

March for Life Leader Reveals Silver Linings in 'Snowpocalypse'

Whether serving in pregnancy care centers, adoption agencies or other advocacy groups, people involved in the pro-life movement rarely look up from day-to-day work to see the big picture. Once a year, the March for Life provides that opportunity.

Held annually to mark the Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion in the United States, this peaceful protest is organized by the March for Life Education and Defense Fund—which Jeanne Mancini has led since 2012, when founder Nellie Gray passed away.

It seems like a position tailored for Mancini, known for her bright smile and policy expertise. She worked previously at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, then at Family Research Council focused on life issues—including women's health, end-of-life concerns and ethical questions surrounding abortion practices.

Mancini spoke via phone from her Washington, D.C. office to give her perspective on this year's snowy event, the future of the pro-life movement and why Good Friday matters.

Bound4LIFE: Jeanne, Washington was hit by a massive blizzard right around the March for Life this year. Could you put us in your shoes that week?

Jeanne Mancini: Typically, there's always some weather issues because the March has been held in January over the last 43 years. A couple years ago, we were concerned because of extreme low temperatures. This year, we were concerned with the potential blizzard that was scheduled to hit the day of

the March.

In the week leading up to the event, we were consumed with getting all the details handled. We would never cancel the March, but were concerned about getting messages out to the public about logistics, social media and how to connect remotely.

Bound4LIFE: Government offices shut down that day in D.C., and some speculated severe weather could affect the right to assemble. Looking back, are there any silver linings you see in “snowpocalypse”?

Jeanne Mancini: We made some statements leading up to the March about our constitutional privilege to practice freedom of speech and freedom of participation. The March for Life has never been cancelled due to weather.

A spokesperson for the U.S. Park Police said in the Washington Post, “This is a First Amendment event, and if people want to come and demonstrate, we want them to be able to come say what they have to say.”

Some of the best stories came from those groups and supporters that got stuck on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, some stranded for up to 24 hours. Huddled in their vehicles, they served each other, holding prayer vigils.

One group in particular will share their testimonies at next year’s March for Life. Many viewed their experience as, “No sacrifice is too great as we stand up for a culture of life.”

Bound4LIFE: This year’s March for Life theme is “pro-life and pro-woman go hand in hand.” What is the significance of this theme?

Jeanne Mancini: In this current election year, we have heard a lot of statements about the false “war on women.” There has been a lot of messaging about the idea that to be pro-woman,

you have to be pro-choice. We argue that nothing could be further from the truth.

Our theme was selected to correct this erroneous messaging which creates confusion in our culture. Being pro-life is wanting what's best for mom and the baby, and it's empowering for women. We love them both and, naturally, we wanted to educate about that and to focus attention on those messages.

Bound4LIFE: Many people may not realize that the March for Life is both an annual event, and a non-profit group that operates year-round. In what other ways does your team advocate for lives in the womb?

Jeanne Mancini: Thank you for asking that question because I am constantly asked, "What do you do after January?" One-fourth of our job is planning the March for Life and working to do the very, very best job we can to have a successful event.

But we also have a very strong presence on the Hill and advocate day-in, day-out, year-round for marchers so that their voice will be heard—whether they are Democrat or Republican. We have an amazing colleague, Tom McClusky, in charge of that effort; he has a reputation of being one the best lobbyists in D.C., having worked with Family Research Council's governmental relations group before coming to us. He works behind the scenes and on behalf of the public to help build a culture of life on Capitol Hill.

We have also embarked upon a robust social media educational campaign. We take our theme and develop a digital year-round effort, whether that's utilizing fun and creative memes, or making a teaching moment from something that's recently happened in culture.

For example, on the front page of the New York Times recently there was a picture of a teenager who wore a t-shirt, "I am a Pro-Life Feminist." A moment like this is great for re-

tweeting, or posting to Facebook and Instagram.

In addition, I do a lot of traditional media interviews, write op-ed pieces and share pro-life messages at schools, pregnancy center banquets and other venues.

Bound4LIFE: Now under your leadership since 2012, what has been your approach to moving the March for Life into the 21st century?

Jeanne Mancini: I'm not the greatest strategist on leading into the 21st century! I just feel God wanted me in this job and that it was the right thing. Most of what happens has not been of my own making, but discernment and allowing God to open and close doors.

The irony of it is, we are not actually an inherently religious organization. We are non-sectarian—though most who work here have a deep faith. We are very prayerful and pray together as a staff. We seek God's guidance on what our next steps should be.

We have built a strategy with a one-year and five-year plan. I think the most important thing since 2012 was our emphasis on social media and engaging the younger generation with a better website. We've shortened the rally and sought out engaging speakers. The evangelical outreach and getting more involved legislatively—it quickly became apparent that our focus should go in those two directions.

There is a constant day-in, day-out administrative challenge in running a non-profit and stabilizing fundraising efforts. We had never done a direct mail campaign until 2012. We rely on God one day at a time as we face each challenge.

Bound4LIFE: Have you seen a change in the demographics of those attending the March for Life over the last few years?

Jeanne Mancini: We've definitely seen more evangelical groups

get involved over the last few years. Having come from a background of working at Family Research Council, it was difficult for me to comprehend why—for the most part—my pro-life evangelical brothers and sisters weren't participating in the March for Life. Each group coming on board, such as the OneVoiceDC prayer gathering, seems to have a call from God to be involved and stand for life.

In addition, many groups are joining with us who are not faith-based. One group, Secular Pro-Life, is truly an amazing organization; I'm always impressed with the different resources they have to offer. We encourage all groups to be involved in the March for Life as long as their approach to being pro-life is non-violent.

The March over the last 20 years has progressively gotten younger so that the majority of participants are now young adults in the age range of 25-30, with teens and elementary age children included. It's been said this is the most pro-life generation, and we are witnessing that.

Bound4LIFE: If you could see into the year ahead, what would you envision this next year to look like with regard to pro-life victories?

Jeanne Mancini: If I had my dream, we would see a strongly pro-life president elected as well as a really pro-life and pro-religious liberty justice appointed to the Supreme Court. As to our culture, our prayer is a dynamic shift in the direction of people understanding in their hearts and minds what it means to build a culture of life.

It's difficult to predict right now what may happen in our current landscape. We have enjoyed a lot of freedoms in the past in this country, but I wouldn't be surprised if we are headed to a time of "refining"—where we will need to be stronger in our faith, conscience and standing up as witnesses.

In terms of relying on our government and legislators, I believe we will have less protection in the future than what we've experienced in the past for many, many years.

Bound4LIFE: Millions are involved in the cause to see life upheld in our nation—praying, volunteering, even getting involved in adoption. What is your call to the pro-life movement during this critical election year?

Jeanne Mancini: I believe we are in a spiritual battle. Often we get discouraged thinking our efforts aren't successful, but every voice does make a difference.

I was at a church service right before Good Friday one year. Themes of light and darkness were prominent during the service. At one point, all of the lights went out in the church; then one single candle was lit, reflective of Christ. It struck me how that one candle lit up the whole enormous church.

It spoke to me how each of us are like a candle which matters all the more the darker it gets. Back in the first century, Jesus called His followers to "Let your light shine"—those words haven't lost their importance or impact.

Pray, fast, remain close to the Lord and allow God to work through your faith and works: I think that's the most important stuff.

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