

"The right to life is the first among human rights." –Pope Francis

Hope Lives Here: The Pregnancy Help Center

by Katie Martin

IT'S A WARM MONDAY MORNING AS I MAKE MY way through the front door of the Pregnancy Help Center at 1311 Crenshaw Boulevard in Torrance. A bell chimes lightly and a woman walks into the reception area to greet me. I tell her I'm there to meet with Norma, and she guides me to a room used to counsel clients. Norma has to make a quick phone call, so while I wait I take in the feel of the room: The walls are light blue and calming, the couch and chair comfortable and inviting. There is a large desk along one wall and it is tidy and organized without seeming sterile. The lighting is warm. It is peaceful. And it is purposeful.

"They get it," I think to myself as I scribble notes onto my paper. The touches in the room are certainly details but I know details can make a near-pivotal difference in stressful situations. As I write, a phone rings in the other room; a Center volunteer answers and I hear her set up an appointment for someone to come in later that day for a pregnancy test. It's barely after 10 a.m. and the Center has been open for maybe ten minutes. "They're busy, too," I note.

My simple thoughts are halted as Norma Grove enters the room. Norma is the Marketing and Communications Manager of the Center and was a volunteer Client Advocate for nine years before becoming part-time staff in January 2012. She has a kind smile and conversation comes easy.

"No, I haven't," Norma tells me when I ask if she has always been pro-life. She mentions turning her life back to Christ and the transformation that followed. "I started to see the value of life and the sanctity of life."

The Pregnancy Help Center opened its doors in 1976; prior to that, it existed for five years as a phone helpline for women experiencing a crisis pregnancy. Now a 501(c)3 organization and a licensed medical facility with an ultrasound machine, the Center has been in the same location on Crenshaw for the last 38 years.

Norma tells me that they have a pool of about 80 volunteers at the clinic: some are Client Advocates who are usually the first to meet with clients, some are General Volunteers who help with basic office duties like data entry and making phone calls, and others are Nurse

Volunteers. There are only five paid staff members; one is full-time and the rest are part-time.

All the services provided at the Center are free and include pregnancy testing, STD/STI testing for men and women, obstetric ultrasounds, both options consultations and post-abortion consultations with Client Advocates, breastfeeding and nutrition education, and assistance with the Medi-Cal application process. The Center also offers referrals for adoption services, maternity housing, legal services, childbirth preparation and counseling services.

"Our number one goal is to reach more abortion-minded women," Norma says. She points out that there are an estimated 3,100 abortions yearly in the South Bay alone. "It doesn't seem like a huge number, but when you think about it, that's like the World Trade Center every year. That's a lot of babies."

In the effort to reach more men and women, the Center revamped its website last year to include more information and a way to schedule appointments online. It has ads on local billboards, at South Bay Galleria, and can be found on Yelp and Craigslist; Google has also provided the Center with a grant for monthly advertising.

"We want to be wherever they are," Norma says referencing their demographic of abortion-minded men and women. And it's working. This January alone, they served 76 new female clients with pregnancy tests, nearly 20 percent of the number of women they served in all of 2013.

"We want to increase the number of women we see, we want to increase our hours, we want to have a bigger space," Norma responds when I ask about the Center's goals. "We also are looking into an abstinence education program and a post-abortion healing program for women."

The Center is currently open 24 hours every week during varying times Monday through Friday and the Nurse Manager or a Nurse Volunteer is always present during open hours. The acquisition of an ultrasound machine in August 2013 has increased the opportunities to reach more abortion-minded men and women.

As if on cue, as Norma relates to me the ultrasound process, a woman and her male companion

are welcomed into the Center and taken into the ultrasound room. Norma later tells me the story of Amber, a young woman six-months pregnant whose father was adamant she have an abortion. When they came to the Center for an ultrasound, the image of the baby on the screen softened both of their hearts. Baby Ezekiel was born February 12, 2014.

Flanked by four abortion clinics in the South Bay area, the Center is a vestige of hope for the unborn. “The more ultrasounds we can do, the more babies we can save,” Norma says. “There is a direct relation to how much money we bring in and how much of that we can do.”

In addition to events like baby bottle fundraising drives and the Center’s Annual Gala, one of the biggest sources of revenue for the Center is the yearly Walk for Life. The untimed 5K takes place at Veterans Park in Redondo Beach and this year’s event is slated for Saturday, May 17. Participants can fundraise as individuals or as part of a team, and non-walkers can volunteer or opt to sponsor other participants.

Norma reminds me that the Walk for Life not only serves as a fundraiser but also as a visible support for women and men in crisis pregnancies and as a witness to the Center’s presence in the community. I think back to a family friend, a good Christian woman who felt abandoned and alone and found her way into an abortion clinic not once but three times. Perhaps if she had seen the same outpouring of love and support in her community that we can show in the South Bay, her decisions would have been different.

As Norma and I chat, the office around us is busy with volunteers. There is a lot of joy here. I see one male in the volunteer ranks and the scene reminds me that abortion is often viewed as solely a women’s issue, a veritable minefield for any male standing on the side of life. Deacon Dale Sheckler, a Client Advocate and Board Member, rightly sees it otherwise.

“As a Client Advocate, roughly one-third of the ladies that come in for counseling attend with their boyfriend or husband,” Dale points out in an email to me. “It is in these situations that I feel the most useful. While the woman ultimately calls the shots on her ‘choice,’ the boyfriend or husband can have a huge sway on that decision.”

Male and female Client Advocates and General Volunteers alike play a huge role in the life of the Pregnancy Help Center. And it’s a volunteer opportunity that pays dividends in return.

“I would want everyone to know how incredibly fulfilling it is to know you are doing work that is saving

lives,” states Adrienne Gross, Executive Director of the Center. “Saving lives not only refers to the babies that are born but it also refers to the women and men we help and the difference it will make in their lives to not have had an abortion history.”

Board Member and General Volunteer Jeanne McLeod echoes those sentiments. “To someone who is considering volunteering I would just say that there are no two days alike at the Center; each day has its challenges and rewards, and it is very fulfilling to be involved somewhere that offers hope in the face of what could have been a crisis pregnancy.”

Norma has been gracious and generous and I begin to wrap up our time together. “Obviously we need people’s prayers,” she humbly begins when I ask what we in the community can do for the Center. But with goals of increasing open hours, moving to a bigger and even more central location near South Bay abortion clinics, and training more nurses to do ultrasounds, she continues that the need for financial donations and volunteers is both very real and crucial for the Center to grow and succeed in the battle for life.

It’s a battle the Pregnancy Help Center is taking head-on and from every side with love and compassion, just as it did 38 years ago when it first opened its doors. Much has changed since then, but the Center has adapted and grown to reach and meet the needs of the women, men and children it aims to serve and save.

“We are a relevant organization,” Norma concludes. “We understand the sexual and social challenges women are facing. We don’t judge. We don’t give preference. Everyone that walks through the door gets the same compassion and caring treatment.” †

The mission of the Pregnancy Help Center is to provide a safe, caring environment where every woman facing a crisis pregnancy can receive counseling, education, and practical assistance in order to eliminate the crisis and choose life for her baby; and to inspire others to embrace sexual health and integrity.

To learn more about or to support the Pregnancy Help Center, visit www.phctorrance.org, www.supportphctorrance.org or call (310)320-8976



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