

# LIFE ON THE LINE

Knights were among the many who came together for 40 Days for Life

BY ALTON J. PELOWSKI

In the summer of 2004, the Holy Spirit was at work in College Station, Texas. David Arabie, who had recently been elected grand knight of Texas A&M Council 10624, came to his brother Knights with an idea he admits was pretty radical. He suggested the Knights hold a prayer vigil outside a local abortion clinic for 24 hours every day until it closed down. David Bereit, who was working as the director of a grassroots pro-life organization in nearby Bryan, approached him about the idea, and their meeting soon led to the first "40 Days for Life" campaign.

The success of 40 Days for Life in 2004 led to six more campaigns in communities from Washington to Wisconsin to North Carolina. Last summer, Bereit led a team in organizing what was perhaps the largest, simultaneous pro-life effort in history. From Sept. 26 to Nov. 6, 2007, more than 22,000 people in 89 communities in 33 states joined in praying, fasting and witnessing for the cause of human life.

In many of the cities where 40 Days for Life took place, abortion facilities had never before encountered any opposition. As a result of the campaign, there have been hun-

dreds of reports about women who have chosen to have their babies, and pregnancy resource centers have seen a dramatic increase in clients. Other results were visible, too: An abortion clinic in Pensacola, Fla., closed for three weeks. In one city, a Planned Parenthood employee was so moved by the people praying outside, she quit, saying, "I can't do this anymore." And in some places, even former clinic workers joined in prayer outside the places they used to work.

"Those stories are still coming in. They're all over the nation," says Jason Ferguson, program director for the Houston Coalition for Life. A member of Our Lady of Walsingham Council 13615, Ferguson was very involved with the original campaign in Bryan and coordinated volunteers for the vigil in Houston.

Shawn Carney, a member of Council 10624 who led an extensive door-to-door outreach during the first 40 Days for Life and served as treasurer for the national initiative, explains, "40 Days was an invitation." It was an invitation to Christians, to people who work in the abortion industry, to those considering an abortion, and to post-abortive women and men, he said.

## PEACEFUL, PRAYERFUL PRESENCE

Everyone who attended a 40 Days for Life vigil was asked to sign a "Statement of Peace." Organizers made their nonviolent philosophy explicit from the beginning to curb any potential problems and disprove the media's false depictions of the pro-life movement as violent or extremist.

In truth, Ferguson says, the pro-life community exemplifies peace and compassion. "It's not about



In fall 2004, Knights and other students from Texas A&M University in College Station helped to make the first 40 Days for Life a success. Abortions performed at the local Planned Parenthood were reduced by 28 percent.

forcing anyone's will on anyone else," he says. "It's about offering up prayer and sacrifice, and relying on the power of God to protect the innocent and help the suffering."

The simple focus on peaceful prayer also helped solicit participation from numerous volunteers who would have otherwise felt uncomfortable with the idea. "Many people say, 'I want to do more, but I don't want to be seen as a fanatic or something like that,'" says Carney. "Once people just go, and stop thinking about abortion as something you vote on, they begin to see."

"You see the brokenness, and you want to do more," says Ferguson. He adds that when people become educated about abortion, they often are shocked by the gravity of the problem and ask what they can do to help.

"The most basic thing is we can pray, and we can do it where all of the pain is," says Carney. "There are people who need our prayers and need our help and need our fasting."

There are innumerable examples of men, women and youth who made 40 Days for Life a success. "People would drive an hour to fill a three-hour slot. Others were waking up at 4 a.m. every day," says Ferguson. "It has given people a tangible opportunity and a challenge to do something big for the cause of life."



National Campaign Director David Bereit and his family (center) join a 40 Days for Life event in Greenville, S.C.

## RECRUITING GOOD MEN

Texas A&M Council 10624 in College Station has now participated in two 40 Days for Life campaigns, in 2004 and 2007. In cooperation with the Brazos Valley Coalition for Life, the Knights also participate in smaller-scale vigils, help families in need, and even travel to Huntsville, where state executions are performed.



