

AT THE EYE OF THE STORM THE ABORTION DOCTOR AMID THE SHRILL DEBATE OVER ABORTION STAND DOCTORS LIKE RALPH BUNDY - BABY KILLERS

By **Barbara Stewart of The Sentinel Staff**

THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

MAY 13, 1990

Dr. Ralph Bundy does abortions.

That is his entire medical practice - 75 abortions a week, 15,000 during his five years as doctor for The Women's Health Center Inc. in Orlando and Daytona Beach.

He has not tired of his work. Each abortion is similar but also different - in the tilt of the uterus, in the tension of the woman's muscles, in the degree of the woman's fear or sadness or utter relief.

For some women, he says, having an abortion is like getting a haircut. For a few, it creates strong guilt or sadness.

To most of his patients it is an unhappy decision, but one that does the least damage.

"That's the abortion dilemma," says Bundy. "Nobody's completely happy with what they've done. Nobody leaves with a completely clean conscience. People have ambiguities.

"There is no easy way out. Try raising a kid you don't want for 20 years."

Bundy is fiercely proud of his job and his clinic. "I am an abortionist because it is good medicine," he says. "It is good work for good people."

Bundy said this on a television debate last October. He spoke firmly, his words deliberate, intense.

A woman who rose to question him was equally intense.

"Sir," she said, her voice shaking with anger, "you are a murderer."

IT WAS 10, SUNDAY MORNING, FOUR years ago. Bundy's children were watching cartoons. A neighbor's call roused Bundy out of bed.

Demonstrators were pacing in front of his house. They carried signs and chanted: "Bundy is a butcher! Bundy is a murderer!"

He called the police, who could do nothing but make sure the demonstrators weren't trespassing on Bundy's property.

"It was ugly," he said.

The protesters walked and chanted until noon. Before departing they huddled to pray and then yelled: "We love you, Dr. Bundy!"

"Fortunately, the kids were watching cartoons and didn't pay attention," says Bundy. "My wife was out of town. When she heard, she flipped out. It really upset her."

The demonstrators returned another Sunday when Bundy's former wife was home. They distributed leaflets - "Dr. Bundy is a butcher" - to all of Bundy's neighbors.

"It was genuinely dreadful. . . . I felt so violated," she said.

Bundy was accustomed to the shouts of demonstrators outside the Women's Health Center. But they had never before intruded on his home, his children and his neighbors.

"That had to be the turning point," says Ruth Arick, a director at the Women's Health Center. "When they picketed his home, they let his fury out. The pickets backfired. Ralph recognized where his heart was, his energy was."

Bundy had been doing a job. Now he had embarked on a cause.

"Before, I wanted to keep a low profile," he says. "Then it was, 'All right, you're taking this to my turf. You've come to my doorstep.' That galvanized me. . . ."

"You're either in it or you're not. After that, I was so into it there was no getting out."

That's what separates Bundy from his peers. His voice is not faint or equivocal. He faces the opposition publicly. He tries to balance the debate.

Like Bundy, most doctors support legal abortion on demand. The most recent survey of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists shows that 84 percent of their members are pro-choice.

But only two-thirds of these doctors do abortions and only 4 percent do more than 26 a month.

"A lot of us are uncomfortable doing abortions," says Dr. Robert Hoover of Winter Park, the president of the Florida Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. "We're pro-choice and pro-life. Doctors who routinely do abortions are a special breed."

Bundy is not the only abortion doctor in Central Florida, nor is his the only abortion clinic. But he is the only doctor who would openly talk about his work and his reasons for doing it. Other doctors fear the backlash could hurt their practices - or worse, them.

If they do abortions, they keep a low profile to avoid demonstrators or arsonists. Those contacted would not allow their names to be used, and many refused to discuss their work even if promised anonymity.

"I do abortions every Saturday and every other Tuesday," says an Orlando obstetrician-gynecologist. "I also do obstetrics and deliver babies. Not every patient is pro-choice. There are patients who, if they find out, won't come back. There are new patients who would never come."

