

## Abortion Wars

### **From Internet campaigns to cookie boycotts, small pro-life groups are adopting a range of tactics to fight the nation's largest pro-choice organization**

**WEB EXCLUSIVE**

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Usually, all it takes is a phone call. Inside his small Virginia office, Jim Sedlak picks up the receiver and listens as worried callers sound off about the Planned Parenthood Federation of America's newest clinic or its distribution of pamphlets in their area. They don't like it, they tell him, but they don't know how to stop it. So Sedlak leans back in his chair and, drawing on almost 20 years of experience, tells them how tiny anti-abortion groups can tackle the nation's largest abortion-rights group.

Sedlak has been taking aim at Planned Parenthood for years through his small, grassroots anti-abortion organization, American Life League's STOPP International, a two-man group whose sole mission is to bring down its giant ideological opponent. Planned Parenthood normally brushes off attacks from such "fringe groups," reserving its considerable strength for reproductive healthcare services and advocacy. But it's hard to ignore recent anti-abortion legislative victories like the ban on so-called partial birth abortion passed in November, the more recent Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which defines fetuses as unborn children, and similar state measures against fetal homicide. Anti-abortion activists are gaining ground, and that's forced Planned Parenthood to take a closer look at the opposition. "It gives us a big challenge," Planned Parenthood President Gloria Feldt told NEWSWEEK. "But we're ready."

Feldt has learned that even individual efforts can have nationwide ripple effects. Take the case of John Pisciotta, director of Pro-Life Waco and a Baylor University economics professor, who sparked a furor in Waco, Texas, this February when he decided to attack the relationship between the local Girl Scouts council and Planned Parenthood. The council, long a participant in a half-day Planned Parenthood conference on puberty education, had ignored Pisciotta's pleas to distance itself from what he considered "an assault on Christian morality." After chatting with Sedlak, a longtime friend, Pisciotta recorded a 60-second spot for a Christian radio station urging listeners to reconsider supporting the scouts. Then, he asked them to boycott their Thin Mints.

The cookie boycott wasn't successful—sales actually rose 2 percent—but the local council did break off its relationship with the group. And, much to Pisciotta's surprise, his local concern became a national one. STOPP was flooded with phone calls from angry parents demanding to know whether their councils were linked with Planned Parenthood. Individual Girl Scout troops have autonomy in choosing their programs, and national CEO Kathy Cloninger has said that those aligned with Planned Parenthood would continue their relationships. Sedlak compiled a list of them that he posted online last week. It's up to individual viewers, he says, to decide what to do with that information.

Chris Danze is another anti-abortion activist who attracted attention last fall when he learned of plans to build another Planned Parenthood clinic in his hometown of Austin, Texas. He decided to fight back, with a little help from STOPP. On a Web site designed for the protest ([boycottplannedparenthood.org](http://boycottplannedparenthood.org)), which STOPP helped publicize, Danze posted the phone numbers of each company involved in the clinic's construction, many of them mom-and-pop businesses with a lot to lose. The calls started immediately, and became so overwhelming that one subcontractor reported receiving 1,200 phone calls in one week. Other companies received faxes of aborted fetuses. After six weeks, the main contractor pulled out, halting the project. Construction resumed in January after Planned Parenthood took over as general contractor, fueled by what they say was an outpouring of monetary and moral support. But Danze's disruptions had earned the organization's attention. "In the beginning, we did regard Chris Danze as some[one] that was simply nipping at our heels," says Danielle Tierney, spokeswoman for the group's Texas Capital Region. "There was no way we could have predicted his ability to convince our general contractor to withdraw from the project." Since then, her affiliate has become more organized, stepping up volunteer recruiting, talking to the media and calling on local and state political allies, including former Texas Governor Ann Richards, to reassure subcontractors that they wouldn't be put out of business for aligning with Planned Parenthood.

Though STOPP has notched more successes in Texas than elsewhere, the movement isn't limited to George W. Bush's home state. Sedlak counts around 18 chapters that have sprung up around the country, and credits STOPP most recently for helping to shut down a Houghton, Mich., clinic and halting construction of another in Los Angeles. Anti-abortionists around the country can follow his detailed "Plan for Defeating Planned Parenthood" on STOPP's Web site, complete with statistics and instructions on how to write letters and hold rallies. "If we get enough people fighting in communities, it will

raise to the state level, and it will raise to the federal level," Sedlak says.

Planned Parenthood and other abortion-rights groups still play down such victories, but they are paying more attention to them. "The anti-choice groups like STOPP are zealots," says Planned Parenthood's Feldt. While she argues that her organization has more than enough strength and "extraordinarily deep taproots" to fend them off, she does acknowledge that abortion-rights activists have grown dangerously complacent in their confidence that they have the law on their side. "There is a war on choice," says Feldt.

Her strategy? To try to assemble the largest abortion-rights demonstration ever at the March for Women's Lives in Washington D.C. on April 25. "Now," she says, "is the time we must get activated." And she doesn't mind taking a cue from the anti-abortionists about harnessing grassroots power to do it.

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