

NEWS

A Cookie Boycott and a Bishop's Ban

Fighting for the Soul of the Girl Scouts

BY Barb Ernster

May 9-15, 2004 Issue | Posted 5/9/04 at 10:00 AM

WACO, Texas — When the Texas Bluebonnet Girl Scout Council in Waco earlier this year cosponsored a teen sex-education conference called Nobody's Fool with Planned Parenthood and honored the organization's executive director with a Woman of Distinction Award, parents across the state were outraged.

Cynthia Baylor of nearby Temple pulled her 7-year-old daughter out of Brownies and quit as troop leader. Lisa Aguilar of Crawford also pulled her daughter out. Several troops disbanded.

Their decisions were difficult, Aguilar said, but "we had to get their attention and take a stand. The Girl Scouts isn't a Christian organization and we weren't looking for Sunday school, but that kind of stuff crossed the line the other way."

John Pisciotta, co-director of Pro-Life Waco, uncovered the Girl Scout/Planned Parenthood link and organized a Girl Scout cookie boycott in February. Only after a fire-storm of protest did the Bluebonnet council pull out of the conference and sever its ties with Planned Parenthood, he said.

Pisciotta was interviewed on NBC's "Today" show along with Kathy Cloninger, the chief executive officer of Girl Scouts USA, who told viewers it "partners with Planned Parenthood organizations across the country to bring information-based sex-education programs to girls."

The news prompted STOPP International (Stop Planned Parenthood), a division of American Life League, to survey all 315 scout councils. While nearly 80% would not say whether they associate with Planned Parenthood, 17 councils said they do and 49 said they do not. STOPP posted the results on its website (www.all.org/stopp) in April.

Baylor said she can no longer support the Girl Scouts after discovering certain troubling facts. She's organizing a campaign to speak out about what they're up to.

And that's quite a lot, according to various reports around the country:

- In Pennsylvania, Junior Girl Scouts can attend a workshop on puberty designed by Planned Parenthood of Northeast Pennsylvania to earn their Becoming a Teen badge.
- In Connecticut, the Girl Scouts honored a Planned Parenthood official for promoting "healthy practices" in local troops.
- In Amarillo, Texas, Girl Scouts have sponsored Planned Parenthood sex-education seminars for fourth-through eighth-graders.

Bishop Bans Troops

Planned Parenthood did not return calls from the Register, and Girl Scouts USA would only read a statement citing its official policy that it "does not take a position on abortion or birth control" and that sex-education topics are "discussed from an informative rather than advocacy point of view."

But Jim Sedlak of STOPP said if the Girl Scouts truly believed that, it would not have anything to do with Planned Parenthood, an organization that is all about birth control and abortion. It is the largest provider of abortions in the United States.

"We are just as upset about [Planned Parenthood's] sex education because it is aimed at young people, and getting kids into sexual sin is not our idea of a good experience for girls," he said.

Baylor wrote to Bishop Gregory Aymond of the Diocese of Austin, Texas. The bishop contacted Girl Scouts leaders, asking them to reexamine their position.

He released a statement April 20 to Catholic school principals and pastors in his diocese saying that "scouting troops associated with the diocesan entities will not support, encourage or in any way endorse the activities and programs of Planned Parenthood or any other organization espousing similar beliefs and practices. ... Any scouting unit or troop not

embracing the above directives shall not be permitted use of parish or school facilities ... or indicate association with the Catholic Diocese of Austin. Whether or not we will be able to continue our association with Girl Scouts of America is still questionable."

There are 25 to 30 troops that meet at Catholic schools or parishes in the diocese, and Bishop Aymond said he is further concerned about the Nobody's Fool sex-education program, which gives no direction on right or wrong and has no Christian morals.

"We have a Catholic scouting program nationally and it would be a shame to lose that link," he said, "but as Catholics we must stand for Catholic moral principles. I don't see this as a resolved issue."

Girl Scout fans have been concerned about the organization's direction since 1993, when the word God in the Promise was changed to mean any spiritual influence a girl chooses. Not long after, the organization openly acknowledged its acceptance of lesbians in leadership positions.

When Cloninger was interviewed as the new chief executive officer in the winter 2003 issue of the Girls Scouts' *Leader* magazine, she applauded the Girl Scout Research Institute for its information assembled from "other experts" to help the Girl Scouts develop a progressive approach to serving girls 11-17.

"We're on the front end of that process right now and my goal is to support local councils as they integrate this new approach to serving girls," she told the magazine. "It really requires a paradigm shift."

Troop leaders say they're feeling the shift. In Indiana, leaders at three councils are reporting a growing distance between them and Girl Scout boards. Some have been threatened, and information about what's going on is suppressed, they say.

Linda Cook, a 12-year troop leader with the Calumet Council in Griffith, Ind., said the council has lost 60% of its adult and girl membership since a new chief executive officer was hired from the Waco council three years ago, armed with a "powerful" endorsement by Cloninger.

"A number of us are afraid she's going to bring the [Waco] agenda here," Cook said. "She said she wants to revamp the older girls' instruction and touch on all aspects of girls in development in middle school and high school. They haven't brought out the new [handbooks] yet and I think it's because of this controversy; they're afraid to put them out. I would love to see what's in them."

Shelley Jones of Burlington, Ind., who was a co-trainer with the Tribal Trails Council, said there are still a lot of "safe" councils and good leaders, but the national philosophy is spreading.

"As long as you have Christian-valued people on your board or as leaders you can have a good council, but they're outnumbered," she said. "The feminists have been infiltrating for too long. As a nation we need to stand up and fight; however, with the Girl Scouts, we should have started a good 10 years ago."

Barb Ernster writes from Fridley, Minnesota.