



Frontline's "The Last Abortion Clinic":
What's Fair in a Video World?
Epilogue

Frontline producer Raney Aronson and her team eventually decided not to use the footage from the abortion support group meeting at the Jackson Center for Pregnancy Choices. When the documentary, called "The Last Abortion Clinic," ran on November 8, 2005, none of the women from the support group appeared in it. It was not an easy decision. The production team had found several compelling reasons to use the scene, not least that it presented an important aspect of the pro-life strategy. Jackson Center Director Barbara Beavers had made that very point. Recalls Aronson:

She was pushing me to see this. Her basic point to me was that the pro-life movement has a bad rap that they're very anti-woman, that they don't care about the woman, they just care about the child. So this [support group] is something that they've constructed to say, 'We support women... When they've had an abortion, we're there for support. We don't shun them, we bring them in, we try to help them understand what they did.'¹

At the same time, Beavers' very eagerness for Aronson to film the abortion support group raised the producer's antennae about being used as a mouthpiece for political purposes. There was nothing specific she could point to, but Aronson worried about the potential effect on the neutral voice of her film of including that scene.

More importantly, however, Aronson could not justify using the scene given the theme of the documentary—the changing legal landscape since *Roe v Wade*. She explains:

I think if my film was about the pro-life movement strategies in general, we would have been remiss not to include it. But our film was actually

¹ Author's interviews with Raney Aronson on July 5, August 13 and August 20, 2007. All further quotes from Aronson, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

about the legal landscape, specifically, and how the pro-life movement was working within the legal framework to change laws.

We basically had a very strict story we were telling which is, what happened since the states got more power? And I couldn't look at that pro-life support group and say, because of these laws or because of action by the Mississippi state legislators, they were able to have a support group for women who had had abortions.

Editor Seth Bomse agrees. The film's theme, he emphasizes, was access to abortion. He recalls watching footage of a woman in the abortion support group crying; while moving, it felt irrelevant. He elaborates:

I remember I was looking and I'm thinking, no, this is just too far in one direction. And it's not about this film. It's not about access. Because really I think in a lot of ways what the film is about [is] *Roe vs. Wade* said abortion is legal. That's the way folks understand it. What does that actually mean in a state like Mississippi? Is there access to it?²

Aronson also believed that if she were to use any part of the scene, she would need to more fully develop the character of one of the women in the group. But that would add minutes to the documentary—and time was a commodity in short supply. She says:

In order to do that scene right, my thinking was you have to devote at least five to seven minutes on this. You have to get to know the characters. We knew Barbara [Beavers] a lot, but Barbara hadn't actually had an abortion. So you'd actually have to get to know somebody else in the room.

But in the end, Aronson points out, there is no roadmap to doing a documentary. Just because her team elected not to use the support group scene does not mean that in any absolute sense it should not have been incorporated. She explains that, in some ways, a film is never done.

I think I struggled the entire way through this film and I still struggle... After you film a piece, it's not as if it's gone from your psyche. You still question decisions you make, you still think about it. I still go back and watch it and I think, 'Oh, why did I do this? Why did I do that?'

For example, Aronson continues to wonder whether the early decision to focus on the legal story was the correct one. She could have chosen instead to highlight the strategies and tactics of the pro-life movement.

² Author's telephone interview with Seth Bomse, August 27, 2007. All further quotes from Bomse, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

We could have redefined the film along the lines of, look at this powerful movement and all that they've done. And one of the chapters, and maybe it would have been a hefty chapter, could have been the legal landscape within it. We did the opposite. We took the legal landscape first, which is a very public affairs-y kind of decision to make, and then went and found the characters inside that story. So it's a top-heavy approach and some people won't agree with that approach. I'm not even sure if I totally agree with it, actually, in retrospect.