



Published in "The Philadelphia Inquirer"
April 4th, 2006

A Publication of **Rachel's Vineyard Ministries**
www.RachelsVineyard.org

Dispassionate Compassion

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In the polarized realm of abortion politics, Cherry Hill's George J. Zallie has established an oasis just for grief and counseling. It's in memory of his daughter.

The billboards are striking – a dark silhouette of a woman with haunting eyes focused on the boldface words beside her.

No judgment. Just support. Not pro-choice. Not pro-life. The Stacy Zallie Foundation.

The foundation is the force behind StacyZallie.org, a web site where women can find nonpolitical counseling after having had an abortion. And providing that help has become a mission for George J. Zallie of Cherry Hill, whose daughter Stacy killed herself in 2002 at age 21, about a year after secretly having an abortion.

Zallie, 53, is convinced that Stacy, a graduate of Cherry Hill High School East and a student at Camden County College, felt conflicted about her decision to end her pregnancy, and was searching for the right person to talk to.

"We lost our baby and we wanted to know why", he says, speaking not only for himself but also for his wife, Linda, the cofounder of the foundation, who chose not to be interviewed for this article. "We found out through some of her friends that she'd had an abortion. And I think it may have precipitated all of this".

Before his daughter's death, Zallie says, he struggled with his feelings on abortion.

"I can kind of understand both sides. If you believe that abortion is the taking of a human life, that's what you believe. But there are so many social, economic issues involved, too. It's very complex. At any rate, I didn't know what to do".

He was, however, determined to accomplish at least one thing – make sure his daughter’s death was not in vain.

So Zallie, who owns eight ShopRite stores in the Philadelphia region, decided he would put his time and money into the development of a web site with no political agenda.

By taking that step, Zallie became a leader in what is emerging as a common ground in the polarized national abortion debate: More groups seem willing to help women cope with residual doubt or guilt, regardless of their political leanings.

It’s a quiet voice in the contentious rhetoric that has raged since the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade*, and that shows no signs of receding. Last month, the governor of South Dakota signed into law a near-total ban on abortion, setting the stage for even more court, legislative, and political battles on the issue.

For Zallie and others involved in this new realm of reproductive rights, politics take a backseat to personal forums where struggling women, such as his daughter, can have their needs heard.

“I look back now, and I can see there was something she was trying to say to me. I think she was trying to find a way to reach out”, he says, his voice still tinged with pain.

Inside the Zallie’s spacious home, every bookshelf and tabletop is adorned with framed photographs of Stacy. Here she is as a towheaded toddler, as a junior high school soccer player, as an attractive college student dressed in satin, standing alongside her two brothers, George Jr. and Michael, at a family wedding.

Zallie says Stacy’s bedroom has been left intact, but he will not let a visitor enter it.

He has sunk about \$100,000 of his own money into the foundation and raised about \$60,000 from donors. Michael Zallie, 28, says overseeing the web site has become a second career for his father.

“This is definitely what is helping him deal with the loss”.

At StacyZallie.org, the founder’s intentions are clearly stated.

"We believe that both sides want to be understanding and compassionate, but both sides are equally blind to the ways in which they are failing", reads a statement signed by both George and Linda Zallie.

"As a result, women and men struggling with unresolved grief over an abortion may be caught in a trap, boxed in by the politics of abortion, afraid to share their grief".

The foundation's middle-of-the-road stance is so unusual that many private counselors and abortion activists said they did not know what to make of it when it surfaced 10 months ago.

"That's where I was when I was first approached to work for it", says Judith Eckles, who now handles marketing for the non-profit organization. "I kept asking my partners, 'Are you sure it's not a front for a pro-life organization?'".

She had reason to doubt. For many years, almost all post-abortion counseling services had ties to religious communities or groups wanting to ban legal abortion, such as the National Silent No More Awareness Campaign founded by Georgette Forney of Sewickley, PA.

But recently, groups supporting abortion rights have stepped into the post-abortion counseling field, recognizing they can no longer ignore the emotional turmoil some women feel after undergoing the procedure.

Many Planned Parenthood centers, including the one in Philadelphia, now have religious counselors on site, and provide referrals to therapists for any women who ask.

The Zallie web site does not list Planned Parenthood as a resource because its main purpose is not grief counseling, Eckles said. But individual therapists who work with abortion clinics are listed.

In Pittsburgh, one abortion clinic has gone as far as giving pink construction-paper hearts to its clients. They are invited to write anonymous messages and post the valentines on the clinic walls if they choose.

"The reality of abortion isn't political at all", says Calire Keyes, director of that clinic, one of the first to offer grief counseling. "Women don't come in here and say, 'I want to exercise my constitutional right.' It's a personal, emotional decision. Most women express relief, but some talk about sadness and loss".

