

Visalia Times Delta

LIFE

April Kesterson of Right to Life retires after 25 years

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April Kesterson clutches an anti-abortion sign as she stands in front of a Planned Parenthood clinic in Fresno.

It reads, “No-no-no-no-no-no-no-no-no tax-funded abortion!”

She joined more than 340 other pro-life supporters from around the Valley on Aug. 22 as part of a national protest against taxpayer money paying for abortions. It followed the release of seven undercover videos about the alleged harvesting of fetal tissue from Planned Parenthood clinics for research.

An eighth video was released Tuesday. Kesterson said she hopes the videos will raise the consciousness of Americans and eliminate government funding for Planned Parenthood.

She’s been at the helm of the pro-life movement in Tulare and Kings counties for 25 years. Next month, she steps down to retire.

Kesterson, 66, plans to introduce her replacement at the 20th annual Making a Difference for Life fund-raising banquet Thursday at the Visalia Convention Center.

Not even her three-person staff knows who their next boss will be.

Another well-kept secret is who will be the mystery speaker for the banquet. He or she has been advertised as an internationally acclaimed celebrity speaker with an “exciting entrance, exhilarating wit and encouraging testimony.”

Last year, former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum was the keynote speaker. In past years, as many as 1,200 have attended the banquet.

“We have a really deep and wide support base here,” Kesterson said.

She expects 800 people at Thursday's banquet but more people are welcome to attend, Kesterson said. Sue Sa's will prepare champagne salmon and bacon-wrapped fillets. Reservations are required.

In honor of Kesterson's retirement and the 20th anniversary of the banquet, the cost to attend was reduced to \$65 per person or \$495 for a table of eight.

Outreach

Right to Life's most visible outreach in Tulare County includes anti-abortion billboards, some ads on television, radio and newspapers, opinion pieces in the Visalia Times-Delta and Tulare Advance-Register and speakers and booths at public events such as the Tulare County Fair.

As for why she's retiring, she said 25 years is enough.

"You run out of steam," she said.

Since she took over, communication technology has raced ahead, first with computers and now, with smart phones and texting. She admits she's not well versed in all that social media has to offer.

"Technology is flying by so fast," she said. "We really need to get on that wagon. Young people need to catch that train."

She leaves behind a staff of three women. Each of them is a director of a different emphasis in the pro-life movement including Latinos for Life; Voices for Life for youth; and the IRMA Network which stands for "I regret my abortion."

On a recent weekend, three women who've had abortions they now regret took part in an IRMA Network retreat at Bass Lake in a private residence where forgiveness, healing and rebuilding was emphasized.

"It takes guts to say 'I need to address this issue in my life,' " Kesterson said. "IRMA is near and dear to my heart."

The annual operating budget for Tulare-Kings Right to Life is close to \$300,000.

The money comes from hundreds of individual donors, she said.

Early days of Right to Life

In Visalia, a fledgling group of Right to Life supporters met for two to three years before Kesterson joined the movement in 1990. They met in Mary Olson's kitchen. All of the

founders have since died.

She participated in some activities such as a demonstration, walks and a pro-life rally.

The organizer at the time, Diane Bearfield, wanted someone to take her place as president in 1990. Kesterson stepped up to the plate. The group had \$375 in the bank.

During Kesterson's tenure, she grew Right to Life into a 501(c)3 with a 12-member board and four people on staff. She was hired part time as the executive director in 1995 and became full time in 1996.

"To accomplish anything, someone had to be the paid executive director," she said. "So we started having fundraisers because there was no money in the bank."

She worked for Right to Life out of the third bedroom of her own home for her first five years before moving to the office building across from Recreation Park, where it still is today, at 1120 W. Murray Ave. in Visalia. Over time, she expanded the nonprofit from one office into multiple offices there.

Why get involved

During the early part of her marriage, she and her husband, Ed, lived in Southern California. It was there that Kesterson became aware of the effect abortion had on children, women and families. She said she read a lot on the topic and listened to the arguments.

Women often get pressured into having an abortion, she said.

"It just grieved my heart," she said. "There are people in my family that wouldn't be here had abortion been legal [back then]."

Abortion was legalized Jan. 22, 1973 in the United States. Since then, more than 55 million abortions have been performed in this country, she said.

"I prayed because I was so moved by the devastation of the issue," she said. "I wanted to be part of the solution and not part of the problem."

When they returned to Visalia in 1989, the little group of Right to Life supporters caught her eye. At first, when they asked her to become the next president, she said no.

But then she remembered her earlier prayer.

"The Lord had conviction with me," she said. "I had no choice. I said 'yes' to the presidency."

Hardest sell

The hardest sell for Right to Life in Tulare County is convincing people it's not a political issue, Kesterson said. Right to Life is not aligned with a church or political party.

It's a human rights issue, she said.

"Women instinctively know there's a baby growing within them when they're pregnant," she said. "Ever since ultrasound was developed, it's hard to say it's not human."

She's convinced the real issue is money.

Pro-life organizations don't charge for services but Planned Parenthood is well funded, she said.

Lately, Planned Parenthood has been under fire following the release of undercover videos shedding light on the sale of fetal tissue from aborted fetuses.

Even though she's known about the practice for 17 years, the videos surprised Kesterson.

"[These videos] shocked me as well as everyone else," she said.

Planned Parenthood denies it's doing anything illegal and says it's not making a profit from the sale of fetal tissue.

How to attend

What: 20th annual Making a Difference for Life fund-raising banquet

When: 7 p.m., Sept. 3

Where: Visalia Convention Center, 303 E. Acequia Ave.

Cost: \$65 per person or \$495 for a table of 8

Info: Tulare-Kings Right to Life 732-5000

Website: www.TKRL.org