

## What I Learned During My Trip With Justice For All—By Jon Wagner—9/7/05

My mission trip in spring of 2005 was to Texas with a group called Justice For All ([www.jfaweb.org](http://www.jfaweb.org)). We joined them in their goal to spark discussion on campus about abortion using four mediums. The huge display of facts, thoughts, and graphic pictures is what attracts students to come by and start to discuss this topic of abortion. Along with the large display they have free speech boards to write opinions on, tables with poll questions, and pamphlet sized copies of the larger display to use in conversations. The set up is very conducive to sound discussion as it allows people to relate to one another cordially as they refer to a display of information in picture and argument form that is unattached to either party. Only a few JFA representatives stand behind barricades and officially represent the display. The rest of us try to blend in with the campus students so as to create conversation without seeming condescending or aggressive. My Texas—JFA (Justice For All) trip started with a drive that lasted parts of three days. We left Azusa Pacific on Friday at 4:00 PM and arrived in Scottsdale, AZ the next morning at 1:00 AM. After a quick rest we then woke up bright and early at 7:00 AM. After breakfast we departed and drove all day toward Texas. After just a few food and bathroom stops we arrived in Fort Jackson, TX at 9:00 PM. Our director from JFA wanted us to play it safe and finish our trip the next morning. At 5:00 AM we departed for San Antonio and arrived around 10:00 AM. The trip was long but our team was really able to get to know each other better and we were even able to practice our knowledge and tactics with my brother Stephan Wagner on the way. We were tired from all the driving but we were ready for a great day of training by the JFA staff and fellowship with our fellow teammates from other schools gathered from all around the country. After a long day of training and fellowship we stopped by the University of Texas—San Antonio to pray for our week. We were equipped in an academic way but many of us were spiritually drained and hindered by having much on our minds. Prayer helped me personally understand and lay aside my frustration and attitude that I was holding onto and reorient my focus from our drive out and my individual goals to what was needed for the overall JFA group and how much bigger the whole mission was than any of us individuals. I was able to humbly come together with the team and see our true mission. God allowed me to focus on my purpose of being a servant to the JFA team and individuals I met on the trip from the respective schools. This night of prayer, devotion, selflessness, and focus set the tone for a great week for all of us.

**“ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.”**  
**James 1:19-20**

Monday started out stressful as I was unsure what to expect from the whole experience. After I was willing to take the first step towards interaction with students God really helped me along and showed me the potential for our week. I had a few very involved conversations on Monday as well as some quicker and less detailed interactions. The main conversations with Denise and James really started the week off well because I was able to understand and change some false notions I had of the pro-choice side. Through talking with Denise I realized quickly that there were understandable reasons

that she was pro choice. Although I felt she was wrong it was obvious that she had studied and had fairly solid opinions, which propelled me to take her very seriously. I knew early on that progress would only be made with Denise if I could show her that I truly respected her and her views unconditionally. At first we discussed abortion back and forth at length. I would not budge from my stance that the unborn was fully human and therefore deserved full rights under our law. Denise would not budge that women have choice and the main issue was about freedom and choice instead of the humanity of the unborn. Even though the talk with Denise was unproductive in changing the views of one another it was helpful for me to start understanding why people like Denise believe the way they do. Underneath Denise's view on abortion were tough life experiences and many other factors making up her worldview. This interaction with Denise proved to be just a foresight of a week of discussion under the following sound principles. My first objective for each conversation was to understand the background and circumstances from each person. By doing this initially I would be able to derive the underlying reasons for each point of view. After this I would bring out carefully selected questions and parallels more specific to each story and understanding. These questions and parallel stories would quickly turned into quality discussion unencumbered by hatred or lack of understanding. There was a strange trust that was built between the pro choice students and I that day as we both began to realize that we could make headway on this issue of abortion if we were respectful and empathetic to honest reason and careful conclusion built by either side. What prevailed due to this understanding were true arguments in light of each person and their own background. All of this was surrounded by a love for the person and a true desire to make sense of and carefully handle each perspective. By caring about the person and their life passions initially it allows us to find common ground and credibility even on the most basic of levels. All it takes is a genuine care for the other person. Although all people are not correct they are all unique in background, family, ideals, struggles, beliefs, and passions. This means that we must focus more on the person and our love and understanding for them than our reasoning or our potential victory in argument. This will occur when we can ask careful and clarifying questions and choose to listen closely instead of being sarcastic and making broad and stereotypical statements that tear us apart and create hostility instead of understanding. True gentleness and respect is a genuine pursuit of understanding and an attitude of caring as one maneuvers with great humility to show this care. We must strive to lose the mentality of sports fans that cheer for their side and constantly ridicule the opponents. The game of life is much more important and requires us to care for all people, perspectives, and beliefs if we really desire to gain the confidence of others so that we may eventually convince all those around us of our weighty conclusions. This includes most notably that the unborn deserve to fall under the umbrella of all human beings who deserve civil rights due to their humanity regardless of the circumstance surrounding them. Although a certain progression of an argument could be obvious to you it will probably take someone else the time to understand and truly appreciate the argument. While discussing the issues of my Monday interactions with a team member I sat down and wrote the following thoughts.

