

The most arresting part of David Crane's campaign against abortion

**“HEY, YOU.
DON'T GO IN
THERE.”**

One man's
anti-abortion
campaign.

BY SHARYL COVEY

is the audacity of his signs, images of the bloody remains of aborted babies pasted onto posters five feet tall, entrails exposed, miniature faces distorted beyond recognition, limbs detached and displayed next to each other, half-formed baby flesh captured in one shot and contrasted with a white background. Crane parades many of the pictures around Hampton Roads simply for shock value, but the message of most of the signs does not apply to the reality of women who have legal abortions before the baby has reached viability, the point at which the Supreme Court has more interest in the baby's life than the mother's concerns (22-23 weeks). The hoped-for effect of the posters portraying third-term abortions certainly doesn't apply to the large percentage of women who have abortions well before 12 weeks, the end of the second trimester. However, Crane, a father of seven children who could easily be mistaken for any man living in comfortable suburbia, is steadfast in adhering to his cause. Beyond simply defending his pro-life stance, rarely deigning to discuss the intricacies of the issue, he is wholly on the offense. He is on a mission to change women's minds.

It is hard to miss Crane as I drive up to the curb of Bison Avenue alongside the Hillcrest Women's Clinic in Norfolk. He is the one supporting two gigantic posters, one with a smiling baby under "LIFE" and another with the mangled, vermilion image of an aborted baby under "DEATH." Crane's then sixteen-year-old daughter, Amy, stands towards the back entrance with pro-life literature fluttering from her back pockets. Ron, a Catholic from New York, stands at the front entrance with his own signs, headphones strapped over his Yankees baseball cap and a megaphone held in one hand. His raspy voice, directed towards a woman entering the clinic, spikes the autumn breeze as I walk towards Crane: "Don't kill your baby! That's your baby!"

Almost as soon as we formally introduce

ourselves, Crane spews statistics: there are about three million abortions per year, 25 per day and 8,000 per year in the Hampton Roads area alone. He figures about 98% of abortions are due to an “oops, I didn’t mean to get pregnant” response and the belief that abortion is just another form of birth control.

I ask him the question concerning the unfortunate cases of incest and/or rape: “If it were up to you, would you outlaw a woman’s right to choose?”

The chances of conceiving after rape are slim, he says, due to psychological stress and other factors. I ask again after the recurrent cases of incest, and he agrees to the repeated occurrences, making pregnancy more possible, but he’s not an expert on these things. Regardless, he says, “I would outlaw the killing of human lives.”

I want to argue, but decide to step away from the technicalities for the moment.

As we stand alone in the crisp autumn air, Crane quotes Proverbs 24 10-12: “Rescue those unjustly sentenced to death.” The Bible also says to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. Ever since Roe v. Wade, thousands of lives, Crane believes, have been unjustly sentenced to death. “If you’ll excuse me, just a moment....” Crane turns from where we had been facing Little Creek Road to point his signs towards the entrance of the clinic, where a young woman is opening the doors.

“Please, we are here to help. At four weeks your baby’s heart is beating, and at five you can see every finger and toe. Please, come talk to us about making the right decision!”

The woman spins around to flick him off and then enters the building. Crane turns back to me, unfazed, and continues. Abortion is a violation of the first commandment, he says. Whether the baby is a day, a week, or five months old, you are still “snuffing out human life,” if you have an abortion. Abortionists (Crane’s word) are “playing god.”

Towards the front of the building this comes from Ron: “Do not go into that abortion clinic! I repeat, do not go into that clinic!”

I notice other signs propped up against a truck parked in front of Crane’s maroon Volvo. They depict a tiny, shriveled mummy head pinched with tweezers and suspended over a jar of yellow liquid. Crane tells me it’s the face of an aborted baby. He describes the dilation and extraction procedure, in which the fetus is torn in pieces from the woman’s womb, and he pushes one of his own posters towards me, pointing out the small crescents on the baby’s forearm, marks from the forceps pulling the baby from its third term.

A Ford Explorer drives by, the middle-aged couple inside staring aghast at the signs Crane points towards them. The woman clamps her hand over her mouth as the man slowly

shakes his head. As they continue past us, two teenagers walk towards the clinic, a couple, the boy's arm wrapped around the girl's waist.

Crane cups a hand against the side of his face. "Please, we are here to help. Don't kill something that was made out of love." The boy shouts something neither of us can understand.

A Honda Accord drives by and honks to our left, the family inside smiling and waving. Crane waves back.