Most abortions in Florida and elsewhere in the nation are done in clinics like Bundy's, and these are dangerous times for such clinics. According to the National Abortion Federation, clinics in the United States have been bombed, vandalized, burglarized, invaded, or set afire 584 times in the past 13 years. Clinic staff members have been assaulted 57 times and received 69 death threats during those years. Two were kidnapped.

Bundy's clinic regularly receives threatening phone calls and is picketed now and then. One demonstrator carried a stick with red paint-spattered baby dolls hanging by nooses. Protesters sometimes shout at staff members and try to persuade patients to forgo an abortion.

During these times employees, wearing T-shirts with the words "clinic staff" in bold letters, escort patients through the crowds.

Bundy has tried to protect his children.

"We were afraid to let our youngest boy ride his bike to school," says Bundy's former wife. "When Ralph picked up the kids, he took a long way home in case he was being followed. We wouldn't let the kids bring in the mail. There might be a bomb."

Amid the name-calling and threats, Bundy did not back down.

He does not simply admit to doing abortions. He proclaims it. In a letter to his hometown newspaper, he wrote: "I am an abortionist . . . and I am proud of it."

"At the end of every day I accomplish two things," he says. "I have helped a whole lot of women with a difficult problem. And I can say: 'Today is another victory for individual rights.' "

He respects logical debate. He says anti-abortionists do not.

"To debate a committed anti-abortionist is like debating a donkey," he says. "It comes down to, 'God says it's murder.' It's impossible to nail them with logic. I stopped arguing with them years ago.

"It's not just abortion. These holier-than-thou nitwits have their fingers into books, videos. They have a whole agenda that goes way, way beyond abortion. It's free speech, the freedoms that made America, that these nutcakes want to take away."

Now when he encounters picketers he tries to brush them off.

"I like to drive by and say, 'Another good day and you had absolutely no effect on us.' "

Even when he's called a killer, which is pretty often.

"The plain fact is that this doctor makes money killing babies," says Ken Connor, president of the Florida Right to Life. "He tries to justify what he's doing by demeaning people like us."

"I'm curious about what motivates Dr. Bundy," says Jean Doyle, a director of Florida's Right to Life, a national anti-abortion group. "He is a medical person, a healer. What could make a healer become an executioner, an abortionist?"

"I know a former abortionist," she continues. "He tells me abortionists have bad dreams, loss of appetite, drink too much . . .

"Dr. Bundy is kind of an oddity as abortion doctors go. I don't know of any other abortionist who admits it up front."

IT IS HIS OWN CHILDREN BUNDY wants to shield from the anger. But they know, and they defend him.

His daughter, watching him in the studio during the television debate, impulsively rose and took the microphone.

"My name is Laura Bundy," she said. "I'm 16 years old, a senior in high school. I'm Dr. Bundy's daughter. In junior high school I was verbally assaulted in school with cries, 'Your father is a butcher,' 'Your father is a murderer.'

"In eighth grade I was afraid to leave the house during the pickets. . . .

"I stand by my father. . . . I think he is right. I love you Daddy."

His wife Bunny laughs off insults or prepares for a good fight.

"I'm like, 'Come on,' " she says. " 'Get in my face. Say that in front of me and I'll show you. . . . ' "

"Our lifestyle is - we're a unit."

Bundy, 40, is tall and tanned, a man whose big love is fishing from his boat. His hair is long, at least for a doctor. He is quiet and direct. At the clinic he seems very much in charge. When he talks of abortion he is not philosophical. He talks of 11-year-olds who are pregnant, of women so desperate that they lie, saying they are 8 weeks pregnant when they are 18 weeks.

"When Ralph believes he's right, you could drive trucks over him and he'd get up and go to work," says his best friend, who does not want his name used for fear of losing customers.

"The older I get," Bundy says, "the more I think: 'If you can't handle what I do, that's your problem.' "

His friend says Bundy was just as firm in his convictions in high school.