**If we fail, in our dealings with the issue of abortion, to differentiate between the moral questions and the emotional, practical, and psychological problems, we will**

**most certainly get lost in our pursuit of truth and fail to find a healthy solution to the overall problem. We will fail by making grey the moral discussion and trivializing the emotional one.**

**“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”**  
**Romans 12: 16-18**

Tuesday was the second and final day at the University of Texas—San Antonio. I understood the system and purpose more this second day so I was excited for our task. A big conversation I had on Tuesday was with two girls named Katherine and Roselyn. By genuinely caring about their emotional stress and struggle with all the issues they really respected the concrete nature of my conclusions. The more understanding, love, and humility I showed the more they wanted to both open up and understand what I had to say. I could tell that nobody ever took their feelings seriously in the past and that they were never able to sort through all the emotional and moral questions in their minds. This caused them to have contradictory conclusions, namely that abortion was socially wrong but outlawing it would be unacceptable. By the end of our long conversation they proclaimed their thanksgiving to me that I chose to hear them out and that my conclusions followed nicely from my individual points. I was convicted today that each person must be introduced to the pro life arguments at their own pace and their inhibitions and questions must be handled with the utmost care. I realized that although many people have bad reasons for their views these views have been formed over their entire lifetime and often go very deep. So if we fail to unpack their many experiences and other things that shape their views we will be unable to truly reach them as they will be left emotionally stranded on points that we have long since checked off our list of things to debate. We only succeed in showing our argument if we can actually get them to see our true side and motive in their timing. I felt that when I started to see things from their perspective they were willing to go forward and take a chance at the discussion. Another key point is that success is when they start understanding the overall pro-life framework and the reasons behind our whole cause. Even if they do not fully agree or change we have done our job if they are eventually thinking and struggling through the real issues. They will always remember these experiences of sensibility and understanding when thinking of our cause. I truly feel that they understood and even started to lean towards my views. The following is my advice to anyone in a debate-type discussion.

When confronted with an argument:

- 1) Take it seriously and begin to decipher the understanding and credibility of the argument systematically.
- 2) If the argument is false then initially clarify to make sure you understood the points correctly. If it is understood correctly then ask tough questions and reason through the evidence with your opponent.
- 3) If they are right in their argument then humbly admit that and learn from their argument by changing your ways. If they are not correct then humbly try to help

them see the issue you do by continuing to reason with gentleness and respect all under the umbrella of genuine love and care.

**Great arguments can only change hearts and minds in the context of great love”**

**“Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.”**

**2 Tim 2:23-25a**

Wednesday was our first day of the real deal—UT Austin. I would be changed even more this day than the previous two days and it really only took one conversation to do that. After some great conversations and observation of teammates the third day of our journey was coming to a close. We had about 20 or so minutes officially left in our day before we were supposed to help with the cleanup and head back to our hotel. My brother Steve and I were hanging around the free speech board and anticipating a possible conversation with a young women writing very hastily on the board. We would later find out that her name was Lynette. When she was through writing my brother Steve initiated a conversation with her in regards to her comments. She had been appealing in her writing for people to worry about worse things in our world than abortion. She wanted those around to be considering the problems of war, poverty, and other things at least alongside any stance on abortion. I was so impacted by what happened next. My brother realized the emotional tension that Lynette had and calmly tried to fully understand her view on abortion but also life in general. The great example Steve set for me was that although he could have quickly turned to abortion conversation he realized the tension and waited till the opportunity was better. Steve amazed me by waiting at least twenty minutes to parallel their conversation to abortion. Due to this Lynette felt very safe around Steve and we quickly learned a great deal of her perspective while also sharing ours. Also Steve was able in a sense “set the table” so well for their talk on abortion. By the time he made his argument Lynette already saw the genuine, humble, and understanding nature of his motives. Due to this state of understanding Steve and those who were complimenting his efforts around Lynette ended up talking for over an hour. By the time we finished with Lynette we had moved locations 3 times to elude the take down of our display. The whole team was amazed at the outcome of this conversation. I could see Lynette visibly more joyful and content than when she came simply because we took her seriously and tried to love her in her needs and questions. She was beaming and all because we had gone really deep but at the same time we had genuinely respected her emotional burdens and thoughts that she was carrying coming in and her experience she brought to our display. Like most of our conversations this did not end with a quick turnaround to the pro-life view. It did however end up with us all in better understanding and trying to decipher the sound opinions from both sides. We all learned so much and Lynette admitted that we truly had good arguments. I realized more today than ever that the arguments must be sound but the overall outcome of success comes from the genuine understanding that is built between all those involved.