Up ahead, Ron starts up again with the megaphone. "Hey, you! Don't go in there!"

The messages Crane sends to women considering abortion are as misleading as the pictures pasted onto his posters and glossing each page of his literature, images portraying the results of an abortion either illegal or induced because the mother's life was in danger. According to Crane, women consistently experience severe emotional and/or psychological problems as a direct result of having an abortion. However, according to a recent report from the American Psychological Association, "most women who have abortions experience a sense of relief" rather than "any lasting psychological trauma." In her book, *Abortion and Dialogue: Pro-Choice, Pro-Life and American Law*, Ruth Colker states that trauma of any kind actually occurs when women turn to another dominating culture or "Other," which is most often the church. Colker explains the women's "later decision (to regret having an abortion) was often made after a religious conversion." As I read these last lines of my research, I couldn't help but remember Crane's words at the end of one of our interviews, when he'd asked me if that one would be our last meeting together. I told him no, as long as I wasn't bothering him. He'd replied, "it's no bother at all," saying that he could work and talk to me at the same time, and besides, "This will give me a chance to convert you." The most encouraging part of his job, after all (as he'd told me during the first interview) is changing women's minds.

I drive home from Hillcrest Clinic, the back of my throat itching, my mind whirling with things I felt should have been said, Crane's rhythmic voice reverberating past my reasoning. I merge onto Interstate 64 right behind a maroon van only to be stuck behind it for forty-five minutes in tunnel traffic until my exit. Jesus fish, stickers of a silhouetted cross, and a Jerry Kilgore sticker are sprinkled around the van's tailgate, but what catches my eye is a bright purple sticker proclaiming, "My Boss is a Jewish Carpenter." I think about a line on Crane's Web site, a caption describing the direct results of action in the name of faith: "We publicly confront the four child-murderers [Doctors performing abortion in the Hampton Roads area] as we see them walking in to execute their victims held hostage

by their mothers.” This seems like an overly condemnatory, transparently partial thing to say, but how can you argue with someone whose boss is a Jewish carpenter, or with anyone spouting statistics through a megaphone?

Another disturbing rumor, relating to the likelihood of breast cancer after abortion and based on the theory that the undifferentiated cells in a woman’s body left after abortion could lead to cancer, is thoroughly disputed by the American Cancer Association. However, this was one of the first “facts” Crane related to me, although he told me he wasn’t sure of its validity.

Finally, one of Crane’s favorite lines to the women walking into the Hillcrest clinic (the one I heard repeated more and more often as I stood helplessly by) is: “We have information that the clinic refuses to give you.” Virginia state law requires women to sign an informed written consent to the abortion, and she must be provided with the following information at least 24 hours before the procedure: a medical explanation about the procedure and its risks, instruction that she may withdraw from the procedure at any time prior to its start, an offer for the woman to speak with the doctor who is to perform the operation, a statement of the age of the fetus at the time the abortion is to be performed, and an offer to review materials about abortion, services for pregnant women, and fetal development. The Virginia Guide to Services for Pregnant Woman has extensive lists of centers for adoption as well as services for child development and rearing, and pregnancy crisis centers in every city and county in the state.

The maroon van, which I had complacently followed for the past twenty miles, exits onto an off ramp and out of my view. At a standstill again on the highway, I look to Crane’s literature, splayed across my passenger’s seat in the waning afternoon light. It is unsurprisingly biased, a bloody spatter next to the “Abortion Option” and a shiny, smiling baby face adorning the page of the “Adoption Option.” Each pamphlet offers one help-line, with either a Georgia or Ohio area code. On the back of one pamphlet, the words “For More Help Call” are typed above a box. The box is empty.

Blue-on-white signs proclaiming “ABORTION KILLS CHILDREN” and “Lord, Forgive Us and Our Nation” face the afternoon Sunday sun along both sides of a half-mile stretch of Virginia Beach Boulevard. The voices behind the signs murmur prayers, and the faces are serene as cars drive by honking and waving or booing and yelling obscenities, with an occasional middle finger jutting into the air from a passenger window. As I walk behind the five hundred men, women, and children gathered along the street, I am able to read the backs of the signs. They are crammed with songs for

meditation, prayers, mission statements, and bible verses. "Today We Stand In Obedience To" heads the back of each poster, followed by a verse, II Chronicles 7:14:

Then if my people will humble themselves and pray,
and search for me, and turn from their wicked ways,
I will hear them from heaven and forgive their sins
and heal their land.

