

George Tiller: Champion of Women, Friend of NNAF

By Lisa Berger
WRRAP, Los Angeles, CA

Dr. George Tiller, together with his clinic, Women's Health Care Services (WHCS), was the principal sponsor of the 2003 NNAF conference. We present the following portrait of this dedicated physician with our gratitude. Thank you, Dr. Tiller and WHCS!

George Tiller didn't plan to become an abortion provider. He expected to finish out his tour of duty as a Navy flight surgeon and become a dermatologist. He never planned to return to Wichita, Kansas where he grew up and where his father, Dean Jack Tiller, had been a family physician. But in 1970, his parents, one of his sisters, and his brother-in-law



Dr. George Tiller

were killed in a plane crash. Dr. Tiller returned to Wichita to close down his father's huge family practice, care for his sister's one-year-old child and his ailing grandmother. His father's patients remembered how Dr. Tiller used to accompany his father on house calls, and they hoped he would also take over where his father had left off. Only after he assumed the practice did he learn that his father had provided some abortions for his private practice patients.

Dr. Tiller was not sure if he could or should continue his father's work and provide abortion services for his own private patients. So he went to his grandmother, whose sage advice and wisdom had always been a source of strength, and her recommendation was, "Georgie, just do the right thing." Fifteen years after her death, he received another shock when he learned that she had undergone

three terminations of pregnancy in the 1930s. It was the quiet support of his grandmother and the education from the women for whom his father had provided abortions that taught Dr. Tiller that, as he put it, "Abortion is a matter of survival for women."

Dr. Tiller never had to make the difficult decision about whether to break the law as his father had done because the Supreme Court legalized abortion in *Roe v. Wade*. He continued making his father's family practice his own, and gradually performed more abortions until it became his primary specialty. He started Women's Health Care Services in 1975. His skill and dedication have become known nationwide, and nearly half of his abortion patients now come from out of state. He performs late-term abortions for women with life-threatening diseases, whose fetuses have severe anomalies, or when continuing the pregnancy will cause substantial and irreversible impairment of a major bodily function. While his detractors refuse to believe it, Dr. Tiller also helps arrange adoptions for the babies delivered by women who are too far advanced in their pregnancies to terminate.

Dr. Tiller's efforts on behalf of his patients have not been easy. As one of the few doctors in the country who performs late-term abortions, he has been dubbed "Tiller the Killer" and made the target of many attacks. In 1986, his clinic was bombed, causing \$100,000 in damage. Undeterred, Dr. Tiller hung a sign outside the rubble reading, "Hell, No. We Won't Go!" He set up shop in temporary quarters and continued to provide medical care until his clinic was repaired. In 1993, while leaving the clinic, Dr. Tiller was shot at close range by an anti-abortion fanatic. One bullet barely missed his chest; he was fortunate to suffer wounds only in his arms. He was back at the clinic the next morning, placing the medical needs of his patients before his own. "I'm a health care provider," he said. "We had patients to take care of." His assailant was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to ten years in prison.

Dr. Tiller and his clinic have frequently been the focus of anti-abortion demonstrations. In 1991, Operation Rescue organized mass protests outside Dr. Tiller's clinic. Prochoice organizations mistakenly believed that ignoring the demonstrators would make them go away. Instead, the protests lasted for more than 45 days, and 2,700 people were arrested on charges ranging from loitering and trespassing to assaulting police officers. Four years later, two anti-abortion protesters parked junk vehicles in the

driveway of the clinic and sealed themselves in metal boxes inside. It took firefighters five hours to free the men and clear the driveway. The men were later convicted of violating the federal Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act.

Anti-choice street activists, now led by Operation Save America, returned to Wichita in 2001 to commemorate the anniversary of what they saw as their successful 1991 protests. But the times and the law had changed. This time there were only a few hundred protesters outside the clinic doors, and they were met by equal numbers of Dr. Tiller's supporters, including NNAF members. Not satisfied with their impact at the clinic, 30 anti-choice demonstrators marched outside Dr. Tiller's church, using bullhorns and carrying photographs of bloody fetuses.

"NNAF makes the world a better place to live, one woman at a time."
— Dr. George Tiller

Undaunted by the demonstrators, Dr. Tiller reaffirmed his commitment to women's health. "Make no mistake," he said in a rare public statement. "This battle is about self-determination by women of the direction and course of their lives and their family's lives. Abortion is about women's hopes and dreams. Abortion is a matter of survival for women." Despite the disruption to his own clinic, Dr. Tiller paid for an ad in the *Wichita Eagle* encouraging people to give money for poor women who need abortions, through NNAF's Pledge-A-Picket campaign. Ultimately, that campaign raised \$10,000 for NNAF's member funds, much of which came from the Wichita community.

Dr. Tiller has also been generous with his time and staff, consistently sending senior staff members to NNAF conferences. Carrie Klaege and Marguerite Reed have worked with NNAF member funds for several years, providing insight into the role of providers and helping funds learn to navigate their relationships with Women's Health Care Services and other providers.

With this history in mind, NNAF decided to ask Dr. Tiller for a major gift to kick off our tenth anniversary campaign. He agreed immediately to be our principal sponsor for the 2003 conference, and



Banner at Women's Health Care Services

made a \$10,000 donation. Dr. Tiller commented that he was committed to supporting the work of the Network because,

"NNAF is the essence of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision for poor women. For without financial assistance, the reality of fertility control for these poor women will remain an unfulfilled promise. NNAF makes the world a better place to live, one woman at a time, by allowing her to decide the most fundamental decision of her life—when to be a mother and when to be a parent."

Despite *Roe v. Wade*, women in America would have no opportunity to control their destinies or their bodies were there not doctors like George Tiller willing to run the gauntlet of anti-abortion extremism.

In a personal interview, Dr. Tiller shared that he is as concerned about the availability of early abortion services as he is about late-term abortion services in the current political climate. He has become convinced that the salvation for reproductive choice lies not in the office of the physician but in the halls of Congress on both a national and state level. He has formed his own political action committee, ProKanDo, which is dedicated to electing prochoice women and men to the state legislature and state executive offices, as well as county and municipal positions at every level. Without this commitment to political activity, the future of reproductive freedom is grim. Fortunately, we have the constitutionally guaranteed right to be politically active, the privacy of the ballot box, and legions of men and women who know and believe that without fertility control and the freedom of choice, there is no freedom for women.