

Film

Abortion: the view from both sides of the street

A dispassionate discourse on the abortion wars in the USA? Not something that seems possible, at least in the current polarised culture. Almost by definition, any analysis of the politics and practice of abortion is heavily partisan. Even the medical world—the last bastion of any possible objectivity—has been overlaid with politics. Outside of major urban medical centres, pregnancy termination has been sliced off from the greater field of obstetrics and gynaecology, isolated in freestanding abortion clinics that have become the last hope for desperate women and the target for desperate protesters.

Into this fray comes the documentary *12th & Delaware*, a quiet movie that seeks to illuminate rather than bully. In 1990, a husband and wife team—Candace and Albert—opened the Women's World health clinic on the corner of 12th and Delaware in a nondescript Florida neighbourhood. Motivated by their desire to help women obtain abortions, Candace provides counselling to the patients and Albert shuttles the doctors, who remain hidden under sheets in his car so that they will not be recognised, trailed, or assassinated.

In 1999, the house across the street went up for sale. Within 24 hours it had been purchased by a pro-life group that opened the Pregnancy Care Center. The clinic is supported by the Catholic Church and seeks to persuade women not to have abortions. *12th & Delaware* shows life in the two clinics with little fanfare and no commentary. There is no narration or punditry. Other than a rare line of text setting the stage, we hardly see the hand of directors Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing.

First we follow Anne, a counsellor at the Pregnancy Care Center. We see her talking to a 15-year-old pregnant teenager. When she estimates gesta-

tional age, she hands the girl a plastic fetus from a collection of all sizes. "Go ahead and hold it", she says, urging her to take it in her hands. "This is what your baby is like." Then there is the free ultrasound. Anne encourages another woman and her boyfriend to look at "their baby", to see the heartbeat. The technician types "Hi Mommy, Hi Daddy" into the machine so that the words appear on the ultrasound picture that is given to the couple.

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Anne and her colleagues cross the street to pace in front of the Women's World clinic. They seem to be there all hours of the day and night, carrying signs, praying, calling out to the women who enter the clinic. Some of this fits into the easy stereotypes, but we also see genuine commitment to the cause. We witness Anne's elation when she "rescues" a woman and see her visceral sadness when a client goes ahead with an abortion.

Across the road we watch Candace counselling women, some of whom had gone to the other clinic by mistake. She thinks that the pro-lifers are deliberately trying to confuse women into entering the wrong clinic. Candace also notes some instances in which women have been told by the Pregnancy Care Center that they were 7 weeks pregnant when they were, in fact, 10 weeks pregnant. "This is not an error", she says. "They tell them the earlier date so that they think they have time to think it over. But by the time they've made up their mind, it's often too late; there are very few clinics able to do abortions past 12 weeks."

Candace watches from her window as a Hispanic woman—a single mother of six—makes her way up the front

path. A half-dozen pro-lifers fingering rosaries beseech her in Spanish. "We will help you. We will pay your rent and your bills, get clothes for your kids." The protesters continue gently, almost seductively: "We know you love children. You're a good mother. You just need some help." The woman edges toward them. The protesters reach out to her and when she nears them they enfold her in their arms and coddle her across the street. Candace watches from her window, but doesn't intervene. "If they really did change her mind, that's fine", she says. "But I just don't know who these people are, who try to control somebody they don't even know." Across the street, a pro-life staffer invites the Hispanic woman to pick out stuffed animals for her children.

By showing the inner workings of two clinics, by portraying Anne and Candace as three-dimensional women with solid convictions and emotional investment in their respective causes, *12th & Delaware* comes as close to a balanced portrayal of abortion as we will probably ever see in the USA. The most poignant aspect of the film, of course, is the women who come to the clinics. They are nearly all young, poor, and in a fragile emotional state. They seem so vulnerable, and so easily swayed. The 15-year-old teenager from the first scene reappears later, now 7 months pregnant. "I didn't want a child at this age", she says. "Anne told me I could lose my life if I had the abortion, or maybe I could never have kids again. I didn't want to take that risk." A closing line of text tells us that there are 4000 pro-life centres in the USA. There are 816 abortion clinics. Fade to black. Cue the credits.

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12th & Delaware
Directed by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing. HBO Films, 2010. Broadcast on HBO on Aug 2 and Aug 5, 2010. See <http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/12th-and-delaware/index.html>