An elderly man with a fat black pipe jutting out the side of his mouth stands with his back to the sun on the corner of Virginia Beach Blvd. and Constitution, leaning his sign into the wind of the westbound traffic across the street. A large Asian family clusters in front of a camcorder set up on a tripod. Young women clutch their rosaries and pray into the wind. A priest adjusts the white band at his neck with one hand, holding his own white sign with the other. Several groups of police gather along the eastbound side of the boulevard and stand guard, arms crossed against their badges.

Today, October 2, 2005, is the biggest day of Crane's year. With salt-and-pepper hair and beard, a red plaid button-down rolled up at the sleeves and tucked into well-worn jeans, Crane looks like a typical middle-aged man out on a family outing—he even has the white sneakers. His eyes are clear blue and kind, and the skin around them gathers into wrinkles from years of smiles when his mouth isn't constricted into a business-like line. He has single-handedly recruited all of the church groups attending the event, made sure each had signs and a place to stand, and sent out men with clipboards to gather signatures petitioning the government to support pro-life legislation.

The event began at three o'clock, and at five past four crowds of people begin running haphazardly across and down the six-lane boulevard to meet Crane, dodging traffic and eliciting more honks from cars, coming from both sides of the boulevard where they'd been standing for the past hour. Hoards of people—families, toddlers clinging to their parent's sides, adolescents with baggy clothing and hats slanted sideways, senior citizens with backs slightly hunched and signs dangling from weary hands—make their way slowly through the thickening crowd and circle Crane in the golden afternoon light. They laugh and murmur and shake hands as they return the signs they'd been holding to Crane, who stacks the blue and white posters into the back of his Volvo. Many others stand back and watch, just as I am, waiting to be acknowledged by Crane. However, I have come simply to observe Crane's crowning moment, the most important day of the year in his pro-life activist career, whereas these others have come to help. It is only the second time I've met

with Crane, my chosen subject for this story, the first profile I've ever written, and the hundreds of complacent Sunday afternoon smiles haloing Crane are all here to support the cause I am so curious—and skeptical—about. I drive home without a formal good-bye from him, unable to make it through the crush of church groups crowding him out, and anticipate my next interview with him, without the hundreds of others, but, undoubtedly, with the signs.

David Crane has lived in Norfolk all his life. The youngest of four siblings, he attended the Norfolk Christian School from kindergarten through twelfth grade, and received a bachelor's degree in business from Old Dominion University. He worked through high school and college, and when he graduated he began working full time with his father's construction company. When his father retired in 1982, Crane was promoted as the vice president of the company, and worked there through 1992.

Crane became involved with pro-life activism after seeing a four-page flyer portraying the results of abortions. His friend and co-worker tacked the flyer onto the bulletin board of the construction company's trailer, and Crane had several months to stare at the lurid pictures, to read the text. Crane was brought up in a religious family, attended church regularly, and although he was aware about the issue of abortion, Crane "always felt like it was out of our hands." Around the same time Crane was exposed to the anti-abortion pamphlet and its pictures, Operation Rescue, a pro-life activist group known for staging sit-ins in front of women's clinics, was gaining national publicity. Crane began to have a desire to become involved. In October of 1988 Crane joined the group to perform sit-ins in Atlanta.

For the first time, Crane began to feel as though he was able to make a difference. The most encouraging part of his involvement with pro-life activism, perhaps the reason he has remained so devoted to the cause despite all its difficulties, is the few times he has been able to "change women's minds" before they go through with the procedure. However, after being arrested and held in jail for one week during a particular sit-in with Operation Rescue, Crane became discouraged and felt frustrated as the sit-in participation began to wane.

In 1994 Crane started Life Ministry, a group that primarily distributes literature outside the five women's clinics in Hampton Roads that offer abortion services. His father had been an entrepreneur (he began the construction company), which Crane believes gave him the confidence to create something himself. The organization, in which his four daughters are active members, offers "sidewalk counseling" to the couples and women entering the clinic, asking them to

reconsider abortion and giving them referrals to other clinics promoting alternatives to abortion. A \$250 dollar check for a "baby shopping-spree" is given to mothers who express an urgent financial need. Crane pulled out a business card the first time we met. His title is the executive director of Life Ministries, Inc, and there is a Bible verse, Pslams 82:3, written in italics underneath his office address: "Defend the cause of the weak and the fatherless."

