

Changing abortion's pronoun (The Los Angeles Times/Statu Uniti)

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By Stephanie Simon, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO -- Jason Baier talks often to the little boy he calls Jamie. He imagines this boy -- his son -- with blond hair and green eyes, chubby cheeks, a sweet smile.

But he'll never know for sure.

His fiancée's sister told him about the abortion after it was over. Baier remembers that he cried. The next weeks and months go black. He knows he drank far too much. He and his fiancée fought until they broke up. "I hated the world," he said.

Baier, 36, still longs for the child who might have been, with an intensity that bewilders him: "How can I miss something I never even held?"

These days, he channels the grief into activism in a burgeoning movement of "post-abortive men." Abortion is usually portrayed as a woman's issue: her body, her choice, her relief or her regret. This new movement -- both political and deeply personal in nature -- contends that the pronoun is all wrong.

"We had abortions," said Mark B. Morrow, a Christian counselor. "I've had abortions."

Morrow spoke to more than 150 antiabortion activists gathered recently in San Francisco for what was billed as the first national conference on men and abortion. Participants -- mostly counselors and clergy -- heard two days of lectures on topics such as "Medicating the Pain of Lost Fatherhood" and "Forgiveness Therapy With Post-Abortion Men."

The most striking session featured the halting testimony of men whose partners aborted. Baier, who now lives in Phoenix, told the crowd he suffered years of depression and addiction. "I couldn't get the thought out of my head about what I had lost."

Since the concept of post-abortion syndrome first emerged in the early 1980s, some women have recounted similar stories -- and learned to leverage them into political power. They speak at legislative hearings and rallies organized by the Silent No More Awareness Campaign. They write affidavits detailing their years of emotional turmoil, which the Justice Foundation, a conservative advocacy group, submits to lawmakers and courts nationwide.

Last spring, the Supreme Court cited these accounts as one reason to ban the late-term procedure that opponents call "partial-birth" abortion. The majority opinion suggested that the ban would protect women from a decision they might later regret.

Women's testimony was also used to justify a sweeping abortion ban passed in

2006 in South Dakota. (Voters overturned the ban before it could take effect.)

"It's a rule of thumb that if you want to get a law passed, you have to tell anecdotes that grab people," said Dr. Nada Stotland, president-elect of the American Psychiatric Assn. Antiabortion activists have done that well, she said. "They've succeeded in convincing a lot of the American public" that abortion leaves women wounded.

Now, those activists see an opportunity to dramatically expand the message.

The Justice Foundation recently began soliciting affidavits from men; one online link promises, "Your story will help legal efforts to end abortion." Silent No More encourages men to testify at rallies.

Therapist Vincent M. Rue, who helped develop the concept of post-abortion trauma, runs an online study that asks men to check off symptoms (such as irritability, insomnia and impotence) that they feel they have suffered as a result of an abortion. When men are widely recognized as victims, Rue said, "that will change society."

Abortion rights supporters watch this latest mobilization warily: If anecdotes from grieving women can move the Supreme Court, what will testimony about men's pain accomplish?

"They can potentially shift the entire debate," said Marjorie Signer of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, an interfaith group that supports abortion rights.

The concept of post-abortion trauma is hotly disputed. Several studies published in peer-reviewed medical journals suggest that women who have had abortions are more prone to depression or drug abuse. But the research does not prove cause and effect, Stotland said.

It may be, she said, that women who have abortions are more emotionally unstable in the first place. Abortion is one of the most common surgeries in the country, with more than 1 million performed a year; while some who chose the procedure surely come to regret it, doctors say they see no epidemic of trauma in either men or women.

But the activists leading the men's movement make clear they're not relying on statistics to make their case. They're counting on the power of men's tears.

"The lived truth of peoples' experience is very hard to dismiss," said Vicki Thorn, who runs post-abortion counseling programs for the Catholic Church. "It's time we . . . affirm the pain that fathers feel."

Morrow, the counselor, described his regret as sneaking up on him in midlife -- more than a decade after he impregnated three girlfriends (one of them twice) in quick succession in the late 1980s. All four pregnancies ended in abortion.

Years later, when his wife told him she was pregnant, "I suddenly realized that I had four dead children," said Morrow, 47, who lives near Erie, Pa. "I hadn't given it a thought. Now it all came crashing down on me -- look what you've done."

A few months ago, Morrow reached out to the ex-girlfriend who aborted twice. They met and prayed together, seeking peace. After they parted, she spilled her anger in a letter: "That long day we sat in that God-forsaken clinic, I hoped every moment that you would stand up and say, 'We can't do this' . . . but you didn't."

Even abortion rights supporters acknowledge that men may benefit from counseling when they and their partners face an unwanted pregnancy. Sociologist Arthur Shostak has interviewed thousands of men waiting in abortion clinics; though they tried to project strength to help their lovers through the ordeal, many told him that they felt powerless, anxious and alone. Some dreamed about the children they would never know.

Shostak encourages clinics to reach out to these men. But he views the activist movement with alarm.

Recruits often cycle through church-based retreats, support groups and Bible studies that aim to heal post-abortion trauma. The men are urged to think of themselves as fathers, to name -- and ask forgiveness from -- the children they might have raised, had their partners not aborted.

At one retreat, the men are told to picture their sons and daughters dancing in a sunny meadow at the feet of Jesus Christ.

"They draw in men who may have a little ambivalence, possibly a little guilt, and they exacerbate those feelings," Shostak said.

Chris Aubert, a Houston lawyer, felt only indifference in 1985 when a girlfriend told him she was pregnant and planned on an abortion. When she asked if he wanted to come to the clinic, he said he couldn't; he played softball on Saturdays. He stuck a check for \$200 in her door and never talked to her again.

Aubert, 50, was equally untroubled when another girlfriend had an abortion in 1991. "It was a complete irrelevancy," he said. But years later, Aubert felt a rising sense of unease. He and his wife were cooing at an ultrasound of their first baby when it struck him -- "from the depths of my belly," he said -- that abortion was wrong.

Aubert has since converted to Catholicism. He and his wife have five children, and they sometimes protest in front of abortion clinics. Every now and then, though, Aubert wonders: What if his first girlfriend had not aborted? How would his life look different?

He might have endured a loveless marriage and, perhaps, a sad divorce. He might have been saddled with child support as he tried to build his legal practice. He might never have met his wife. Their children -- Christine, Kyle, Roch, Paul, Vance -- might not exist.

"I wouldn't have the blessings I have now," Aubert said. So in a way, he said, the two abortions may have cleared his path to future happiness.

"That's an intellectual debate I have with myself," he said. "I struggle with it."

In the end, Aubert says his moral objection to abortion always wins. If he could go back in time, he would try to save the babies.

But would his long-ago girlfriends agree? Or might they also consider the abortions a choice that set them on a better path?

Aubert looks startled. "I never really thought about it for the woman," he says slowly.

"On one level, yes, maybe she got an education, married a great guy, has six kids and everything's wonderful now," he said. But he can't believe it could really be that uncomplicated. "It might bother her once every 20 years or once every five years, or every day, but there's a scar."

He has not talked with either of the ex-girlfriends, but he says he can imagine what they feel because he knows how the abortions affected him. He never had the nightmares that other men describe, or the crying jags, the drug abuse, the self-loathing. Yet he knows he has been tarnished.

"I have this stain on my soul," Aubert said, "and it will always be there."

He hopes to organize a father's section at this month's march in Washington protesting the 35th anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, the Supreme Court ruling that legalized abortion.

Aubert pictures men by the hundreds praying, chanting -- and waving signs: "I regret my abortion."

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