

## Two women walked into anti-abortion pregnancy resource centers. Neither got what they expected.

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COLUMBUS - Two women facing unplanned pregnancies searched the internet for answers. One thought she had found an abortion clinic. The other believed she had found an unbiased source to talk about her options. Neither was right. Both had stumbled upon a pregnancy resource center – often known as an anti-abortion crisis pregnancy center. With names like "Pregnancy Choices" and "Women's Centers," these locations often offer few clues that nearly all are faith-based programs trying to steer women away from abortion and toward adoption or parenthood. There are between 2,000 and 3,000 nationwide. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a California law (<https://www.npr.org/2018/06/26/606427673/supreme-court-sides-with-california-antiabortion-pregnancy-centers>) that required pregnancy centers to post a sign disclosing that they weren't licensed medical facilities.

At their best, pregnancy centers offer free cribs and diapers, parenting classes and emotional support to women who want to be mothers but lack the skills and resources to tackle the challenge. At their worst, they deceive women seeking abortions or unbiased counsel, while purporting to be medical professionals. Unlike hospitals, local restaurants and abortion clinics, most pregnancy resource centers are not regulated or inspected by state or local officials. In many cases, the only medical service offered is an ultrasound. But Ohio, along with dozens of other states, directs federal welfare money to these pregnancy centers and collects donations for them through the state's "Choose Life" license plate. Earlier this year, Ohio lawmakers approved \$7.5 million over two years for pregnancy centers – a dramatic increase from the \$1 million in previous state budgets. That money comes from the federal assistance program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

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That money could pay for more centers, which already outnumber surgical abortion clinics in Ohio 14-to-1. Still, many Ohioans don't know what they're getting for that money. The Enquirer spoke with two women who experienced a pregnancy center firsthand.

### **Emily's story**

The woman who kindly and patiently listened to then 29-year-old Emily Heiden talk about her deepest fears surrounding her unplanned pregnancy looked like an angel. Heiden isn't religious so that's not a description that she would typically reach for. But the woman's calm demeanor as she offered Heiden a chocolate Snackwell cookie was best summed up as angelic. "I don't

normally say that kind of thing, but she was just so lovely and appealing and quiet and just like a good presence," said Heiden, now 35, sitting at a Clifton coffee shop this August. Heiden thought she had found someone impartial to confide in about her options facing an unplanned pregnancy as an unmarried woman without a paycheck. In 2013, Heiden was a graduate student working on her second master's degree in writing and literature at George Mason University. Heiden said she was torn about what to do next. She understood the financial realities of her situation, but "there was a part of me that was hoping to be talked out of ending it." But something shifted when the angelic woman pulled out a tiny pamphlet with a pink lily on the cover, titled "May I Ask You A Question?" It was a religious tract used to explain the gospel. "The moment I saw the Bible, I knew. That was it. There went all objectivity," Heiden said. "I knew I'd been tricked." Nothing on the website of the Care Net Pregnancy Resource Center, in Manassas, Virginia, at the time indicated the organization was religious and antiabortion, Heiden said. Care Net's website now reads "Saving Lives. Sharing the Gospel." A 2016 Yelp review for the Manassas location indicates: "if you have not accepted Jesus as your savior or prayer makes you uncomfortable; I would advise you to think twice before going to these facilities." But in that room in 2013, Heiden sat stunned. She questioned the accuracy of gestational milestones in a pamphlet called "Before You Decide" and health threats of abortions detailed in a video. Then she left, went home and cried. When the woman called to follow up, Heiden had made her decision. "That was actually the moment that solidified for me that I would get an abortion," Heiden said. Heiden, who studies and teaches at the University of Cincinnati, is working on a memoir about her experience, which she detailed in a first-person essay on Literary Hub (<https://lithub.com/the-abortion-clinic-that-wasnt/>). The fact that the pregnancy center was religious didn't bother her, but she wouldn't have gone there if she had known. She was looking for unbiased, professional guidance and found none. "The deception is the No. 1 problem," she said. "Women and pregnant people deserve the truth."

### **Victoria's story**

Victoria Leavell thought she was going to an abortion clinic when she arrived at Pregnancy Center East in Oakley. Leavell had searched for a location online and briefly scanned Pregnancy Center East's website. At the time, Leavell was unmarried, going to school and facing an unplanned pregnancy. Leavell didn't read to the bottom of the website page titled "abortion" (<https://pregnancycentereast.com/abortion/>) to a line that said: "We do not offer, recommend or refer for abortions or abortifacients." When she arrived, Leavell realized her mistake.

But Leavell stayed to talk with a woman there. By the end of the conversation, Leavell said she had a different trajectory in mind. She was going to keep the baby. Leavell spoke with the woman performing her ultrasound. The technician had five children and still pursued college. She shared other stories of women navigating motherhood. "Little success stories like that just are very motivational," Leavell said. After deciding to have her son, Leavell visited the pregnancy about once a month. She received care packages and encouragement. She completed a pregnancy class and took home a free crib. "They just made me feel like I had a family in Cincinnati," Leavell said. "I had someone to lean on." Pregnancy Center East is a faith-based, anti-abortion pregnancy center. Its website says the organization is "rooted in the God-given dignity of each human life beginning at fertilization." The location employs a "chastity educator." But Leavell, who is a Christian, said faith was never mentioned. More than a year

after that first visit, Leavell said she wouldn't change anything about her experience. Her son, Victor Henderson, recently turned one. "Having my son was the best decision I could have ever made."

### **A conservative path**

In recent years, Ohio's GOP-controlled Legislature has set aside more money for pregnancy centers while stripping funding from abortion provider Planned Parenthood. That's unlikely to change under Republican Gov. Mike DeWine, who has made protecting the unborn an essential plank of his conservative platform. For those opposed to abortion, the money given to pregnancy centers is well spent. But opponents, such as NARAL Pro-Choice Ohio (<https://prochoiceohio.org/issues/crisis-pregnancy-centers/>), say these "fake women's health centers" operate in misinformation, judgment and coercion. "Until taxpayers can be assured that these centers conform to ethical standards of licensed medical facilities, offer sound medical advice, and do not lead to harm, states should refrain from directly or indirectly funding these centers," two doctors wrote in the American Medical Association's Journal of Ethics. (<https://journalofethics.ama-assn.org/article/why-crisis-pregnancy-centers-are-legal-unethical/2018-03>)

One thing is clear: These centers are not always clear about their intentions. Neither Heiden nor Leavell got what they expected from their visits. One left with hope. The other left in tears.

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