



A Conversation with a Planned Parenthood Volunteer

Impact Report

Sometimes it's a blessing in disguise to be in the dark. In this Impact Report, JFA trainer Mary St. Hilaire describes an unforgettable conversation with "Ashley" that highlights a valuable lesson for all of us: Give the benefit of the doubt. Because Ashley wasn't forthcoming with her views, Mary was allowed to simply enjoy Ashley's company as they talked. It appears this helped Ashley consider Mary's pro-life beliefs with a more open mind.

- Steve Wagner,
Executive Director

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I walked up to “Ashley” while she was studying a cluttered free speech board at a Justice For All (JFA) event. I asked her if she had thoughts about abortion, and behind a grin, she replied that she did but that she was “just looking.” She expressed how interesting it was to read the array of comments from people on both sides of the issue. I agreed and began reading them with her. After a minute or so, she turned to me and asked what my thoughts were. As I began to share my pro-life perspective with Ashley, I wondered what she was thinking, what her position was, and what kind of person she might be. My first impression was that she certainly seemed to be a genuinely kind and joyful person. She had a captivating smile and laugh which put me at ease. I felt comfortable sharing my beliefs even though I was ignorant of hers. I figured that she couldn't be extremely pro-choice or she would have had a lot more to say to me.

After briefly sharing my thoughts, she began asking me more about myself, my job, and how I became involved with JFA. I told her I was working with JFA full-time and that I loved it.

Ashley: [with a huge smile] That makes me so happy! I'm so glad you have found something you love. I'm curious: Are your pro-life beliefs a result of your faith?

Mary: Yes and no! I was raised Catholic, and the Catholic Church teaches that human life is sacred and valuable from the moment of conception until natural death. But, as an adult I have also looked at the science and the non-religious arguments as to why the unborn are human and deserving of the right to life. So, yeah, my faith has definitely influenced my pro-life beliefs, but I can also base those beliefs on science.

Ashley: That makes total sense!

It was at this point that she finally began to open up about her own opinion of abortion. I was truly enjoying Ashley's company and conversation, so I was excited to hear her thoughts.

Ashley: In the past several years I kind of took a step back from my faith, but I was raised Christian, so I can totally understand where you're coming from. I like coming to these types of events because I really want to educate myself on both sides of different political and moral issues and I don't know that I've made up my mind on the issue of abortion yet.

Thoroughly impressed by Ashley's maturity and honesty, I wanted to find out more.

Mary: I think it's great that you are really searching for the truth! Can I ask...do you think the unborn is biologically human?

Ashley didn't know anything about the biology of the unborn and was open to hearing my thoughts. After I quickly shared some scientific evidence, she agreed the unborn is biologically human. I then shifted the conversation to the topic of equal rights *outside* of the womb.

Mary: Let's take a break from the unborn for a second. Ashley, what do you think gives you and me and everyone here on campus equal value? I think we can both agree that we should be treated equally, despite all our differences. So it makes sense to say there must be something we all share that grounds our equality, right?

Ashley: Absolutely! We're all human. So I guess it's a question of, “Is the unborn the same kind of human as you and I?” and if so, then abortion would be killing an innocent human being.

Mary: I think you're right.

I was surprised at how easily Ashley understood my train of thought. Then suddenly, almost

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out of nowhere and to my utter shock, Ashley nonchalantly told me more of her story.

Ashley: I volunteer at Planned Parenthood because I really care about women and I want to help give them more accessible birth control, so I table with them on campus. I know they provide abortion services, which I don't really like, but I think it's a pretty small percentage of what they do...what do you think about Planned Parenthood?

As shocked as I was by this new discovery, I tried to gently and graciously share the truth about Planned Parenthood with Ashley.

Mary: I think it's awesome that you are going out of your way to help women! As far as Planned Parenthood goes, I know they do other things than abortion, but I think you'd be surprised at how much of their business is actually abortion. Whatever the case may be about that, it really does come down to that question, "Is the unborn a valuable human being with the right to life?" because if so, it doesn't matter whether or not abortion is their number one money-maker or just something they're doing on the side. It's that they are doing it at all that matters. We wouldn't support an animal shelter that provides services for animals, but also abuses some of their animals on the side, would we?

Ashley: [nodding] Yeah, for sure. I get what you're saying. I guess I'm just still trying to decide what I believe about the unborn.

Mary: That's totally understandable.

It was at this point that a pro-life student who had been listening in on our conversation interjected, asking if Ashley had heard of the movie *Unplanned*, the story of former Planned Parenthood clinic director Abby Johnson and her conversion. He explained the storyline and encouraged her to watch it. I almost couldn't believe my ears when Ashley replied that she had heard of it and sincerely promised that she would "definitely look into it." As our conversation drew to a close, Ashley turned to me and said, "You've really given me a lot to think about!" I expressed how much I had enjoyed talking with her.

As I walked away from this conversation, I had to pause and take a moment to process what had just happened. Ashley is by far the kindest person I have ever encountered on campus and perhaps one of the kindest people I've ever met. She was genuinely interested in my life and my beliefs; she shared in the joy of my success with JFA despite disagreement on the issue of abortion; she was caring and compassionate towards women and children; she was gracious and respectful to me and other pro-life volunteers she encountered; and yet, she was also a Planned Parenthood volunteer. If I had met Ashley last year, before going through JFA training, and she had started our conversation by saying she volunteered for Planned Parenthood, I would have made a million assumptions about what she believed and who she was. I would have presumed her to be radically pro-abortion, close-minded, and hostile. I would have believed her to be the exact opposite of the person she really was.

As pro-life advocates who are passionate about defending the sacredness of human life and ending the injustice of abortion, it's easy for us to assume the worst about people who disagree with us. We forget the fact that most pro-choice people, especially many who work in the abortion industry, care about women and children. We must remind ourselves that there are kind people with good intentions on both sides of the issue, but we will only ever discover this and make an impact in their lives if we take the time to get to know them, not with presumption or hatred but with graciousness and love. I am so thankful that this encounter with Ashley helped me to see this more clearly.

- Mary St. Hilaire, for the JFA Team

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