

Catholics praying throughout 40 Days for Life campaign

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



FAYETTEVILLE — Debbie Magee says she was once an ardent pro-choice advocate. “I was as pro-choice as you could get before I converted to Catholicism.”

Now, six years after her family — husband, Brian, son Brian II, and daughters Katy, 16, and Kiley, 14 — became Catholics, Magee’s goal is to say the rosary every day during Lent, while standing on busy College Avenue, across from The Women’s Clinic in Fayetteville, known as the area’s only abortion provider.

She hopes she won’t be alone. That’s because Fayetteville is one of 59 cities in 31 states where the 40 Days for Life campaign is under way throughout Lent. It’s an interdenominational campaign to promote 40 days of prayer and fasting, peaceful vigils and community outreach programs.

Magee, now a strong pro-life believer, became part of the campaign after she was contacted by Natalie Edmondson, who’s serving as director of the movement in Fayetteville.

40 Days for Life actually began in 2004 in various cities throughout the country and it’s been billed as “one of the largest simultaneous pro-life mobilizations in history.” Organizers say on its Web site (www.40daysforlife.com) that the number of abortions has declined in several cities where the movement has reached. One example they cite is in Bryan/College Station, Texas, where they say the number of abortions dropped 28 percent after the 40-day peaceful demonstration.

Lent didn’t begin until Ash Wednesday, Feb. 6, but several dozen people attended an opening rally the night before, despite high winds and drenching rain, Magee said.

The campaign ends on Palm Sunday, March 16.

Edmondson said she believes her involvement in 40 Days for Life is clearly something God wanted her to do. An active member of Fayetteville Christian Church, she was a financial analyst. But the work wasn’t fulfilling, and Edmondson felt she was being led to leave the corporate world. A new job at the University of Arkansas meant less pay and fewer demands on her skills. “I had a lot of mental spare time,” she explained.

In late December, she learned through the Internet about the 40 Days for Life campaign. If Fayetteville was to be included in the campaign this year, Edmondson had just a few days to put together an application and pay the registration fees. She did both, and since then, has tried to stir interest locally.

It's been a little harder than Edmondson expected. She had hoped to find enough local churches willing to take one day each for the campaign or, alternatively, to find 960 people willing to take one hour each. People have shown up but many have been reluctant to sign up for specific times.

Edmondson said she realizes she may never know the full impact of the campaign.

"I have no clue what to expect from this," she explained. "I'm trying to keep my perspective that God works in ways we don't always see ... I have made the mental decision to be excited and happy for whatever happens. If that means I see nothing happen, I have faith God called me to it and there was a reason for it. If nothing else, it changed my life."

Magee, in addition to praying daily at the site, has helped spread word about the campaign at the area Catholic churches. Among the Catholic groups participating are the Knights of Columbus from St. Joseph and St. Thomas Aquinas, both in Fayetteville, and from St. Raphael in Springdale. Father Bradley Barber led parishioners in saying the rosary Feb. 13.

Magee is also trying to secure permission for Mass to be said at the site on Saturday, March 8 when a representative from Priests for Life, a Catholic clerical organization based in New York with a special emphasis on the pro-life cause, will be there.

Magee not only prays the rosary, she holds a sign saying, "I regret my abortion." That was a secret she kept from her three children, even after the family converted to Catholicism.

"I had planned never to tell them," Magee explained. "They knew I volunteered at Loving Choices for awhile. They just thought I had a passion for pro-life activities."

Two years ago she finally told her children and Magee felt more compelled to get involved in other pro-life activities.

Her daughters and some of their friends are vocal pro-lifers, too.

On the first Saturday of Lent, they spent their morning in a bone-chilling wind, holding signs reading "A pregnant woman needs support, not abortion."

Kiley and friends Taylor Neff and Britanee Russell, all 14, interrupted each other to explain why they're standing in the freezing cold instead of sleeping in: "I don't think (abortion) is right." "The babies never have a chance to live." "It's murder."

Kiley and Taylor both belong to St. Joseph in Tontitown; Britanee attends Fellowship Bible Church in Lowell.

The clinic is closed on Saturdays but the Magees and their friends weren't the only petitioners present on this day. Ray and Natalie Hines had come from their home in Watts, Okla.

Ray Hines called abortion "a significant scourge of our generation." Taking part in 40 Days for Life is one way to take a stand, he added.