One can find Crane standing outside the Norfolk Hillcrest Women's Clinic on Wednesdays and Saturdays between 2 and 3:15 pm. The abortionist (again, Crane's word), travels around the Hampton Roads area to perform abortions at several locations, and arrives at Hillcrest at quarter past three. Crane hopes to catch all of the women before they enter the clinic with both his signs and his pleas to get them to reconsider. At 3:15 he shouts across the parking lot to the doctor, telling him he can turn around as well, and ask for God's forgiveness. Crane has changed many women's minds, but he has not yet seen a doctor turn back from the procedures.

Crane is a busy man. He is heavily involved in volunteer work through his church, Kempsville Presbyterian, and his own initiatives. He went with his wife on a mission to Honduras, the second most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere, in which he did construction and maintenance for the buildings of a small town while his wife spent her time in rural areas counseling and leading bible studies. In the local hospital he assisted with surgery. He did hernia repair, tumor removal, took out stitches. Crane has no formal medical training, but all the doctors needed was "just another set of hands." He also volunteered for several months in a jail, in which he did ministry work in Chesapeake, VA, leading bible studies.

A week before the National Life Chain Event, Crane left Virginia Beach with a group called "Operation Blessing." This group set up camp in Slidell, Louisiana, a city west of New Orleans, where it ran a mobile kitchen cooking and distributing meals to Katrina's victims. He and his fellow volunteers had long, unrelenting days, getting up at 6 a.m. and working on through 7 p.m. with few or no breaks, but his team served between 4,000 and 6,000 meals a day to those left without food, water, or shelter in the hurricane's aftermath.

This Wednesday Crane begins by asking me about my faith. He asks me about my pastor's view on abortion. I tell him my pastor would guide anyone gently through their problems without judgment, thinking I know both my pastor and where this conversation is going quite well. Crane apologizes, then says he would like to "banter" with me.

"What would your pastor do if a man comes to him and

tells him he's been beating his child, and it went from his hand to the belt, and now he thinks he should use beer bottles to punish the child?

"What would your pastor do... if, say a man came to him and told him that he was sexually attracted to his daughter? If he told your pastor that he liked it—a lot—when his daughter sat on his lap?

"Or how about if a mother decided to kill her one-year-old child? Do you think he would just sit back and tell her, hey, it's your choice, lady?"

Before I can answer any of his questions, Crane's mouth moves from its smirk into a familiar business-like line. He explains that some people are "squishy" or "soft" on the issue of abortion. They can be so clear about issues they believe to be black and white, yet decide this instance is gray.

I dive into another trap, telling him I thought maybe the issue is so gray because abortion is legal in all fifty states.

"Well, if we looked at the legal aspect of things, slavery was once legal." Anti-Semitism was legal. Segregation too. "Are you going to tell me that these things weren't wrong? We are only strong in supporting things that are politically correct."

He takes off his sunglasses and shifts so that the sun isn't shining directly into my eyes. He tells me his opinion about "liberal" churches. "Lutherans don't even follow the things Luther taught" and "Liberal churches think they can just pick and choose the parts of the Bible that they agree with."

Unsure of how to go on, I look down Bison Avenue to where Crane's sixteen-year-old daughter, Amy, is standing near the back entrance to the clinic's parking lot. She is alone, silent, her long blonde hair waving in the air as her pink pamphlets flap in the wind. The silence reaches us for a few moments, and although I can't begin to collect my thoughts, the stillness is strangely rejuvenating, even though we hadn't solved anything at all.

The Kempsville Presbyterian Church is located in Virginia Beach. When I walk into the huge nave, I ask a parishioner how to get to the balcony, and waver uncertainly over the stage of the church as the band below, complete with drums and violins, strikes up Christian rock ballads. One by one, Crane's family drifts toward the metal folding chairs on the right-hand side of the balcony. I meet Amy first, then Mr. Crane's wife. She is sweet and conversational, prim and auburn, and suddenly quiet as a man steps up to the microphone and begins a prayer. The band strikes up again, and people hold their hands up in the air, women and children dance around the aisles waving flags, teenagers splay themselves on the floor, and a man in the front row blows into a large wooden

horn resting on his shoulder. Heather, Crane's 21-year old daughter, takes a seat next to her mother during the opening songs, and at intermission after the songs have ended Crane finally sits down next to me.

This Sunday, the pastor's theme is submission. Reverend Nate Atwood begins with 1 Peter 2: 18-25, a verse admonishing slaves to be submissive to their masters, a passage slave-owners once used to justify slavery. The verse flashes up onto a gigantic screen above the pastor's head as he explains that all God's children are His slaves; the passage has nothing to do with the racism America is still trying to erase from its past, and certainly doesn't, and never did, justify it.