**One of the JFA staff members, Antoinette, had a profound experience with another student that she told us about at weeks end. She said that when she broke down and became vulnerable and truly tried to feel their pain they were able to break down and see the truth she was offering. The feeling of being understood led the other person to a compassionate understanding for Antoinette and her views.**

**“Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”** **Colossians 4:5-6**

The highlight of day 4, Thursday, was undoubtedly my detailed discussion with David Salinas of the University of Texas at Austin. We were really able to connect because we both desired so much to respect and really understand each other. I felt that a fellow member of my team did not fully understand David. I chose to step in to try to support and uplift both him and David in their discussion. We ended up breaking off and talking rather exclusively even though many people were still gathered around us. It seemed like we were getting nowhere as we continued to go back and forth between my point of view and his. I could sense with David that we could find common ground and productivity in our discussion. I decided to take him at face value and assume he had good reasons for his view. Then I sought out to understand those views without making it seem tense or condescending. We ended by acknowledging that each other had good points and truly did care for all human beings. We disagreed on whether the hardships of women permitted them to always make a choice for abortion or not. When we shook hands to depart I told him I considered him a true friend and that I hoped to see him again. I was so satisfied to have such a healthy and productive conversation even though we did not fully agree on all the issues surrounding abortion. We must realize that finding common ground and understanding is not a weak gesture or our last resort. It is simply the easiest way for us to understand a point of view as we try to get our points across in the process. I purposefully reversed those from how we normally act in that we must often argue only from our perspective and with very selfish motives. When I got home from the trip I told some people about this conversation I had with the pro-choice student named David. A good friend of mine commented that it was so amazing what some people on the “left” can come up with when dealing with abortion. I agreed with him in part but challenged him by sharing that common ground can be found even with some of the most extreme pro-choice people surrounding the abortion debate.

- 1) We must start by finding common ground even if it is very basic.
- 2) Then we must use the principal of that common ground to parallel to our unresolved topic (in this case of abortion).
- 3) Example 1: First of all because most people believe the holocaust was wrong they probably also believe that housing Jews, although unlawful was a noble thing to do. By simply agreeing on that point it is reasonable to correlate those conclusions to the abortion issue. I argued in many discussions that a Jew in need of a hiding place would be imposing on the generous people, would be inconvenient, would be dangerous and illegal, and could be heavily punished by the Nazis. It would also be expensive and would be unfair in many other ways. In general people will say that it

would be tough to take on the responsibility of housing Jews but under the circumstances and considering the immense value of the people in need we would call it morally good to house them and a moral mistake for those who chose to reject the Jews need regardless of the circumstance and no matter how inconvenient, expensive, or unfair it was due to its imposing nature. This is a direct parallel to abortion. So often the excuses for abortion are only valid if we disregard the value of human beings or choose not to look at the facts of the situation somewhat like someone who convinced themselves the Jews were not in need.

4) The second parallel is with the civil rights movement and overall attitude about equality in our present country. Most people think that Martin Luther King Jr. had a positive impact on us all. Most people believe that human beings deserve equal human rights and protection under the law as well as equal opportunity at least to a reasonable degree. Taking this as a true assessment of society then we can construct a principal to use in all conversations using these civil rights principals. The principal that is the foundation of this civil rights argument seems to be that something of utter importance that we all hold equally, our human nature, calls for us to be treated equally in at least basic ways and with equal opportunity, protection, and certain equal rights. Now taking this further, the unborn has the one thing, humanness, that makes us all valuable or at least equal in value in society so it seems that they deserve these same rights that we do. If this is in fact true than arbitrary differences like size, level of development, environment, degree of dependency, inconvenience, expense, and any other reason would not be valid to disqualify them as human. None of these reasons matter in terms of civil rights because all that matters is our humanness. If we judge our value or rights by anything else then we will disqualify some that deserve rights and lessen or pervert the rights of so many others, including many outside the womb who could be pushed aside or abused due to their size, inconvenience, and abilities to name a few. Now this not a perfect parallel but it does help to inform us on what is truly important for any civil rights discussion including abortion.

