

Voices of Choice

• PHYSICIANS WHO PROVIDED ABORTIONS BEFORE *ROE V. WADE* •

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George Tiller, MD

Dr. George Tiller is Medical Director of Women's Health Care Services, P.A. He is also a Clinical Instructor of Family Practice Residency at Wesley Medical Center and a Clinical Instructor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine Wichita State Branch at the University of Kansas School of Medicine. He has been shot; his clinic has been bombed; and for more than two years he lived under the eye of a federal marshal. Dr. Tiller is a Board Member of *Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health*®.

In July of 1970, I planned to start a Dermatology residency. On August 21, 1970, my father, mother, sister and brother-in-law were killed in an aircraft accident. My sister had a 12-month-old boy, Maurice. They had written out a will in longhand the evening before the airplane crash, that I was to raise Maurice. So we took charge of my sister's boy and we moved back to Wichita. My game plan was to spend six months here, close out my father's huge family medicine practice.

After I had been there for a little while, patients in the practice began to ask me if I was going to do abortions like my father did. I was outraged. Why would these nice people say that he was a scumbag kind of a physician?

I began to ask some of these women. And I found out that in 1945, '46 or '47, a young woman for whom Dad had already delivered two babies came to him pregnant again right away, and she said something to the effect that,

... I looked down and all this blood is all over the place. I thought, "She shot me ..."

"I can't take it, can you help me?" That is apparently the way you asked for an abortion from your regular doctor before abortion was legal. Dad said, "No. Big families are in vogue, by the time the baby gets here, everything will be all right." She had a non-healthcare provider abortion and came back and died.

I can understand how upset my father was. I do not know whether he did 100 abortions or 200 abortions or 300 abortions. I think it may have been something like 200 over a period of about 20 years, but I don't know for sure. The women in my father's practice for whom he did abortions educated me and taught me that abortion is about women's hopes, dreams, potential, the rest of their lives. Abortion is a matter of survival for women.

When it became legal and my patients began to ask for it, I'd say,

"Sure. It's a legal process." I was a service provider. I was a physician. The patients needed abortions, and I did them. It is my fundamental philosophy that patients are emotionally, mentally, morally, spiritually and physically competent to struggle with complex health issues and come to decisions that are appropriate for them.

We've been picketed since 1975. My office has been blown up. In 1993, I survived an assassination attempt. My kids were harassed in high school. I had to write letters of complaint to the City Council and the Board of Education. We had people who actually camped across the street from our house. I restrict where I go to eat, where I travel. You see a car following you, you think, "Ah-ha, let's watch that." You're always on alert. You're always looking around.

I was leaving the office. It was 7:00 in the evening. As I'm driving out, I have to slow down and I have to stop. Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and I thought to myself, "That lady is shooting me with rubber bullets. I'm not afraid of rubber bullets." Then I looked down and all this blood is all over the place. I thought, "She shot me. She can't do that! I'll get her." I saw her running through some front yards. So I zipped down the street, turned in front of her to block her escape. She stops and reaches into this little fanny pack that she's wearing in the front, and I thought, "She's going for her gun again. She shot you once, George. She'll shoot you again. You are in the wrong place at the wrong time."

So then I drove off. Ended up back at the office, and I don't remember anything for about 20 minutes. I remember trying to get into my car and drive myself to the hospital. I said, "Let's not make this a big media event." Well, I had lost 20 minutes and the TV trucks were there. I thought, "How'd they'd get here so soon?"

There was never any question in my mind that I was going back to work the next day. I belonged there and they were not going to separate me from my job and they were not going to separate me from my community. So I did go to work the next day, and we got everything done. People got taken care of, it took a long time. Arms hurt, bled a little bit, but so what? I am not going to be run over and I'm not going to run out. It's just that simple.

I am a member of this community. Our DNA has been here since 1880. I belong here. The folks that come in from out of town, they are the intruders. Forty percent of all the people who were arrested here during the Operation Rescue in 1991 came from out of state. I intend to stay here. I am part of the fabric of Kansas and Kansas is part of the fabric of me.

I have more to be grateful for than I have to be resentful about. We have much more support in Wichita than we have rejection and castigation. If Wichita and our community did not want us to be here, I wouldn't be here. But the vast majority of people in Wichita support, on a quiet level, what we do, which is help women and families.

Edited Transcript

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