

Unexpected Turnaround

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When volunteers come to campus for the Justice For All exhibit training, we encourage them to listen in on several Mentor led conversations with University students before attempting to dialogue with students on their own. The picture on the front was of one of these Mentor led conversations.

I was excited about this opportunity because this was one of the first times I had been in the role of Mentor instead of Trainee. In the back of my mind, I was wondering whether or not my trainees were thinking the same things I had been thinking at my first JFA campus outreach a year ago. While traveling to UGA for my first campus outreach, I had been excited and rather gung-ho about jumping into conversations immediately. But as I helped raise the exhibit panels I started to think things like, "*Am I here with These People? Really?...Am I actually going to stand in front of Those Pictures and try to talk to students?*"

I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind and tried to focus on the mentoring task at hand. I whispered to the trainee (pictured beside me in the black jacket, I'll call her Sarah), "There's a guy over there. Let's try to engage him." Sounds kind of like war lingo, now that I see my words on paper.

I asked the guy pictured in the red hat (let's call him Steve) a generic conversation starter.

J - "*Have you ever seen pictures like these before?*"

S - Steve said, "*I think so, but can't remember where.*"

J - "*Do you think this organization should have the right to be here, displaying these pictures?*"

S - "*Yeah, I guess you have the right to be here. It's free speech, but I don't agree with you.*"

J - "*I really appreciate that you agree with our right to free speech even though you don't agree with the the subject. Do you think abortion should be legal through all 9 months?*"

S - "*Well, it's not, is it?*"

J - "*Unfortunately, it is.*"

S - "*Wow. I don't agree with that.*"

J - "*Well, we can agree on somethings! We both agree that late term abortions are wrong and in free speech. That's 2 for 2! Can I ask you at what point in the pregnancy do you think it's wrong to kill the child?*"

S - "*Well, it's not a child. It's a fetus.*"

At this point I could see my trainee connecting the dots mentally: , "*In less than 2 minutes we've brought the conversation around to the one question that matters: What is the unborn?*" From here I engaged this young man in a text book discussion on the points of SLED. What is SLED, you might ask? I'm glad you asked.

SLED is a tool we teach people during a JFA training that addresses the 4 major arguments from the pro-choice side about why an unborn child is not a human being worthy of protection:

Size: *It's small; it doesn't look like a person.*

Level of Development: *The unborn can't feel pain or think. It's not self-aware.*

Environment: *It's still in the womb.*

Degree of Dependency: *The unborn can't live without the mother.*

During this conversation, we hit all the points of SLED in order...several times! Our discussion was very similar to the model dialogue we share at ADD seminars.

Jacob: *Why do you think the unborn is not a person?*

Steve: *It's small; it doesn't look like a person. (Size and appearance)*

Jacob: *Aren't toddlers also smaller than adults? Are you saying an adult is more of a person than a toddler?*

Steve: *I guess that's true, but the unborn can't feel pain or think. It's not self-aware. (Level of Development)*

Jacob: *Aren't there some preschool children and adults who can't feel pain? Don't some of us have worse thinking skills or more self-awareness than others? If those things give us value, don't those of us with more thinking skills have more value than those of us with less?*

Steve: *Interesting point. But still, it's in the womb. It's not even in the world yet. (Environment)*

Jacob: *Are you saying that it's simply a change of location that changes the unborn into a person? If changing location doesn't change the value of human beings outside the womb, then how does it change the value of those inside the womb?*

Steve: *Well, I don't mean location exactly. It's just that the unborn can't live without the mother. (Degree of Dependency)*

Jacob: *Isn't it the case that newborns and toddlers can't live without someone else either? I agree that the unborn is more dependent, and I think I'd even agree that it's dependent only on the mother.*

Steve: *So it can't be a person. It's not independent.*

Jacob: *Let me ask you this: If a one-year-old falls in a pool and you're the only one nearby to save him, would you?*

Steve: *Sure.*

From here, Steve would start down the list of SLED objections all over again. I was actually glad for this because it was giving Sarah (the trainee) lots of great exposure to the SLED tool. About an hour into this conversation while staring at a picture of an aborted child, Steve finally says,

"I guess I never saw the unborn as a person before. Maybe I should."

Soon after this comment, a friend of Steve's walks up (call him Bob) and Steve starts asking his friend what he thinks about the exhibit and abortion. His friend gave a non-committal answer with a shrug, "I don't know. It's legal." Before I could engage Bob in conversation, Steve jumped in and said, "Yeah, but come on man. You know not all laws are good."

Before I understood what was happening, Steve and Bob were engaging in a dialogue about abortion with Steve defending the pro-life side!

I continued to converse with Steve and Bob (all the while, Sarah was listening intently) for another hour. I don't want to make it seem like Steve became a fully onboard pro-life advocate at that time, but he definitely walked away with a pebble in his shoe and major questions in his mind.

Sarah went on from here to engage students in her own conversations and at the end of the day she reported back to me that she had learned a lot and had several productive conversations. It was a great day of learning for all of us involved!