

To Life!

Birthright keeps rights of women at forefront

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

In 1968, five years before the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision effectively legalized abortion in this country, Louise Summerhill was already concerned about providing alternatives to abortion for women in troubled pregnancies.

Summerhill created Birthright to offer supportive care for these women.

Today, there are more than 600 Birthright chapters around the world — including centers in Canandaigua, Corning, Ithaca, Ontario, Rochester and Victor.

In these days of heated rhetoric surrounding abortion, however, even just offering supportive care to women in troubled pregnancies has caused Birthright to come under attack, noted Joan Rohr, director of Birthright of Rochester.

"We do seem to have to defend ourselves a lot," Rohr said. "As soon as you say you're pro-life, a lot of barriers go up."

However, Rohr continued,

"Birthright has always been the gentle wing of the pro-life movement because we are nonpolitical. We stay out of controversial issues."

Moreover, Birthright is not simply concerned with discouraging abortion, Rohr said.

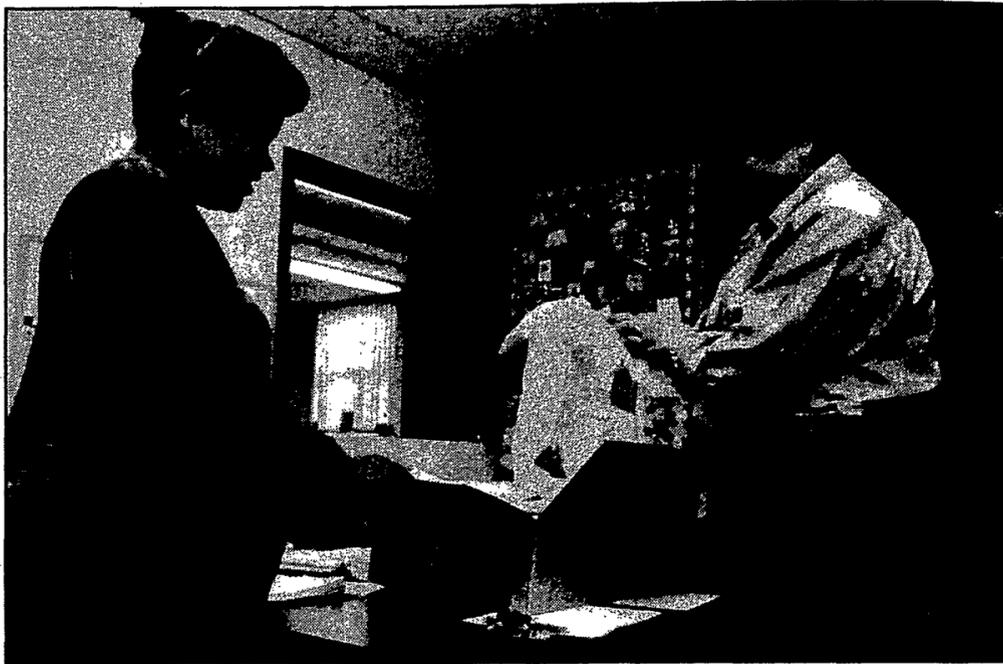
"When people say, 'Are you pro-life or pro-choice?', I say we are pro-woman, and that kind of throws them off," Rohr said. "We are very pro-woman."

"It's the right of every pregnant woman to give birth," she added, "and the right of every child to be born."

What Birthright's mostly volunteer staff does do, Rohr said, is to try to give women a sense of hope and to point out that there are other ways to deal with their difficult circumstances.

"The only thing we do tell (a woman) to do is to slow down and think carefully about a decision she can't change," Rohr said.

In helping the women, Rohr continued, Birthright counselors point to support services available through Birthright



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Joan Rohr (right) goes over the contents of a clothing package with a client at Birthright of Rochester's office on Monroe Avenue in Pittsford. The Rochester chapter has another center at St. Mary's Hospital.

and other area agencies.

Birthright of Rochester, for example, offers such services as pregnancy tests; counseling; supplies of maternity and children's clothing and infant formula; childbirth classes; information about adoption; a "Friendship Volunteer" program through

which clients are matched with individual volunteers for support; a follow-up program after the birth of a child; and a new mother's group.

Last year alone, Birthright of Rochester's two offices provided 1,000 pregnancy tests and initial counseling sessions. The

Rochester chapters also filled 700 requests for maternity and children's clothing, and helped 82 women secure childbirth and infant-care classes.

In talking with women who have had abortions, Rohr said, the lack of support from family and friends — and even pressure from them to take what appears to be the "easy way out" — are cited as the most frequent reasons women get abortions.

"We really do give them the friendship and emotional support that they need," Rohr said. "They begin to see that they are not backed into a corner, that there is a positive alternative."

EDITORS' NOTE: Consult the yellow pages for phone numbers of Birthrights throughout the Rochester diocese.

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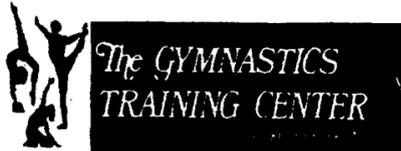
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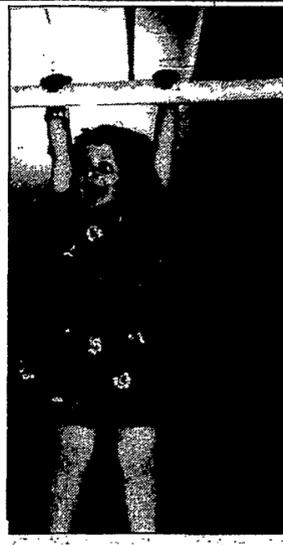
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