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Deep in the Heart of North Texas

Prolife Profile

BY JOSEPH PRONECHEN

On Feb. 3, 2006, Karen Garnett went to Naples, Fla., but not to bask in the sun. As executive director for the **Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas**, which is the Respect Life ministry of the Diocese of Dallas, Garnett was one of six receiving the 2005 Cardinal O'Connor Pro-Life Hall of Fame Award from Legatus International.

While past recipients were national pro-life leaders like Father Frank Pavone of Priests for Life, this award for Garnett was the first given to a local Respect Life director or local ministry.

No wonder. Last year alone, North Texas' sidewalk counseling convinced 405 mothers to turn away from abortion facilities. They're among the 3,000 mothers who decided to have their babies since the group began tracking sidewalk counseling in 1999. Add to these confirmed numbers possibly 2,000 more "hopeful turnaways" who didn't become part of the official tracking.

The sidewalk counseling began in 1997, four years after Dallas's recently retired Bishop Charles Grahmann commissioned this Respect Life ministry. The Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas (online at Prolifedallas.org) added side-



Karen Garnett (front, center) leads the troops. Look for them online at prolifedallas.org. Photo courtesy Diocese of Dallas.

walk counseling to the four pillars of the U.S. Bishops' *Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities*, making the gentle face-to-face encounters a key part of their 5-Point Plan of prayer, education, public witness, civic action and supportive services.

"We really put an emphasis on public witness," Garnett says of the sidewalk counseling. "It's the centerpiece of what we do here. It's so important to have coverage at the very point of death itself. A lot of the praying we do is right outside the abortion centers themselves."

The group calls this part of their program Project 100.

"There are 100 killing hours in the Dallas abortion centers every week," explains Garnett. "As a committee we want 100% coverage every hour a baby is

being killed in Dallas." Since there aren't enough volunteers to cover all 100 hours, the organization has some paid staff to make sure every minute is covered.

The effort has made a major difference in saving babies. Many women later tell Garnett that, on their way to have an abortion, they were praying to God for a sign showing them the right choice to make.

Four years ago Barbara Franklin was one of those mothers heading for an abortion facility. The trouble was, she had trouble finding the place. "I felt God was making me get lost," she recalls today.

She made an appointment, but "something kept pulling me back outside to talk" to the woman from the North Texas

pro-life group. "I was telling her I didn't want to do it but I was in a bad financial situation," says Franklin. "She told me God will protect you and your baby. I never went back inside."

Franklin, now a mother of four, then got volunteer Jeanette Sliter as her Project Gabriel "angel." Sliter came to her house and set up a baby shower connected with the local Catholic crisis-pregnancy center.

"I started crying," says Franklin. "I saw the face of God for a moment, someone representing God. That was my favorite memory: Jeanette visiting me. She would always come by when she said she would. It made a big difference to have a person actually committed and faithful to what she was doing."

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Franklin gave birth to a little girl. Soon she became active working with youth in her church. And now she happily tells her story at public meetings.

The Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas follows through with nine distinct ministries: prayer, sidewalk counseling, Project Gabriel, Project Rachel, Youth For Life, speakers bureau, parish on this coordination, civic action and Spanish-language outreach.

It's not unusual that a woman gets help from more than one. As a team leader, sidewalk counselor and Gabriel angel, Sliter remembers successes like the woman pregnant with her third child who kept threatening to abort throughout her pregnancy.

"We prayed, we helped babysit for her, helped her move five times," says Sliter. "She was able to get a job and move to a suburb and nicer house. She invited us to her middle son's first Communion last year. She had been away from the Church.

She had bettered herself; she had made spiritual progress. That was very rewarding."

Faithful Servants

The Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas has a staff of 32 — seven are full-timers — and a \$900,000 budget. It's not funded by the diocese. All but four work from home offices, which keeps overhead down and is a blessing for moms like Garnett — who has five children.

In 2005, Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., told the group: "Every diocese in the world needs to emulate your work."

"I've been told it's the best pro-life program in the U.S.," says newly retired Bishop Grahmann, whose leadership Garnett credits for the inspiration and success of the organization — and for her award.

When he came to the Dallas Diocese, the bishop wanted to give the Respect Life ministry new energy. "This is truly a work for the laity," he said.

"They can do this work, and they can do it well."

Soon Garnett was directing the center, whose success in saving babies and helping mothers now spreads the culture of life beyond Dallas. Take the unique summer-intern program for sidewalk counseling for mature high-school and college students. Former intern Dave VanVickle is making a big impact.

"It was life-changing for me," he says of the summers. A student at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, he trained hundreds of fellow students there and from nearby colleges and high schools to be sidewalk counselors, too.

It all started with the Catholic Pro-Life Committee of North Texas, he says. "It's the ideal place to start learning because they have such a good history and are so well established."

Perhaps that's why Garnett has been asked by Father Pavone and Father Pablo Straub to train seminarians for pro-life work in

Amarillo, Texas, and Acapulco, Mexico, respectively.

Msgr. Mark Seitz, pastor of St. Rita Church in North Dallas, knows Garnett as a parishioner as well as a pro-life champion.

"I think that the organization and particularly Karen has a way of conveying the message that comes across as very strong and very committed and yet not strident," he says. "She's able to place this teaching within the greater context of the love of Christ and our Catholic faith, and I think that has opened the doors in Dallas on the part of many people who otherwise might have hesitated in being involved."

Says Garnett: "Our popes and bishops have told us that there is only one choice: We have to respond — all of us, with urgency."

Now there's a pro-lifer who puts her action where her words are.

Staff writer Joseph Pronechen writes from Trumbull, Connecticut.