

His Film Was Presented to the Supreme Court in the Texas Case—Now Kermit Gosnell Documentary Director Speaks Out

During oral arguments on March 2 at the Supreme Court in the Texas case *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg asked an important question: "What was the problem the legislature was responding to?"

The answer, in short, is that thousands of women in Texas have been harmed by the abortion industry. Mainstream media only took notice of this industry due to an unscrupulous abortion center owner in Pennsylvania: Kermit Gosnell, now serving a life sentence for involuntary manslaughter of a woman seeking an abortion at his clinic and first-degree murder of three infants born alive (among other criminal charges).

Filmmaker David Altrogge and his team tell the complete horrific story in *3801 Lancaster: American Tragedy*—a documentary that surprisingly features the voice of Kermit Gosnell in a leading role. Recorded from his prison cell, Gosnell gave the filmmakers unusual access when they sought out why he maintains his innocence.

Justice demands that we refuse to look away from the truth. In fact, the film makes such a compelling presentation that one Texas-based legal group used a summary and stills from *3801 Lancaster* in an amicus brief filed in the Texas case. Altrogge, currently based in Austin, Texas, gives behind-the-scenes insights in our phone interview.

Bound4LIFE: How did you first hear about the criminal case

against Dr. Kermit Gosnell?

David Altrogge: The story of this film on the Gosnell case really started in 2011. I was in a coffee shop in Pittsburgh, sat down and picked up a newspaper. I saw this tiny little column about the Gosnell case, how the grand jury report had just been released. I was shocked and horrified; I couldn't believe what I was reading. How does something like this happen in my home state of Pennsylvania?

A couple days later, I get a call from a buddy of mine who lives in Harrisburg. He said, "I don't know if you've heard about this Gosnell case that just broke, but the Philadelphia district attorney Seth Williams is going to be testifying before the State Senate here in Pennsylvania and they're going to allow the press in. This is pretty unprecedented. I know you're a filmmaker; you might want to think about coming."

So my director of photography and I hopped in the car and drove to Harrisburg to film the hearing. We were just staggered by what was presented; we walked out of there realizing we had to make a film about this.

Bound4LIFE: The film includes a key quote from the District Attorney's office, that "there's more oversight in women's hair salons than abortion clinics in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania." Why do you think abortion has become such a difficult issue to discuss in American society?

David Altrogge: I think that gets to the heart of the film. One of the main reasons we wanted to make *3801 Lancaster* is we wanted to spark conversation between people on both sides of the issue.

In effect it says: "Look at this case, here's the facts of it. Here's the Grand Jury report, here's what the police officer said, here's what Gosnell himself has said. Now why did this happen? What is it about our laws in the state of Pennsylvania and in the country as a whole that allows something like this

to happen?”

I think abortion has become such a politicized issue that we forget there are real people at the center of this issue. Real women and real babies—we forget they’re real people. And we just start shouting and screaming. One of my hopes for this film is that it inspires dialogue between people on both sides, pro-life and pro-choice.

I think if we keep shouting, if we keep just screaming at each other, there’s not going to be any progress made on this issue.

Bound4LIFE: Your film captures Kermit Gosnell in his own words. How did your relationship with him come about?

David Altrogge: We actually had a version of the film totally finished in 2014 that didn’t have him in it. We were ready to release it, and then at the 11th hour, my producer said, “Let’s write to Kermit Gosnell. We know we won’t hear back from him, but we’ll write to him to see if he has any interest.” Then we just went on with business as usual.

But a couple months later, I received a letter from Kermit Gosnell in prison. I remember opening it, and my heart was pounding. He said he would be interested in talking about being in the film and sharing his side of the story. That letter led us to almost a year of just getting to know Dr. Gosnell, building a relationship with him.

We exchanged a lot of letters and phone calls. My producer and I went and visited him twice in prison. I think we really had to show him that we weren’t trying to make a film with an agenda before we could finally start rolling tape on that interview. We were just trying to tell the story.

We conducted interviews with him from February to September 2015. That was such an interesting process, the longest interview I’ve ever done. Then we were also able to interview

his family. When his family found out we were making the film, they wanted to add their voices and share their perspectives on the case.

Bound4LIFE: Kermit Gosnell speaks in the film about preventing “children from growing up in poverty” to justify his abortion practices. How do you respond to these claims?

David Altrogge: For me, those claims are some of the most troubling ones that he makes. And I hear those claims often made by other people as a defense of abortion.

It’s troubling to me because it puts such a limit on people’s potential. Do we look at certain people and say, “These are your circumstances; you’re born in poverty. You will never rise above that, so I’m going to be kind and end your life”?

Somehow it’s kinder to prevent a person from living, than to give them a chance at living and rising above their circumstances? Is that really how we as a society view compassion? That sort of thinking terrifies me.

Bound4LIFE: *3801 Lancaster* concludes noting how some states have enacted regulations to protect women from the unsafe conditions found at Gosnell’s abortion clinic. What is your perspective on the Supreme Court battle gearing up around the Texas case?

David Altrogge: If the Gosnell case proved anything to me in making this film, it is that when people choose to turn a blind eye to what’s going on, real people die.

Real people were hurt—real women and babies lost their lives—because the Pennsylvania Department of State and the Department of Health chose to look the other way. Whether you’re pro-life or pro-choice, can’t we at least agree that women deserve better?

If you read the Grand Jury report, the reason they chose not

to inspect clinics is because they were afraid that they were going to impede women's access to abortion. So they chose not to regulate the clinics, and Gosnell operated outside the law. As a result, women died, women were maimed, and babies died.

Whatever happens with laws like the one in Texas, which abortion providers are challenging at the Supreme Court, it's going to affect real women and real babies. These aren't abstract laws; women's safety is in the balance. That's why I support the law in Texas.

After the film was completed and early screenings began, we were approached by the public interest legal group Texas Values—who wanted to include some of the film's evidence in an amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court. Quotes and even still images from our film are included in the brief, which we hope the justices examine.

What a scene it was outside the court last week. Later I learned that Kermit Gosnell's name was mentioned seven times during oral arguments inside; this story is very relevant right now. We're excited to be working with Texas Values to raise awareness and start many conversations across America using *3801 Lancaster: American Tragedy* as a springboard.

Visit for details on film screenings currently planned in cities nationwide.

*For over a decade, **Terri Shepherd** has taken part in pro-life advocacy with Bound4LIFE—a grass-roots movement to pray for the ending of abortion. She graduated from TheCall Institute at the International House of Prayer University in Kansas City, and earned a degree in social work from the University of Central Florida.*

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