

CCBR: Canadian Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform

Making Abortion Unthinkable

March–April 2008

“Seeing the display for the second day made me even angrier. I actually remember being so angry that I felt sick to my stomach, like I had to vomit.” –Jacinda, U of Calgary student

Dear Friends,

Those are the words from someone who was irate when she first encountered the Genocide Awareness Project (GAP). But the anger didn't last. Here is her story, in her own words:

*“In the fall of 2007, I saw the GAP display at the University of Calgary [(U of C)]. Prior to seeing this GAP display, I had decided that despite my Roman Catholic upbringing and pro-life roots, I was going to be pro-choice. I was a university student now, why shouldn't I have an open mind? I remember talking with some girls in my dorm, and even going as far to say that **if I were to get pregnant now, I would without a doubt obtain an abortion.** I thought that, medically, abortions were more safe than delivering, that women had a right to choose when and when not to be pregnant, and that if something was legal, it was obviously justified.*

“Walking by the display, I felt anger—extreme hatred and disgust. These feelings were so intense, and I had never felt so much hatred towards a group of people that I didn't even know. I remember standing and talking to a few of the people ‘on the other side of the fence.’ ... After listening to some of the arguments made by the pro-lifers, I remember going to talk to the pro-choicers who were all rallying around, chanting, and who had large banners that everyone was autographing. ... One of the girls from the pro-choice groups told me that they were trying to start a letter-writing campaign to the university saying that the GAP display was sexually harassing to women, and that they wanted the signs turned inward. I actually agreed, took a flyer from her, and was going to write a letter as soon as I got back to my dorm.

“Seeing the display for the second day made me even angrier. I actually remember being so angry that I felt sick to my stomach, like I had to vomit. I thought it was disgusting that people were allowed to do this, to impose their viewpoints on others, to display graphic pictures of a medical procedure and to ‘proselytize’ their church’s stance on abortion. Going home that night, I couldn’t sleep. The pictures of the dead and alive 24-week-old fetuses haunted me.

*“Throughout the next few days, I prayed and prayed and prayed. I hadn't prayed once since I came to university. Through prayer, I came to realize that why I was so upset and so angry about the GAP display was not because I hated the people that were talking about abortion, it was because I hated abortion. In my heart, I knew abortion was wrong. I knew pregnancy involved two lives, and I knew it shouldn't be a woman's right to end another being's life. I knew I had to get involved with pro-life; I knew that it was my moral obligation to speak up for the unborn who don't have voices. **I'm now happy to say that in the spring of 2008, I was a volunteer at the GAP display at the U of C campus!**”*



▲ From pro-choice to pro-life, to pro-life activist, Jacinda dialogues with a fellow student at GAP. In the days following GAP, Jacinda was elected a vice-president of Campus Pro-Life (CPL) for the next school year!

Conversions like Jacinda's explain why there is so much resistance to GAP; after all, the more effective something is, the more its opposition fights that effectiveness. And there was no shortage of opposition to the latest GAP exhibit held by CPL students on March 31 and April 1. But these young pro-life activists showed their resolve to overcome all obstacles to expose the injustice of abortion. Here's what happened:

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After having displayed GAP four times since 2006, CPL planned to do GAP again this semester. But this time the university told the club that, due to complaints from other students, it would have to display its GAP signs inward, making it impossible for passersby to see the imagery without going out of their way to do so.



▲ ▼ Common behaviour at GAP: students often glance curiously at the images as they walk by or gaze upon them as they stand at a distance. Even though no dialogue takes place with GAP volunteers, such moments may be the only time these students will receive factual information on abortion during their academic careers. These critical opportunities would be lost if the GAP signs were censored by being turned inward—not that “pro-choicers” would mind.



CPL members refused to comply with this unjust demand, knowing it would hugely diminish GAP’s effectiveness. In a society that is guilty of a terrible injustice, precious few will *seek out* evidence that could implicate them.

So, before sunrise on March 31, with the temperature at -10°C, they arrived on campus (yes, that’s dedication) and set up the exhibit. That afternoon, Campus Security served the students with a “Notice to Vacate” ordering the removal of their signs—and themselves.

That evening, the students gathered to strategize. Would they return to campus with GAP the next day as planned? Should they defy the university’s “Notice to Vacate”? While they discussed their options, cell phones began

ringing as media (newspaper, radio, and television) were contacting the students for comment. CTV News even came to the students’ meeting to take video footage of their planning and then made the issue their lead story at 11:30 p.m. that night!