Bible passage 1 Peter 3: 1 flashes up above in neon lettering next:

You wives should be subordinate to your husbands so that, even if some disobey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct when they observe your reverent and chaste behavior.

I wait quietly for the pastor to qualify this verse as he had with the first, aware of Crane's breathing right beside me. Reverend Atwood: "Why do you think my wife is submissive to me? Because I'm just a great guy?"

Loud chortles and giggles resound throughout the nave. "Nooooo...."

The congregation laughs louder. I can distinctly hear the high-pitched giggles of the women seated around me, overlapping the appreciative grunts from the men.

Another bible verse flashes. 1 Peter 3:7:

Likewise, you husbands should live with your wives in understanding, showing honor to the weaker female sex.

Reverent silence reigned for Atwood, whose words cascaded into minutes upon hours over the subject of submission, and I cross and re-cross my legs, quietly waiting for him to further explain the last two Bible verses still flashing in my mind. Before I know it, however, the service is over. I look expectantly to Crane, waiting for him to say something, anything as the one person in the entire church whose primary income and drive in life foremost, undeniably, and in many cases, solely, affected the female sex. "Long service today," he smiled at me, and I followed him toward the stairwell, maybe for once appreciating the simplicity of the red on white sign proclaiming "EXIT." His silence and the signs brought the simplicity of it all back to me, of the one word on the back of Crane's tongue—murder—as I stretched mine into argument

against pro-life sentiments.

KPC is a full hour's trip from Crane's home, yet a trip he and his family dutifully make every Sunday. To Crane, the drive is obviously worth its troubles, though I can't imagine how ultimately silent Heather, Amy, Mrs. Crane, and the other two daughters must remain as their maroon Volvo spins them towards 1 Peter 3: 1-7. The back of my throat is itching again, and I can't fully inhale until I hit Interstate 64. I drive home sucking in deep breaths of air between intervals of singing "Me and Bobby McGee" at the top of my lungs.

Crane is late. It is our last meeting together, and I sit on the hood of my car in the unseasonably hot November afternoon, watched by a security guard pacing back and forth in front of the clinic's entrance.

I finally see one of Crane's three Volkswagens pull into the clinic, and he and his daughter, Amy, get out of the car and pull their signs out of the trunk. "By the way, do you like my hat?" Crane asks as I approach, pointing to the gray baseball cap with a patch on its front claiming in child-like font, "Life is good." Half smiling, he says it's an indirect statement for his cause.

As Crane is telling me more about his church, he mentions that one of the reasons he likes it so much is because many of its members home-school their children as well. Crane and his wife decided to home-school all seven of their children. In public schools, Crane believes, other children can bring emotional problems and "baggage" with them to school. While "Academics are good," home-schooling is much more flexible in its curriculum. Crane teaches character and Bible training, and his children just spent the last two days working on Kilgore's campaign for governor, making phone calls.

"One boy made 80 calls in an hour," Amy jumps in, smiling shyly, and Crane looks askance at her.

"Don't just say things, Amy!" He turns to me. "Some of the kids got a little goofy after hours of making phone calls."

Maybe thinking I'm still skeptical about home school, he goes on to tell me that Heather is about to graduate from Chesapeake Community College. I remember Heather well; we had spoken right after the service. She is pretty and soft-spoken, like Amy, only with her mother's auburn hair. As we were leaving the church, Heather told me it seemed that many women were very illogical in their condoning view of abortion. After all, if the pictures are so bad, why don't they see the reality of abortion as such? "I mean, I know I'm irrational, too, sometimes—because I'm a woman—but can't they see that abortion is just as bad as those pictures?"

Crane disrupts my thoughts with an "If you'll excuse me...." He tells me he hadn't started today's session of

sidewalk counseling with a prayer, as he usually does. I step a little farther away as he and Amy bow their heads and ask God to help them “Communicate Your will to women.”

As Crane shifts to point his signs towards the clinic, Amy tells me her friend wants an “undercover degree,” and Crane furrows his eyebrows at her, saying there is no such thing. “No, they get degrees in something like... like....”

“Criminal Justice?” I offer.

“Yeah. Criminal Justice.” The creases at his eyes crinkle again, and he smiles as he looks from me to her, two young women standing by his side. He corrects his daughter again. “There’s no such thing as an undercover degree, Amy.” •