

# Foundation says its prolife ads having effect

WASHINGTON – Unless you're watching daytime talk shows or soap operas, late-night or late-late-night television or some of the most basic cable channels, you might not have seen commercials with a pro-life message sponsored by the Vitae Caring Foundation.

The foundation buys commercial time from local stations in selected U.S. cities for just short periods of time. But the impact of their ads on their intended audience – women who may be facing a troubled pregnancy – has been measurable in both the upsurge in calls made to local crisis pregnancy centers and the decline in the number of abortions performed in those areas.

The ads, in both English and Spanish, are generally shot with a soft focus and feature a woman who remarks about the gift of life she received and is able to pass on, or some fact about abortion designed to make the female viewer think about that fact's ramification in her own life. They include an 800-number for a pregnancy resource center.

Moral theologian Pia Solenni, who has been working since early 2006 with the Atlanta-based foundation on its TV ad campaign, said she had seen the ads before she started collaborating on them.

"I just loved the ads. They weren't shock-jock ads. They weren't graphic or in-your-face type ads. They were just very engaging ads," Solenni told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview from Philadelphia.

"I knew they put a lot of money into the research that generated the ads," Solenni said, adding, "I think nonprofits should be encouraged to spend their money as carefully as possible."

One ad shows a woman firefighter at the scene of a blaze, noting how her mother saved her life when she could have had an abortion, and now she is able to save others' lives in her job.

That ad, Solenni said, “is a little ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’” that raises the question of “what would life had been like if you had never been born? For a firefighter, (the question is) who would have been there to save that child?”

Because of the research conducted prior to the commercials’ production, “these ads really resonate with the feelings these women are having. They call the 800 number and they get connected with a pregnancy resource center,” Solenni said. “One caller said, ‘I felt just like the woman in that ad.’”

Thomas Grenchik, executive director of the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, can vouch for the ad campaign’s effectiveness.

Years ago, when Grenchik was the director of the pro-life office in the Archdiocese of Washington, the Vitae Caring Foundation announced it would like to sponsor a series of ads on Washington-area TV stations.

Grenchik said pro-life officials looked at the ads that were offered and suggested two of them to use for the campaign, but the foundation “had a donor” and in the end “the donor won,” and two different ads were chosen.

One, he recalled, was acceptable, but “the other was so hokey, so soap opera-y, we said that nobody would ever respond to it.”

“But they had their research,” Grenchik continued, “and they used that one ad. And it generated a gazillion calls.”

The ad’s target, he said, was African-American women who thought they might be pregnant. When it aired during the daytime soaps, “it flowed right in with the story line of the soap opera they were watching,” Grenchik said.

Solenni told CNS that oftentimes “someone else sees the ads and they call and get the information and they pass it on” to a pregnant woman they know.

Solenni expressed amazement at “the long staying power of the ads. People were writing down the number when they saw it – the ad – and calling six weeks after the (ad) campaign finished.”

For someone to “keep track of that piece of paper” weeks later, she said, shows “a kind of stick-to-itiveness” that “anybody who’s behind this product would love.”

She added the “overwhelmingly positive response” to the ads “really reinforces the fact that women who have abortions feel they have no choice. Most women don’t even know they have options, resources within their own communities. They say we have more pregnancy resource centers now than abortion clinics.”