Bundy was class president, student council representative, the boy who persuaded the others to settle down, his friend says.

"He always seemed to be heading in the right direction."

After receiving an undergraduate degree from Florida Technical College - now University of Central Florida - Bundy joined the Army, which put him through Duke University medical school.

As an Army doctor, Bundy delivered 1,024 babies. He was called out in the middle of the night, night after night. He worked all night, and then worked all day.

The strain damaged him. Bundy fell sick with sclerosing cholangitis, an obscure liver disease that can kill. It is largely caused by stress, Bundy says. Twice the Army summoned his family - first to Washington D.C. and later to California - where Bundy lay dying.

He took stock of the way he was leading his life. It seemed he could not withstand the demanding hours required of an obstetrician.

After the Army, he and his wife and three children moved to Central Florida, where Bundy had grown up.

He planned to become a partner with an established obstetrician-gynecologist and eventually open his own doctor's office. Meanwhile, he did abortions at the Women's Health Center.

Bundy works only during the day and takes Sundays and Mondays off. He would make more money with a private obstetrical-gynecological practice, but he would not have as much time for himself and his family.

"For a lot of years he lived not knowing if tomorrow would be the last day," says Bruce Bundy, his younger brother. "Now every day is a kind of gift."

On Sundays, Bundy and Bunny, his three children and her son go fishing. They take the 25-foot boat, drop anchor at a sandbar and grill hamburgers.

Bundy takes the kids swimming with manatees in St. Augustine. In the summer they go to Key West, where they swim during the day and play music at night.

"We talk music and fishing," says Bruce. "He is a top-notch guitar player. He plays rock 'n' roll - Jimmy Buffet, Santana, the Doobie Brothers. . . . Music runs through the whole family."

"That family does a tremendous amount of things together," he says.

Bundy says he talks to his children about personal subjects as well as fishing and music.

"I don't want my kids to think there's a mystery with drugs, sex and liquor," says Bundy. "I want them to be aware, to be rational and reasonable about what they do."

When asked what he'd do if a daughter became pregnant, he says: "I'd certainly have the same difficulties and ambivalence any other parent would have. I certainly wouldn't say, 'You should have an abortion.' I would say, 'You have choices.' "

"This is a guy who does not have fangs and horns," says Bunny. "He is not a black-cloaked murderer. He's a real live guy with four children and a wife and a boat and a pool and he even cleans his own pool."

"He is a renegade in this town," she continues, referring to the opinions of other local obstetrician-gynecologists. "He's doing other people's dirty work. He is as licensed as any other doctor. But people receive him as being less than a doctor. . . .

"We feel very strongly about what he does and why he does it."

ON A TUESDAY AFTER-noon in March, there are 23 women and a few men in the waiting room of the Women's Health Center.

The clinic is on a dirt road in Orlando. Its windows are barred, its carpet is worn, its chairs do not match. On its walls are pro-choice posters and drawings of Victorian women. It has a friendly feel, and patients talk easily with each other.

"This is the worst part," a woman says, in a knowing voice. "Waiting."

A teen-age boy and girl bend their heads over one of the innumerable forms that precede an abortion at the clinic. The girl is 17, her unruly hair held back from her face with sunglasses. She hesitates over a question - the answer, it seems, is too obvious for words.

"Because" - she finally writes - "my parents would be very upset and their reaction would be an unpleasant one."

The Women's Health Center is directed by Patte Martin and Ruth Arick - "two old-fashioned radical feminists," Bundy says with affection. The clinic does abortions on women who are between seven and 14 weeks pregnant.

Patte Martin's pepper-and-salt hair hangs down her back. Her eyes, in stylish aviator glasses, seem to flash when she talks about her enemy, the anti-abortionists.

Martin began working in abortion clinics soon after abortion became legal in 1973. For she and Arick, the Women's Health Center is not just a small business; it is a crusade, a life's purpose.

