

April 11, 2004

FOLLOWING UP

By JOSEPH P. FRIED

Abortion-Rights Lion Endures in Winter

He is 71 and long gone from the spotlight. He is still denounced by most in the opposite camp, and still disparaged by some who have fought for the same cause he has.

But Bill Baird, who has worked and crusaded since the 1960's for women's rights to birth control and abortion, keeps on campaigning.

True, he closed his last abortion clinic, in Hauppauge on Long Island, seven years ago. But there are lectures to be given "to awaken young people" to continuing threats to abortion rights, he says. And public meetings of the National Right to Life Committee to attend in order to keep up with its antiabortion "battle plans," he says, as well as the meeting sites to picket with his large wooden cross bearing the message, "Free women from the cross of religious oppression; keep abortion legal."

And, lest his history of provocative promotion of birth control and abortion rights be lost, there is the book he is writing about his long full-time work for those causes -- work whose value, he said last week, some feminist leaders "won't acknowledge."

Mr. Baird opened his first office in Hempstead in 1964, when abortion was illegal in New York State. It provided birth control information and referred women to doctors willing to perform abortions "underground," he recalled, until 1970, when the state legalized abortions and doctors began performing them at his center. Mr. Baird is not himself a doctor.

Over the years, the Hempstead clinic was set on fire and Mr. Baird was assaulted. Once, he said, he was shot at but not hit. He counts eight arrests in five states after violating bans on distributing birth control information and contraceptives.

One arrest, in Boston, led to a United States Supreme Court ruling in 1972 that a state could not outlaw the provision of contraceptives to unmarried people if they were legally available to married people.

While his supporters say this reflects the importance of his contributions to the abortion rights cause, some prominent figures in the cause have long castigated Mr. Baird.

One feminist author, Robin Morgan, called him a "male supremacist," and another, Betty Friedan, charged in 1985 that he was a "counterproductive" and "disruptive" egotist.

Ms. Friedan has not softened her view. Last week she said, "He was a nuisance and a laughingstock."

Mr. Baird contended that such views showed "sexism in the women's movement."

Late Settlement In '96 Police Shooting

Given the circumstances, the lawsuit looked conducive to a quick settlement.

The look was deceiving.

In July 1996, Nathaniel Levi Gaines Jr., an unarmed Yonkers man, was fatally shot in the back as he ran from a police officer on a Bronx subway platform. The officer, Paolo Colecchia, said the two had physically struggled after he investigated a report that Mr. Gaines, 25, might have been stalking a woman.

Not only was the shooting deemed unjustified, but also the officer was convicted of manslaughter and served three years in prison. In 1998, Mr. Gaines's family sued New York City. A lawyer for the family, Peter J. Neufeld, said last week that the suit was not settled till last summer, with the city paying \$1.5 million.

He said it had become complicated by the failure of the family's previous lawyer to meet a filing deadline involving one ground for damages, entailing longer skirmishing on the remaining grounds.

The city's lawyer, Kenneth S. Sasmor, said the settlement negotiations "involved a variety of considerations."