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ON THE WEB

www.stacyzallie.org -- Stacy Zallie Foundation Web site

Shattered by daughter's death, a father finds purpose

If it's true hindsight is 20/20, then George J. Zallie's vision never has been sharper.

But his heart is in pieces.

Zallie's daughter and youngest child, Stacy, took her own life in October 2002, almost a year after having an abortion she kept from her close-knit family.

Zallie is convinced the resulting emotional roller coaster led to her death, days before she was to be a bridesmaid in her older brother's wedding.

"I knew it was a life event for her," says Zallie, 53. ". . . It was the most serious issue in that brief life of hers. I know, in my heart, it took a toll on her emotionally and mentally, that she couldn't recover from it. And it just breaks my heart that she didn't open up."

So Zallie put his shattered heart, his prominent name -- he's the second-generation owner of eight area ShopRites -- and his financial clout behind a Web portal and foundation in his daughter's name that provides post-abortion support and advice.

The Cherry Hill resident immersed himself in research on the emotional after-effects of abortion and heard both sides of the great divide, committing to neither one. (For the record, Zallie family campaign contributions over the last several years have gone to Democrats and Republicans alike.)

Zallie admits he was previously ambivalent about the issue -- as a man; as the father of a stereotypical "good kid"; as part of a great, silent majority for whom abortion is neither black nor white but a murky gray.

But when he attended a retreat in Malvern, Pa., after Stacy's death -- the only man in a roomful of 22 women who'd had abortions -- Zallie had his epiphany.

"I heard guilt, remorse, loss," he recalls. "Their frankness was really astounding to me. It was helpful for me in understanding just what Stacy was going through . . . It became important to me to get the message out."

And while Zallie may be more committed to the message than most people, it's fair to argue, as he does, that post-abortion effects have not been widely studied or publicized. Twenty percent of women who've had abortions may suffer some depression, says Mark Rosenberg, an advanced practice psychiatric nurse at the University of Medicine and Dentistry-School of Medicine in Stratford. But at least one other study he quotes shows 98 percent of women feel comfortable with the decision.

Zallie knew in the current political climate his "message" had to claim no ideology. So his daughter's Web site lists faith-based and non-faith-based resources for help, as well as individual counselors and organizations. Two dozen highway billboards in the area use her image to promote "non-judgmental post-abortion care."

It's one thing to be the name on thousands of ShopRite sale circulars every week; it's quite another when your dead daughter's face is staring at you from a highway billboard.

Says Zallie: "I gotta admit, when I first saw my daughter's face on 95 . . ." And then he drifts off.

"It's a hard thing to do. But it's the only way I felt we could do it. It had to be done . . . If I get one girl -- one girl -- to go to that site and realize that she's not alone, then it's worth it.

"Stacy's life meant something. She's here for a purpose."

The present tense is no slip when Zallie talks about his youngest child, a former soccer standout and 2000 graduate of Cherry Hill East. He mentions the homecoming title, the trophies. His eyes wander to a shelf in his kitchen full of her photos. He asks himself why Stacy didn't tell him or his wife, Linda, about her abortion, though she did ask to see a therapist. He would have found her the best money could buy.

"I figured it was something she had to work out," the soft-spoken Zallie says, struggling to keep grief from overwhelming his businessman's demeanor. "She was a rational kid . . . but I didn't press her on it, nor did her mother.

"It was really baffling to me -- to all of us."

That's where the hindsight comes in. When he thinks about their daily breakfasts near his office in Clementon, Zallie remembers fleeting moments when it seemed his youngest child wanted to tell him something. Past conversations now hold precious clues.

And the "what ifs" are killers: if only she had talked to her parents, if only he had gotten her a female therapist sooner, if only her brother's three beautiful children had come along sooner to assuage her loss.

All George Zallie can do is translate all the torturous mental energy into action.

"I miss her more than I can ever say," he muses. "I just loved that kid. But I say to myself, 'What would have helped Stacy?'

"This is not about pro-life or pro-choice. But in the emotional debate . . . there are a vast amount of Stacys out there, of varying ages, who don't know where to go, who've had abortions, and have had trouble reconciling with that. And it's been under the radar.

"That's what the foundation is for."

Ties That Bind appears Thursday. Contact Christina Mitchell at (856) 317-7905 or cmitchell@courierpostonline.com.

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