It is a place where bonds are formed quickly, where women confide in strangers who, for this day, are close friends. It is a woman's place, where women sympathize with each other about birth control pills that fail, men who betray.

Martin and Arick have organized the clinic to encompass all the activity - medical and psychological - that surrounds an abortion. A few days before an abortion, women come to the clinic to pay a \$50 deposit, to fill out forms, and to be counseled.

Counselors ask: Do you want an abortion? Are you being forced or coerced by anyone? Is an abortion what you, and only you, want?

They tell women what the tools are called. They hold up a diagram of a woman's pelvic area and trace the path the suction will take. They call the contents of the uterus "the tissue."

The 17-year-old girl with the sunglasses in her hair listens intently as the counselor describes a pelvic examination. She has never had one. She has never even seen a speculum. She and her boyfriend had used condoms for birth control - "when we thought about it."

An abortion in the first trimester, the first 12 weeks, of a pregnancy is relatively fast and simple. The cost is \$250.

On a busy day Bundy does 20 or more abortions.

He chats briefly to help the patient relax. He does the procedure, answers questions and wishes the woman well. This all takes about 15 minutes.

One woman, talking nervously, asked what Bundy uses for birth control. Bundy answered easily: "I've had a vasectomy. I can't tell the difference, but my wife says she does."

The woman laughed and felt more at ease.

To do an abortion Bundy inserts a slim wood stick, a dilater, into the uterus to slightly open the cervix.

He removes that and inserts a slim hollow plastic tube, a cannula, which is attached to the suction machine and which suctions blood, tissue and the fetus. The procedure takes about 90 seconds.

The patient is led from the operating room to an adjacent recovery room. She rests there for a half hour, covered with a light blanket. Nearby is a mug of Patte Martin's herbal tea and a wicker basket of soda crackers.

The operation is not always simple. A woman could have a double uterus or a tilted uterus or fibroid growths.

"Those are abortions that are technically quite interesting," he says.

Before the procedure, some women cry out of fear. Others say they want an abortion but mean, with their bodies and their hesitations, that they don't.

Bundy must try to hear what those women cannot bring themselves to say.

"One patient sat very tight, her shoulders up, her knees together, her hands clenched, rocking slightly. Just sitting there. . . ."

"I asked, 'Do you want to be here? Is this your decision?' "

The woman had been told an abortion was very painful, Bundy said. She was afraid. But she managed to calm herself enough to go through with it.

A woman with bronchitis, on the other hand, upon being told to wait and recover, became distraught.

"She screamed, 'I want to be unpregnant now!' " Bundy says.

Another patient was a conservative Baptist, very much against abortion, with children and a husband who'd had a vasectomy. She was pregnant by a friend and, faced with destroying her marriage or having an abortion, she chose the latter.

"She was quiet and teary," says Bundy. "I said, 'Take heart in your family. You're a good person and have something worth preserving. I'm sorry you have to go against your principles.' "

Sometimes a woman will dress and go away, still pregnant, and days later come back.

Some women tense, expecting pain.

"At the end they say, 'Are you done? Is that all?'

"That's my carrot. In the recovery room there's a great sense of relief."

The pregnancy is gone. It wasn't planned, it wasn't wanted. Now, she can start over.

If the pregnancy is wanted, everything is wonderful.

Bundy does not see those happy women. He sees the others. He hears women who say: "My boyfriend left me. My parents are unhappy; I have this huge thing in me; there's an urgency. I want my abortion right now.' "

Then, Bundy says, "You make your decision. And you get on with the rest of your life."

Corrections

***** CORRECTION PUBLISHED JUNE 10, 1990 *****Patte Martin
owns and is executive director of The Women's Health Center Inc. in Orlando and Daytona Beach.
Dr. Ralph Bundy is medical director of the clinic, which is also known as The Birth Control
Center.*****

LIBRARIAN'S NOTE *****Correct spelling for Jimmy
Buffett.*****

Copyright © 2020, Orlando Sentinel

This article is related to: [Duke University](#)