As the students strategized, they were uplifted by this message from a fellow pro-lifer: *“In prayer this morning, our six-year-old ... prayed that the grades of the U of C students involved [in GAP] would not be affected due to their courageous stand.”*

But grades were the least of their worries. What would the university do if the students defied its “Notice to Vacate”? Would the administration actually arrest its own students? Would they face academic discipline, even be prevented from graduating? Would it be worth the risk? Contemplating these intimidating questions, the students were emboldened by these words from Gregg Cunningham, the creator of GAP:

“These students have a rare opportunity to change the course of Canadian history regarding speech rights if they have the courage to stand up for the rights of all Canadians and invite arrest. The press needs to be reminded that what is at stake here are the speech rights of all Canadians, including the press.

“These students have nothing to fear. ... They will not be abandoned if they defy this academic tyranny. There is no employer for whom they will ever wish to work who will refuse to hire them because they were arrested for participating in a peaceful student protest. Their arrest will become a badge of courage for which they will later become proud. Someone has to have the courage of a Rosa Parks who when she was ordered to the back of the bus said, ‘No more! Arrest me.’ She forced the state to defend the indefensible and history rightly records her as a heroine in the struggle for social reform.

“What I really want these students to know is that a chance like this comes along once in a lifetime if at all. This is the kind of thing which will inspire other students to demand their freedoms at universities all over Canada. Tomorrow a female student is going to walk past your display site and she is going to be pregnant. Her baby will live or die as a consequence of the direction in which your signs are facing. This is about life and death, freedom and tyranny. Someday your GAP students will have children of their own and having parents who were willing to be arrested in defense of life will provide an example of courage which will change the lives of those children as they grow to adulthood. This is much bigger than they can possibly imagine.”

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The next morning, eleven brave students gathered with GAP signs and prepared to march onto campus. They held a **press conference that included CTV News, Global News, CityTV, and the Calgary Herald newspaper.** After presenting their position for defying the university's discrimination, the students carried the GAP signs onto campus as the media followed.

Security was waiting as the students arrived at their usual location, but did not prevent them from setting up—how could they with a swarm of media recording everything? Pro-choice students were also waiting for CPL. As they did on the second day of GAP last semester, abortion supporters were “playing soccer” on the field where GAP is traditionally exhibited. Undeterred, the pro-life students erected their signs across from the soccer game. Other club members arrived, and the group soon began debating their peers, and did so through mid-afternoon.



▲ Following their staged soccer game, pro-abortion students attempt to suppress GAP by trying to block the display from being seen. The U of C condoned this act by refusing to protect the pro-life students' freedom-of-expression rights, which the university had publicly acknowledged during previous GAP displays (see sidebar on next page).

Fortunately, there were no arrests and no further “Notices to Vacate.” In fact, the university was rightly chastised in the media. The Calgary Herald commented, *“So much for Calgary’s premier centre of learning as a bastion of tolerance, where the search for truth may be conducted in an atmosphere of forthright debate among people holding diverse opinions. If the administration doesn’t like the opinion, it may try to suppress it.”*

Thankfully, the members of CPL had the courage to defy this suppression and were well-equipped to do so. In the weeks leading up to GAP, CCBR staff trained the students in pro-life apologetics and in defending the abortion-genocide comparisons. As well, CCBR and CPL watched Eyes on the Prize, a very inspiring documentary about the Civil Rights Movement and all the opposition its activists, many of whom were students, struggled to overcome. We at CCBR are grateful to you, our supporters, who enable us to work closely with these modern-day world-changers.



▲ CPL president Matthew Wilson (right) is interviewed by media on day one of GAP. Prior to setting up the exhibit on day two, he and fellow executive Leah Hallman read the following statement at CPL’s press conference:

“We are here today because abortion is here. If abortion was already recognized as what it is, the killing of an unborn human being, there would be no need for ‘Notices to Vacate,’ suppression of constitutional freedoms, or scare and bully tactics used by the university on its own students. In their ‘Notice to Vacate,’ which was handed to members of the Campus Pro-Life yesterday at 3:30 p.m., the university clearly stated that it did not want pro-life activities to be done on campus. In stating that ‘students registered at the University of Calgary may remain on campus for their classes and other regular activities not connected to Campus Pro-Life’ the University proved that it is not a matter of graphic signs, security risks, or any other rhetoric that they have employed in the past. The issue simply boils down to the fact that they do not want our message on campus, period. **It is worth pointing out that even in Russia, where human freedoms are still beginning to make their way back into everyday life, [pro-lifers] experienced no problems in erecting the same display that the University of Calgary has found so unacceptable.**”

