

NATIONAL POST

Showing graphic abortion images to high school students draws flak

By Charles Lewis

Published June 9, 2011

The tactic of using graphic images of bloody fetuses to target university students to promote a tough anti-abortion message is now being used to try to convince a far younger audience that abortion is wrong: high school students.

In Calgary, the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform has been conducting a series of rolling demonstrations in front of high schools using images of aborted fetuses in order to "educate young people about the realities of abortion."

But it is not a tactic universally endorsed across the anti-abortion spectrum.

"I'm a supporter of free speech and they're entitled to that as a strategy," said Joanne McGarry, executive director of the Catholic Civil Rights League. "But they might wish to reflect on the desirability of exposing kids of that age to such a graphic image. Young people can get hardened to such images and become desensitized.

"My other concern is using photos that don't respect the sanctity of life. These are the corpses of those who were never allowed to develop."

The project is called "Choice Chain" and employs the shocking pictures of first-trimester aborted fetuses next to the word "choice."

"The idea is to redefine the term 'choice' from what is seen as a positive term to one that is a negative act that kills a child," said Stephanie Gray, executive director of the Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform.

The group stands on public property, not on school campuses, and what they do breaks no law.

But the decision to target a young audience with the signs raises serious questions, observers say. What is the efficacy of such a tactic in general? Is it even proper, from a pro-life perspective, to use human remains to sell a cause? And are some high school students simply too young to be confronted with such difficult images?

"Our philosophy is if someone is old enough to have an abortion, they're old enough to see the aftermath of an abortion," Ms. Gray said.

“What’s more disturbing: having an abortion or seeing an abortion? Many of these young people are having abortions because they haven’t seen what an abortion looks like.”

The tactic has proved controversial on several Canadian university campuses. For the past few years, for example, there has been an ongoing battle over whether an anti-abortion group at the University of Calgary could display its graphic signs in public places on campus in which it would be impossible for passersby to avoid the images. The case is before the courts.

At Carleton University last year, students who attempted to display such signs on campus were arrested for defying the school’s administration.

Both cases involved issues of political correctness, freedom of speech and the notion that a university campus is a perfect place to debate controversial issues.

Ms. Gray said many students have reacted badly to the signs but others have engaged in serious dialogue, showing the posters can be a valuable tool to create debate and change minds.

Julie Sedivy, an adjunct professor of linguistics and psychology at the University of Calgary, said such campaigns might engage some but there is a larger risk of turning off many more to the message.

“People who design such campaigns have an illusion of thought that if you create discomfort it will provoke change. But that discomfort often causes people to retreat from the image to get rid of the discomfort.”

In Washington, a group called Democrats for Life, avoids posters and protests in favour of building support programs for women who want to keep their babies.

Kristen Day, the group’s executive director, said many causes could use graphic images but choose not to.

“We didn’t display Osama bin Laden’s body and we try to respect our soldiers by not showing graphic images of those killed in battle. We do this out of respect for life.”

But Andrea Mrozek, of the Ottawa-based group Pro Woman Pro Life, said she supports the Calgary demonstrations because they shed light on an issue few want to discuss in Canada.

“Abortion is very hidden and concealed in our culture and [this tactic] brings it out into the open in a way that can’t be avoided. I think that’s very important.”