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Pushing for personhood

by Teddy James

What is abortion? Is it the removal of unwanted cells from a female's body? Is it the simple procedure of removing a lump of tissue from a woman's womb? According to Cal Zastrow and Keith Mason, cofounders of Personhood USA, the answer is much more disturbing.

"It is baby murder," said Zastrow, who got his start in the pro-life movement more than two decades ago. He and his wife started by helping pregnancy resource centers. This led to their involvement in the Rescue Movement in which pro-lifers would stand in front of or sit inside abortion clinics, preventing them from killing children for that day. As a result, Zastrow and his wife were arrested on several

occasions. Someone suggested that, instead of defying the law, the couple try to change the law. Zastrow immediately started working on a personhood amendment in Michigan. He then heard of a petition drive in Colorado.

Mason was also a veteran of the pro-life battle. He became truly passionate about the personhood of the preborn in 2006 in South Dakota.

"In South Dakota," he said, "there was an incredible sense of unity. It was something I had never seen before. It was so inspiring to me. The reason for that unity and passion, I believe, was because they were finally fighting to completely end abortion." From South Dakota, Mason headed to Colorado to help with the initiative there.

The two met while working on the petition drive in Colorado. They worked on that state petition but felt the movement was bigger than one state. The team began to build a grassroots effort in several states to end abortion.

Problems for Personhood USA

Mason said, "The biggest problem we have is battling against the mentality of some pro-life leaders that the fate of the pro-life argument is held by the Supreme Court. The opposition we have faced by pro-life leaders has been based in fear that we may lose some unforeseen court battle."

Zastrow echoed Mason's sentiment, but broadened the opposition and included Jesus' admonition for Christians to care for their neighbors. "Our number one problem is unbelief," he said. "Unbelief that the preborn are our neighbors and we are accountable to love and rescue them. Unbelief that we can actually get up and stop the killing. Unbelief that God can really bless simple truth and we can mobilize and shut the rest of these child killings down. But with God nothing is impossible."

Mason also said, "To me, it's sad they don't see the bigger picture. The vision is that we are building a grassroots army and a consensus among pro-life activists to end this once and for all. We are spreading that message slowly, but several leaders who have done this for years haven't been as warm as we would have liked."

One more problem Personhood has been facing is a multitude of lies. "There are three main lies," stated Zastrow. "The first is that it is not a baby. We are educating and informing people on that. The second is that the federal government controls everything. States like Mississippi and Colorado should and can end the murder instead of waiting for Washington to give them permission. The third truth we proclaim is that the courts do not make laws. They issue opinions. Baby murder continues because of the unbelief that states can get up and stop it."

Successes of Personhood USA

Before speaking about the successes of Personhood USA, Zastrow said, “There are other pro-life churches and organizations that have done some great things. Georgia Right to Life has the best Web site for education. The American Life League has great treatises and resources on the personhood of the preborn. Personhood USA is unique in that it is an organization promoting personhood legislation within the states.”

That is the big picture of Personhood. As Mason points out, there is also the smaller, personal picture. “I’ve often said that Personhood is like a gateway drug for activism,” he said. “People get into it. Several of those getting involved in these drives have never done any activism before. They have never ventured to pray in front of an abortion clinic. They’ve never even spoken out on the topic. But many ask what they can do next for the preborn because they have received a passion for it. I think that is one of the greatest victories we have experienced.”

One specific victory came during a petition drive when four women who had had abortions came forward for help. One woman had never told her husband of 15 years about her abortion. Some victories result in healing, as with the women above. Others result in a large number of people being educated.

Mason stated, “We’ve tried to educate people on the dignity of the child and bring the gospel into the pre-born argument. I see this as being the goal of a pro-life missionary. Thousands of people have hit the streets talking to tens or hundreds of thousands of people about the humanity of life.”

Legislative victories are numerous in the Personhood Movement. Although the movement itself started only a year ago, over 40 states have personhood initiatives under way. It has also broken records and shattered expectations.

In 2009, NARAL, a large pro-abortion organization, listed Personhood USA on its Hall of Shame. Both Mason and Zastrow wear it as a badge of honor. Mason said, “They say the Hall of Shame is reserved for the biggest threats to abortion. We were the only organization and one of only four nominees for that. And this is our first year of operation!”

In 2009 a personhood amendment passed the House of Representatives in North Dakota. It fell five votes short in the Senate. In Missouri, the Senate passed an amendment, but according to the state constitution, a supermajority in the House is needed for a constitutional amendment. The amendment won the popular vote, but not the supermajority needed.

The personhood movement in Mississippi broke state records for volunteer signatures for any particular issue. They needed almost 90,000 signatures. They submitted over 130,000. People across the country are signing their names and speaking their mind. And it is making a difference.



People of Personhood USA

Each state personhood initiative is independent. As Mason put it, “Our first question when we go into a state is how can we serve them. So many don’t even know the questions to ask. We try to fill in the holes. We keep each state independent because this is a grassroots effort. It starts in one church, in one community. Then it grows to the entire state. When we get enough states, we want to go after the federal law.”

“If you want to get involved personally with a personhood movement in your state” Mason said, “our Web site is the best place to do that, www.personhoodusa.com.” On the site there is a map of the U.S. If your state is highlighted there is a movement present to get involved in. If not, Zastrow and Mason can help you get one started.

Zastrow added, “In most states we have a volunteer serving as a contact person. In Georgia, we don’t have a personhood initiative. Instead, we funnel people to Georgia Right to Life. If there is a church or pro-life group already focusing on personhood in a state, we want to funnel all contacts to them. In states where there isn’t someone working specifically on personhood, we build them a Web site to help them contact and coordinate volunteers. The next step is finding a pro-life legislator who will agree to help write a personhood amendment in his state.”

Both men also had advice for people who find themselves constantly engaged in pro-life debates with family or coworkers. Zastrow asked the question, “Shouldn’t the law protect every innocent person? I look them in the eyeball and ask, ‘When did you become you?’ Nothing has been added to you or me making us more human after the moment of fertilization. Nothing but nutrition. You were fully alive and fully human from fertilization.”

Mason spoke along similar lines. He uses the acronym SLED, which stands for size, location, environment and dependency. If people say they are pro-abortion, you can ask why they believe in that. It all goes into the humanity of the preborn, what makes them not a person? Is it the size of the child? How big does one need to be in order to be human? Are premature babies not human? Is it the location? How is it that being in one place makes one human, but being in another does not?

Is it the child’s environment? Just because a child’s environment is in the mother’s womb and not outside, does that make sense to continue calling it tissue? Lastly, is it the child’s dependency that determines personhood? Is a person who relies on a pacemaker, hearing aid, or even life support no longer a human? Does that make one less deserving of constitutional protection than someone who is healthy?

“Going through this argument,” Mason said, “brings it to the place we want to go. Some people will never change their minds. But when you look at those who are fully invested in abortion, when you get them to look at it as though that child is a person, they will

agree that no human should be put through what a child goes through in abortion. It begins to soften their hearts.”

Help needed

The following states need a leader to step forward and launch a personhood initiative: Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

To begin a personhood movement, visit www.personhoodusa.com. Click on the black map on the right side of the screen. Then click on your state and a link will appear to contact Personhood USA. You can also call 202-595-3500 for a step-by-step guide to get the ball rolling.

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