

# Abortion survivor tells story to promote life

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On April 6, 1992, Gianna Jessen turned 15 years old.

But even as she celebrated the anniversary of her entry into the world, she was not rejoicing in the circumstances.

On April 6, 1977, Jessen's mother — who was seven months pregnant — had a saline abortion in a California clinic. The child being aborted was Jessen, who survived the procedure and was taken to a hospital where she struggled for life weighing just 2 pounds.

Since surviving the abortion, she has had to deal with the cerebral palsy she still suffers from as a result of the procedure. Still, she emerged as a lively teenager who laughs easily and has dreams of a singing career.

She has also become a staunch abortion opponent.

The teen and her adopted mother, Dianna DePaul, now travel across the United States to spread their pro-life message. As part of the New York State Right to Life Committee's 25th annual convention, held in Rochester, Jessen spoke and sang to 300 people — including Bishop Edward D. Head of Buffalo — gathered at the Holiday Inn-Genesee Plaza Hotel, 120 E. Main St., on April 4.

She also spoke to more than 500 people — mostly youths — at St. Joseph Church, 43 Gebhardt Road, Penfield, on April 5.

Such speeches now make up a major part of her life, Jessen said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from her San Clemente, Calif. home.

"We're home only four to six days a month," she said.

The pro-life advocate spends much of the rest of her time on the road, recounting her life story and speaking out against abortion.

When she was taken to the hospital in 1977, Jessen said, doctors did not give her much of a chance to survive. Although she had escaped the chemical burns that occur to most infants as a result of saline abortions, the temporary loss of oxygen to her brain during the abortion left her with cerebral palsy — a disorder that affects motor skills due to damage to the central nervous system.

"When I was taken from the hospital to the foster home, I could only just lie there because of the cerebral palsy," Jessen said. "The doctors told my foster mother not to do anything with me,



Abortion-survivor Gianna Jessen (left) and her adopted mother, Diana DePaul, traveled to Rochester April 3-6 for the New York State Right to Life Committee convention.

that I would never be able to do much."

Ignoring the doctor's instructions, her foster mother worked with the child to help her overcome cerebral palsy's effects. Gradually, she began to gain control of her body, even learning to sit up.

The day she first learned to walk — Jessen was 3 — was also the day that she was adopted by DePaul, her foster mother's daughter. To this day, she still walks with a limp because of her condition.

Although she couldn't play sports or take part in some other physical activities, she was able to go to school. She later discovered her ability to sing and became active in the school's choral groups.

All during this time, Jessen knew she had cerebral palsy — and that she was adopted — but not that she was an abortion survivor.

Then on Christmas Day, 1989, she went into the kitchen and asked her adoptive mother why she had cerebral palsy.

"Just as she was about to tell me, I said, 'I was aborted, right?'" Jessen recalled. "She said, 'Right,' and I said, 'OK, at least I have cerebral palsy for an interesting reason.'"

Jessen knew about abortion because her adoptive mother was active in the pro-life movement. That commitment to life led the family to welcome in a 102-year-old man six years ago. The man, whom Jessen calls "Grandpa," was a street person for 10 years.

In addition, their "family" now includes an unwed mother and her two-year-old son.

Not long after she learned she was

an abortion survivor, she began speaking against abortion.

Most people respond enthusiastically when she speaks, Jessen said, but even she has had people oppose her views.

"One time, a woman stood up (as I was talking) and said, 'You were not a child,'" the youth recalled. "I thought, 'What was I, a fish? I came out as a



Jessen sang and spoke to a crowd of more than 500 people at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield April 5.

person."

She said she doesn't understand why some people get angry when they hear about her life. Nevertheless, Jessen will continue to speak out, she declared.

"I think abortion is a very selfish thing because all the women are thinking about is themselves," she said. "Think about that baby. It was (the woman's) actions that got that baby there."

Despite such strong feelings against abortion, Jessen said she is not angry with her natural mother. "I hope she's OK, and I do forgive her totally for what she did," she said.

Traveling so much means that she has is no longer able to attend school. Jessen joked that she now attends "airplane school," doing much of her school work on airplanes between talks.

Since her current lifestyle also limits her social life, she acknowledged that she is beginning to wonder what it would be like to "go through the normal high school experience and have a boyfriend."

But, she noted, "Everywhere I go, I make friends. I'm going to have friends across the world, and all across the United States."

Jessen's own goals include a singing career modeled after Amy Grant. She has already begun recording an album tentatively titled *Gianna Jessen: Alive*, and eventually she'd like to marry and start a family.

For now, however, she is dedicated to the pro-life cause. In fact, she will join fellow abortion survivors for the first International Gathering of Abortion Holocaust Survivors, scheduled for April 29, in Ottawa, Canada.

"People always say to me, 'How can you do this, don't you run out of energy?'" Jessen said. "When you're called to do something, you do it."

"It says in the Bible that something meant for evil can be something for good," she said. "What happened to me was something evil, but it's been for good."

## Theologian to speak at Sacred Heart Cathedral April 26

ROCHESTER — Dr. Monika K. Hellwig will speak about "God on the Side of Widows and Orphans: The Protection of Distressed Women," on Sunday, April 26, at 2:30 p.m. in Sacred Heart Cathedral, 296 Flower City Park.

During her presentation, the theologian will consider the biblical and traditional mandate to act creatively in response to the old and new types of

oppression and suffering women face in today's society.

Hellwig's speech is part of the Sisters of Mercy's third prayer celebration commemorating the 150th anniversary of the death of their founder, Catherine McAuley. The program is free and open to the public.

For information, call Sister Elaine Kolesnik, RSM, at 716/288-2710.

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