David Arabie, a member of Dallas Council 799, helped to start the original 40 Days for Life

In 2005, the council recorded a 52-member net gain and earned the Family Activity Award at the annual College Knights Conference for its participation in 40 Days for Life. Membership and activities have continued to grow, and Council 10624 won the Outstanding College Council Award at the 2007 conference last September. Grand Knight Richard Sanchez says this would not have been possible without 40 Days for Life.

Shawn Carney, now executive director of the Coalition for Life, was one of Council 10624's new recruits in 2004. He has been impressed by the Order's mission and history, and sees an event like 40 Days for Life as a "perfect recruiting opportunity" for the Knights, since it attracts men who are passionate about their faith and willing to stand up for the culture of life.

The abortion industry, including the national leadership of Planned Parenthood, has seen 40 Days for Life as a formidable threat. "They don't like this because they don't know how to deal with it," says Carney. "You can say we're 'anti-choice religious zealots,' but people drive by and just see a mom and her four-year-old with a sign that says 'Honk if You're Pro-Life.'"

### THE 'KNIGHT SHIFT'

During 40 Days for Life, Knights were often among those called upon to help. About half of the communi-

ties conducted a nonstop 24-hour vigil, which required 960 hours of constant presence. This seemed impossible to many at first, but organizers tried to make it more manageable by encouraging shorter shifts.

"Presence during the business days is obviously essential, but in those communities that did it 24 hours there was a real surge of energy and unbelievable results," explains Carney. "Those were often areas where Knights of Columbus really stepped it up and did the night shifts." In fact, in several communities, the late-night hours were sometimes dubbed "the Knight shift."

Ferguson notes that when it came to filling the more difficult hours, "It was definitely the young guys who stepped up to the plate." But that does not mean older Knights didn't participate or play an important role from the beginning.

For example, Texas Past State Deputy Emil Ogden (1979-81) was instrumental in raising the funds to make 40 Days possible on both a local and a national level. "We wouldn't have been able to do it without his generosity," says Carney. At age 80, Ogden is still "the epitome of what it means to be a Knight," he adds. "He doesn't just write a check and go about his business. He's out there praying. He believes in something, supports it and acts upon it."

"What makes the Knights different is we live our faith out on the line — right out in front as the strong right arm of the Church," says Arabie. "If you're pro-life, you need to be on the line — especially if you're a Knight of Columbus."

### A SIGN OF HOPE

One of the greatest victories of 40 Days for Life, according to the organizers, is that it unified the pro-life movement in an unprecedented way. Churches, right-to-life groups, pregnancy resource centers, adop-



Pictured with a missionary image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Knights and their families participated in the 40 Days for Life vigil in Ann Arbor, Mich., last October.

tion agencies, post-abortion counselors and others joined together, all embracing a common purpose. While about 70 percent of participants were Catholic, there were many evangelical communities and some non-Christians involved as well.

Much of the participation consisted of families and youth. For many, the fact that so many young people stood up for life was an important witness and a sign of hope. "It brings a lot of hope to a lot of people, especially the older generation," says Carney.

As they completed 40 Days for Life, the consensus in participating communities was to continue with some form of consistent, peaceful prayer. Participants in Fargo, N.D., decided to extend their 24-hour vigil by 10 extra days. At a midnight Mass at the end of day 40, Fargo Bishop Samuel J. Aquila said, "Just because these 40 days are complete, it does not mean that we give up our fight for life and turn back to the way that we were living." Bishop Aquila is a member of Cardinal Muench Council 782 in Fargo.

"We're not going to end abortion in 40 days," says Ferguson. "But just like in the Bible, 40 days was the initial preparation for something bigger."

For more information on 40 Days for Life, visit [www.40daysfor-life.com](http://www.40daysfor-life.com). ■

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