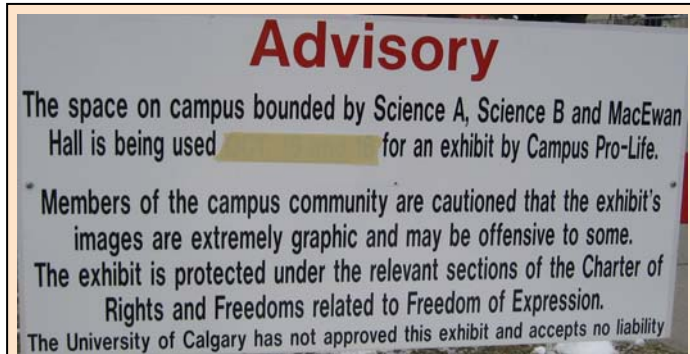
“We are not radicals or extremists, unless trying to promote dialogue on an important, controversial issue can be misconstrued as such. We are simply students who want to express our beliefs that human life has dignity from the very first moments of fertilization. Never in our history have we been violent, demeaning, or rude. Rather, **we have always tried to use our convictions as students in a marketplace of ideas to promote the philosophical and scientific position that the unborn are worthy of life.** We do not know how the university will react to our actions today. We hope that we will be allowed to display our exhibition as we have done for the last several years and that the university will recognize our right to be there, regardless of whether they like our message or not. We are not seeking trouble. **We are seeking to be a voice for those who have none, yet even our voices are being stifled by those who do not believe, in the words of Voltaire, though ‘I disagree with what you say ... I will fight to the death for your right to say it.’”**

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After the two days of GAP, one of CCBR's supporters who took her children to see the exhibit e-mailed me this:

"I think you're aware that our children [age 4 to 11] were in [the concentration camps] Auschwitz and Birkenau with us. [Our now 13-year-old] also accompanied us through the Holocaust Memorial in Israel. In spite of all that exposure to the evil [that] man is capable of without

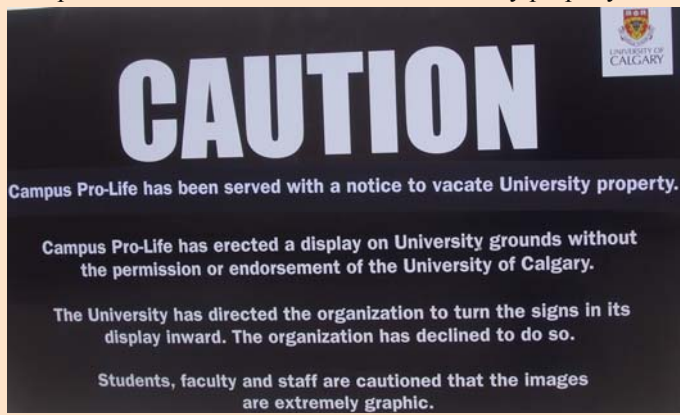
God, this display at U of C left a deep impression on her. Today she said that she couldn't get the picture of the two 24-week fetuses out of her mind. It's been haunting her as I pray it does many others."



- ▲ The advisory posted by U of C at previous GAP displays.
- ▼ At this latest exhibit, Campus Security staff covered the original advisory with a new sign. Are we to infer that the university administration thinks that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms no longer applies on its campus?



- ▼ The U of C modified its sign for the second day of GAP, tacking a sentence at the beginning to inform readers that Campus Pro-Life was asked to vacate university property.



- ▲ GAP images "haunt" viewers because they make real the horror of killing a baby whereas words alone fail. The more often and widely we can exhibit GAP, the more we will reach viewers with functioning consciences (often young people).

If only more people saw what this 13-year-old saw, and if only more parents knew what this parent knows: that to be haunted by injustice isn't necessarily a bad thing—in fact, it's a healthy response that provokes us to change and to action, as Jacinda's testimony shows.

Stephanie

Stephanie Gray, on behalf of the CCBR team

Note: Quotations may have been edited for grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling, and/or length. Boldface font represents added emphasis unless specified as being in original text.



- ▲ CPL member Alanna (left) wrote this after GAP:

"My first GAP was an eye-opening experience. This was one of the first times I had ever had the chance to defend my beliefs about abortion. ... Most of my conversations with people centered around circumstances of birth. The belief that abortion is an unfortunate decision but necessary in cases of rape, poverty, or abuse. I was encouraged to see the diversity of students who stopped to talk, despite the efforts of pro-choice students to impede dialogue. Many students supported our right to present our display, regardless of whether they agreed with our position or not. I learned so much from this experience and the incredible people I experienced it with."

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