a pro-choice medical student organization. Profiled in the *Los Angeles Times* and other publications, he was interviewed on ABC's *Nightline* in 2006.

After being diagnosed with leukemia, he closed his clinic in 2010. At the time of the closing, his patients, friends, and family members gathered at his clinic to celebrate his career and express their gratitude. Antiabortion activists expressed their happiness at the news of his clinic's closing.

Harrison died on September 24, 2010.

#### **For additional information:**

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Harrison, William F. "Dr. Satan, Come Out!" *Arkansas Times*, June 11, 2009. Online at <http://www.arktimes.com/arkansas/dr-satan-come-out/Content?oid=964504> (accessed December 29, 2013).

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Martin, Douglas. "Dr. William Harrison, Defender of Abortion Rights, Dies at 75." *New York Times*, September 25, 2010. Online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/us/26harrison.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/us/26harrison.html?_r=0) (accessed December 30, 2013).

Obituary of Dr. William F. Harrison. *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, September 26, 2010, p. 7B.

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 ENTRY

William Floyd Nathaniel Harrison (1935–2010)

**TIME PERIOD**

**Modern Era (1968 - the Present)**

**CATEGORY**

**Medicine / Practitioners / Science and Medicine**

**TYPE**

**Person**

**RACE & ETHNICITY**

**White**

**GENDER**

**Male**