

UNRELINQUISHED PAIN

BY COLIN FLAHERTY

Daily newspapers usually don't report suicides. But if they did, the story of how one of San Diego's most respected and controversial feminists took her own life might have started like this: Deborah Fleming, 35, former director of Womancare Clinic, was found dead May 26 of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head at a small hotel in Yuma, Arizona.

Fleming's nine-year battle with anti-abortion activists (including Reader publisher Jim Holman, who refused to carry Womancare ads) established her reputation as one of San Diego's most visible — and effective — abortion-rights advocates. Through headlines, harassment, lawsuits, pickets, and bomb threats, reporters doing abortion stories could always count on Fleming for a concise quote. And under her leadership, the clinic's revenues grew as much as 40 percent in a year.

But in early 1989, Fleming, complaining of burnout, quit her job at Womancare and dropped out

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of local feminist politics. At the time of her death, she was a bookkeeper and receptionist at the Pacific Center of Health and Medicine and Acupuncture in Hillcrest. She also operated a professional massage service from her home near Morley Field.

She left a bewildered community of feminists wondering how such a strong, articulate, energetic, forceful advocate with training as a mental-health worker could sink so low that suicide was the only way out. "That's the question we're all asking," said Catherine Walters, Fleming's roommate who received one of the two notes Fleming left. "We don't know."

Walters and Fleming's co-workers at Womancare refused further comment. But some of Fleming's friends attribute her anguish to shell-shock from her abortion battles, despondency over her inability to have a baby, and unresolved childhood traumas. "When people are in a position of being strong, it's very draining," said JoAnn Vignola, who served with Fleming on the NOW board of directors. Dr. Joseph Lozzano, head of the Pacific Clinic, was puzzled when Fleming applied for a job. "Why does a person running a large clinic want to work here as a bookkeeper?" I asked. She said she wanted a retreat. We provided that.

Before being thrust into leadership in the abortion-rights debate in 1980, Fleming had come to San Diego to get a job as a counselor for troubled adolescents. She had graduated *magna cum laude* in 1978 from the University of Wisconsin with a degree in education. She took courses in parenting, counseling, and women's studies. Though she complained of being a slow learner, she was an

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of San Diego." Just below a list of all the usual suspects, in this case the city council members, is the note, "Completion: November 1990." They have yet to break ground. ■

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excellent writer. One professor was so impressed with her reports that he asked for copies of them.

Fleming's only pregnancy (which friends say was the result of artificial insemination) resulted in the birth of a son named Brandon. He died in 1985, four days after he was born. Fleming showed pictures of her son in his coffin to visitors at her Womancare office and later to massage clients at her home. A

1989 effort to adopt a child was unsuccessful.

Less than a month before her death, Fleming emerged from her political exile. She and Atlanta health-care activist Janet Callum visited several Midwest abortion clinics for nine days. Reacting to a recent Supreme Court decision potentially limiting abortion rights, Fleming taught women a self-abortion technique called menstrual extraction.

"Debby was somebody that really wanted a child," said Callum. "She loved children. She wanted to be a mother. Whatever prevented her from being a mother caused her pain. But I don't know if that's the only reason that contributed to her suicide." Shawn Mount, one of Fleming's clients, said, "My impression was she definitely wanted to have a child and be with that child. She realized life was not what she wanted it to be without it.

I always knew there was a lot going on inside of her. And when a friend asked if I had heard about Debby, I said, 'Did she commit suicide?' But most of Fleming's friends were surprised by the news of her death. She let few see the dark, brooding side that tortured her from childhood.

To counselor and friend Jeanann Eckert, Fleming's inability to deal with childhood trauma is what led her to take her own life. "She was in constant pain," said Eckert. "And it was unrelinquishable for her." Police would not disclose the contents of the suicide notes but said they did not explain why she did it. She did not bring a change of clothes (or anything else) to the hotel, nor did she make any long-distance calls, said hotel manager Ken Broyles. Police do not know

where she obtained the recently purchased .38 caliber revolver. She apparently did not know anyone in Yuma, said Eckert. That's probably why she went there. "There's nothing there."

Though her anguish was life-long, her decision appears to have been sudden. She had placed an ad in the gay magazine *Bravo!* looking for a roommate to share her three-bedroom house, available June 1. On June 3, more than 200 friends gathered at Morley Field to remember Fleming. On June 9, ten women watched as her cremated remains were interred at Mount Hope cemetery, next to her son. ■