**I told my teammates during training that if we build common ground and ask careful questions (instead of speeding to an immature understanding and conclusion) our opponents will genuinely ask us to explain to them the concepts which we wanted so much to force upon them just moments earlier.**

**David and I were able to accurately understand our differences on the issue of abortion and precisely work through those differences. This was made possible due to a willing attitude from both of us to work through those differences in light of the principles of ideas and arguments, which we both agreed upon as we initially tried to find as much reasonable common ground as possible. We both left understanding our differences under an umbrella of genuine respect and clarity. We were able to disagree with each other and still accomplish much in these conversations. Our mutual goals were to find common ground and truly understand the points of views of the other which included the conclusions as well as the evidence, reason, and arguments that shaped those conclusions. The clarity of these conversations increased dramatically when we chose to give each other the benefit of the doubt**

**and when we actually took the time to understand why either of us would hold the views that we held by looking at the correct background and context.**

Overall the week was a great success. Roughly 500 conversations later conducted by our 30 people left us all very satisfied and excited. Abortion was confronted in a visual manner and talked through cordially and strategically. Our Sunday training session had really equipped us for the week. Friendships were built due to common ground and respect being searched and found throughout. A vast majority of dissenters to our position actually understood us clearly and respected us although they did not fully agree. Due to the moral clarity of our position and the care for people the great opportunity for spiritual conversations was apparent. The issue of what makes us valuable surfaced quite often and this often led to discussion about morality, truth, and Jesus Christ, His life, plan, and sacrifice. Lastly we were able to talk to and encourage many pro-life persons who did not get the JFA training. They saw us in action and we dialogued with them about tactics and enjoyed prayer and fellowship among believers. Many Christian students are unaware of what the pro-choice side actually believes. They are ignorant to the reasoning and they tease pro choice arguments and followers by simply quoting Bible verses (often out of context) instead of taking them seriously and in love instructing them with sound arguments. The typical pro-life arguments simply do not have enough substance and lack credibility when not used correctly. Ideally pro lifers could master the pro choice side and truly empathize so as to be able to strategize thoughtfully, argue against the right arguments, and bring them up at opportune times. One last thing I would like to mention about the great week was how much hospitality was shown to our group and the amazing preparation that was engineered for us. Everywhere we went we had friends making us food, making us feel welcome, and helping us feel relaxed after a hard day on the two campuses. THE GIFT OF HELPS WAS VERY EVIDENT ON OUR TRIP. I now challenge people to realize how much they can do by simply coming alongside of other people and organizations and offering practical help.

Below is an excerpt from a previous essay I wrote after a trip to interact with Mormon culture in Utah. I feel that this lesson is applicable to all discussions and debates in which we find ourselves.

**I realized there are two basic ways that one can go about witnessing to a Mormon, other cult member, or even a fellow Christian in talking about differences you have with peripheral doctrine. The first is that you can begin dialogue with differences in your ideology and thinking. This will result in your RELATIONSHIP BEING SEEN ONLY THROUGH THE EYES OF THESE UNRESOLVED DIFFERENCES AND A VERY LOW CHANCE OF SUCCESS will abound for friendship and trust but more importantly for the truth to be accepted by the misled or mistaken party. The second way to interact is to focus first on loving the other person in genuine relationship. Then the UNRESOLVED DIFFERENCES WILL BE SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A CARING RELATIONSHIP WITH LOVE AND RESPECT AT ITS CENTER. Consequently there is a much greater chance for the communication to flourish in understanding and for the ignorant party (and many times that could be us especially in quarrels with Christians about doctrine) to**

**ultimately find the truth. Although the knowledge of issues in the second way is not much different the results are worlds apart. True change can really only come when both parties are honest with themselves, their motives, and with the people they are in communication with and this honesty can only be earned by true relationship focused on love, respect, and truth. Jesus was the ultimate example of tact in trying to change those around him and we see this example all throughout scripture.**

**“But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.”**

**1 Peter 3:15-17**