More than 10,000 women have called Exhale, a national after-abortion talk line established in California last summer by Aspen Baker, 29.

“Women need a place to work through their feelings”, says Baker, who calls herself pro-choice.

“This is a generation that knows only legal abortion. People can get them, but nobody talks about them because it’s so politicized”, she adds.

“Some people approach it by saying that abortion is always harmful, and others say abortion can have positive consequences. Exhale says all of those things are true”.

Zallie himself illustrates the contradictions that can form when the abortion issue is raised. A Catholic, he is also a registered Republican who has donated to the campaigns of at least two politicians who support abortion rights.

When Zallie created his foundation, he met with “all sorts of pro-life groups from as far away as Louisiana and Minnesota”, and decided that some of them were simply too political to participate in his endeavor.

“The others I told, ‘This is where our interests intersect, right here on the issue of counseling’”, he says. “Whatever else you do, that’s your business.”

Because of Zallie’s views, the web site includes an equal number of religious and non-religious counselors and resources.

For example, Rachel’s Vineyard, a Scripture-based retreat based in King of Prussia, is on the Web site, alongside Centra, a secular counseling practice with offices in Marlton and Center City. Individual therapists are listed as well.

Theresa Burke, founder and director of Rachel’s Vineyard, says that while she is glad the foundation was established, she is not willing to consider grief counseling a true common ground.

Abortion opponents believe all abortions are harmful to women, she explained, while abortion-rights backers say the emotional effects vary from person to person.

Nonetheless, Burke says she applauds Zallie’s web site as a step in the right direction.

“There’s a whole lot more dialogue about this than there ever was”, she says, “and any dialogue is useful”.

Zallie says he has received hundreds of e-mails through the web site, some criticizing its nonpolitical stand, but most praising its neutrality.

"You should be proud of this organization. I know that if something like this were accessible to me when I was feeling my lowest, it would have helped me feel like I wasn't alone, and like I wasn't a terrible person", wrote one woman who said she had had an abortion following a date rape.

"No matter what a woman decides to do, it is not simple and there really is no easy way out".

Zallie hopes the 24 billboards erected in January will increase traffic to the web site.

"I know people think I have an agenda", Zallie says with a sigh. "But honestly, my only agenda is, 'What would have helped Stacy?'"

If you need to talk...

Here are a few places women in need of post-abortion counseling can find help.

StacyZallie.org – a middle of the road web site offering names and telephone numbers of both religious and nonreligious therapists and counseling agencies.

Rachel's Vineyard Ministries – a spiritual retreat based in King of Prussia, offering therapy through weekend sessions. Reach the hotline at 1-877-HOPE-4-ME. Visit the web site at www.rachelsvineyard.org.

Exhale – a national hotline staffed by peer counselors offering neutral advice and resources. Reach the hotline at 1-866-439-4253, visit the web site at 4exhale.org.

Stacy Zallie's Brief Life: Promise and a Searing Loss

Stacy Zallie was the baby of the family, the only daughter, and fashion-model beautiful – the sort of gril who seemingly had everything.

At Cherry Hill High School East she was crowned homecoming queen; at Camden County College she focused on becoming an elementary school teacher.

"She was very traditional", says her father, George J. Zallie. "She had her life planned out. She once told me that by the time she was 25 she wanted to be married with two kids. She wanted to be a mother more than anything in the world".

And yet at age 21, Stacy took her life, following an emotional decline that the Zallies believe was triggered by a secret abortion.

After Stacy's death, a girlfriend told the Zallies that Stacy had ended her pregnancy. The information made everything more clear to George Zallie. His daughter's drinking binges. Her dark moods. Her emotional withdrawal.

"Stacy was the sort of girl who never came in late, who never drank too much", Zallie said. "Suddenly, in late 2001, she's snapping at her mother, going out with friends and getting drunk, just not being herself".

On a September Saturday, Zallie says, "she came downstairs and tells her mom she's taken too many pills".

The Zallies took Stacy, then 20, to the emergency room. They then helped her find a psychiatrist.

"I didn't ask her to talk about her sessions", Zallie says. "She was at that age, at that stage in her life, when as a parent you don't want to pry".

Four months later, Stacy abruptly quit therapy, he said. The drinking jags resumed. Her emotional state declined.

Zallie had a hunch that perhaps his daughter would rather speak to a female counselor.

"I tried to set something up, but Stacy put it off", he recalled.

In October 2002, just after her father's 50th birthday, Stacy committed suicide.

"I believe our daughter should still be here", Zallie said. "And if I can help anybody else's daughter, I will."



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