

FOCUS: PRO-LIFE ISSUES



Sav-A-Life Director Teresa Towles with sons Grayson and Gabriel

FREE FROM SHAME

Ministry exalts Christ, helps hurting women heal

BY PAT CENTNER

In the late 1960s, when the sexual revolution was in full swing, Wales Goebel of Birmingham, Alabama, devoted his life to sharing the love of Christ with high school, college and university students. An evangelist with a heart for the young, Wales' ministry included crusades aimed at helping young people who struggled with their own identity in a world where sexual promiscuity and substance abuse were running rampant.

As Wales counseled the students, he was often approached by young girls seeking help after they'd suffered the anguish of an abortion. Deeply burdened by the guilt and shame he saw these young women

experiencing, Wales began to wonder what he could do to help prevent others from taking such a drastic step.

"One of the hardest things for girls and young women to do was to forgive themselves after they had an abortion," remarks Wales. "They were carrying a great deal of pain and trauma."

As a result of those encounters, the Lord blessed Wales with the vision for a center where unwed girls and women who were struggling with pregnancy issues could receive non-judgmental love and care, biblical counsel, and education regarding abor-



Wales Goebel

tion and its devastating consequences.

In 1980, the Goebels opened the first Sav-A-Life center in Birmingham, which was followed two years later by the Lifeline Adoption Agency. Since Lifeline's inception, more than 750 babies have been placed in Christian homes.

Today, a mind-boggling 50,000 women a year are given tangible help and God's redemptive love at more than 65 Sav-A-Life centers in six Southern states and several countries. The centers provide free client services that include pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, medical assistance, post-abortion counseling, abstinence training, parenting classes and clothing and supplies for needy mothers.

Twenty years of ministry

One such center is Sav-A-Life in Tupelo, Mississippi, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. The center's founding director was Kathy Coats, who is now with American Family Radio. Nancy Pruett, director since 1991, speaks of the ministry's primary mission.

"The thing that is key about Sav-A-Life ... is that evangelism is first," says Nancy. "We believe that sharing Christ with these girls is the key to not only encouraging them to choose life for their babies, but to changing their lives forever. ... If we talk a girl into choosing life for her child and not aborting, but she dies and goes to hell, we've done her no favor. So we try to keep Christ as the main focus, while giving the truth about abortion."

Tupelo Sav-A-Life provides all services, ranging from meeting physical and emotional needs of unwed mothers and their babies, to providing 12-week classes for post-abortive women. Nancy firmly believes the chief way to stop abortion in this country is to heal those who have been silenced by shame so they can say to the world, "I know what abortion is, and it's not good for you."

To help with the healing, funding is needed. It's an ongoing challenge. Donations from individuals and churches are Sav-A-Life's only source of income. Nancy says churches can be of significant help by putting their local Sav-A-Life center in their missions budget to receive regular contributions. "And it doesn't matter if it's only \$25 a month," Nancy emphasizes. "Every dollar helps."

Nancy and Judy Sewell, the Tupelo of-

fice manager, comprise the entire paid staff for the center. Thus, volunteers are vital. Counselors are badly needed, and training is provided. The only qualification is a compassionate heart. Volunteers can also fill other needs, such as cleaning the offices and sorting donated baby clothes.

Nancy's journey

Nancy's own experience with Sav-A-Life began with her serving as a volunteer, because she, herself, had undergone an abortion at age 16. "After it was over," Nancy remarks, "I went home and tried to put my life back together and tried to forget it had ever happened."

But she couldn't forget. And, as with most who get an abortion, Nancy's self-worth died with her child. As she sought help, she was lovingly told, "God forgives you, and since you're forgiven, you should just get on with your life."

"But what they were not taking into account," explains Nancy, "is that a woman who has aborted a child has suffered the death of that child, and she has to grieve that loss. But we're not given permission to grieve aborted children in this society. So that grieving process is thwarted, and all that pain is buried inside until you're willing to let God go in and open up that wound and clean it out and begin to pour in the balm of Gilead and heal you from the inside out."

When she was 23 and at the end of her own mental and emotional rope, Nancy cried out to God. "And over a period of time He revealed Himself to me, and I became aware that He loved me no matter what I had done. The Scripture 'If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away, and all things have become new' came alive to me, and I was finally able to release my pent-up suffering. I realized it didn't matter what other people thought about me. God loved me, and it was His love that healed my shame, His love that healed my grief, His love that made me whole again."

The family of God

Through God's loving grace, that lesson is one that every woman who's had an abortion must experience before she can begin to truly heal, says Nancy. "And something that we hammer home to the post-abortive women in our Bible studies ev-

ery week is, 'You are not your sin. Your sin does not define you. You are a holy, chosen and dearly loved child of God.' And when that knowledge finally goes from their head to their heart, it sets them free."

The close relationship between the Sav-A-Life centers is a blessing to them all, says Nancy. "We're like a big family." Other loving relationships include those between the staff, volunteers and clients. They share a special bond because many staff and volunteers have walked the same path as the clients they serve. A few examples in Tupelo's post-abortion ministry include: three former clients who now work in centers in other towns; one who helped start a center in another state; five who volunteer in Tupelo; and three who are now directors of other Sav-A-Life centers.

The young woman who directs the new Batesville, Mississippi, Sav-A-Life is one of the latter.



Sixteen years ago Adam Inman's (right) birth mother came to Sav-A-Life and chose life for her baby. Over the years, Adam's adopted family has expressed appreciation to the ministry by sending photos of Adam to Director Nancy Pruett (left).

For assistance with a crisis pregnancy or post-abortion counseling

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➤ Visit www.pregnancycenters.org for a national/international list of centers. Or go online to www.google.com, and type in "crisis pregnancy center."

From agony to exaltation

Teresa Towles is a chatterbox with a quick laugh and a bubbly personality. Her honesty and transparency are refreshing gifts from the merciful God who so dramatically changed her life. Her story emulates that of so many women whose lives are shattered by unspeakable pain at a young age, and who, later in life, turn to substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and, often, abortion as they attempt to hide their own self-loathing while searching desperately for love and acceptance.

Teresa was raped continually when she was seven years old by a family member outside the home. In addition, she suffered physical abuse, and by the time she was in her teens, had already developed a reputation as a "bad girl."

"I believed that the only way I could be loved was by being sexual or having sex," she explains. Teresa began to sleep around with older men, but found no satisfaction or fulfillment. When her family moved to Mississippi, she says she did well for a while. "I went to church and got baptized, but then the cycle started all over again – the drinking and the guys."

Teresa married her old high school sweetheart, but the marriage failed when he became physically abusive. A subsequent partner was pleased when she became pregnant, but suddenly changed his mind, urging Teresa to get an abortion.

"I tried to convince him otherwise," she laments, "but I eventually gave in to his wishes." That first abortion was a nightmare that never ended. Even today, Teresa is haunted by the suctioning sound that meant the death of her child.

After that, Teresa's life became a blur of alcoholism and promiscuity. There was a second abortion, then a third pregnancy. But she told that baby's father, "I'm taking responsibility for my actions and no one can talk me out of it." He said, "Fine," and left. Teresa completed the pregnancy, and today Grayson is a bright, rambunctious five-year-old.

"God started to really work in my life," exults Teresa, "and I thank Him every day for being such a forgiving, loving and merciful God. He brought a wonderful man into my life, and after we were married, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior." And this time Teresa knew it was real.

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Finding His will

That marked the beginning of a loving relationship with the Lord that led Teresa on a burning search for a way to express her thankfulness for God's forgiving grace. Ultimately, she felt Him leading her toward "something to do with abortions." She began to investigate and was told about Sav-A-Life.

Teresa became convinced that God wanted her to open a Sav-A-Life in Batesville, so she set out to learn about the ministry and was welcomed into the Sav-A-Life fold. Although there were obstacles to overcome, God provided a building and all the necessities for the Batesville center. It opened in November 2002.

Perhaps the most incredible gift that God gave Teresa was her second son. Initially diagnosed as Down Syndrome, the spot on his brain was later declared Trisomy 18, a severe retardation often resulting in death. The physician suggested Teresa get an abortion. But she trusted God.

"I took a stand and told him no matter what was wrong with this baby, God was

going to use it to His glory." And He did. A later ultrasound revealed that the spot had disappeared, and, miraculously, little Gabriel was born completely healthy.

"I am still amazed at what God has done in my life," concludes Teresa. "He has shown me how to use my life for His honor, praise and glory, and to be bold in telling my story so others like me can find healing. The world needs to know that abortion is not over in a few minutes."



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