

Veteran of pro-life movement sees ‘mood change’ in U.S. on abortion

WASHINGTON – Joseph Scheidler, regarded by many as the “godfather of the pro-life movement,” sees the mood shifting in the United States on the abortion issue and predicts pro-lifers eventually “will prevail.”

“There is a mood change in the country,” he said. “A lot of our legislators are actually getting backbone and they are beginning to stand up for the rights for the unborn.”

The president and founder of the Chicago-based Pro-Life Action League, Scheidler made the comments in a recent telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

In Chicago in early April, more than 400 people paid tribute to him at an evening banquet organized by Citizens for a Pro-Life Society.

Scheidler, along with his wife, Ann, and their son, Eric, listened to several speakers tell stories, share humorous anecdotes and offer words of praise for his decades of pro-life activism.

“The polls now show that the majority of people call themselves pro-life. There has been a lot of media exposure with Planned Parenthood and it has exposed a lot on abortion. It’s becoming more and more of a negative thing than it was in 1973,” Scheidler told CNS, referring to the year of the Supreme Court’s Roe v. Wade decision.

The recent focus on the Planned Parenthood Federation of America has occurred as a result of the budget debates on Capitol Hill and demands from pro-life groups that the organization no longer receive federal funding.

A resolution to amend federal appropriations bills for the current fiscal year to exclude any funding for Planned Parenthood or its affiliates passed in the House April 14 but failed in the Senate later that day.

Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the bishops' pro-life committee, called the federation "by far the largest provider and promoter of abortions nationwide." He told members of Congress that at a time tough choices need to be made to cut the federal budget a decision to defund Planned Parenthood "is not one of those hard choices."

Monica Miller, director of Citizens for a Pro-Life Society, echoed Scheidler's remark about polls showing Americans' attitude about abortion has changed. "It's clear at this point that the majority of Americans are against abortion in the later term stages of gestational age," she told CNS in a separate interview.

"I think the notion that abortion is, in fact, the killing of a human being is becoming more acknowledged," said Miller.

To those who say they want abortion to be "safe, legal and rare," like President Barack Obama and President Bill Clinton before him, Scheidler would say their position is "illogical."

"They've been saying that since the beginning. That's still something we must fight," he told CNS. "The bottom line is still the same: You cannot destroy an innocent human life. You don't target children. What kind of a society does that? We cannot and will not buy any of that illogical 'safe and rare' argument."

"When you say 'legal but rare,' that's like saying, 'We'll still kill children and old people but only rarely.' The fact is that you are still killing a person. It shouldn't be legal. Those are just words," he continued. "It's got to be illegal because it's wrong to kill people. If you don't stop it there, then it only makes sense to continue down the road we have been on."

For Scheidler, overturning Roe would be a victory but not the end of the battle.

"I'm not spending time with legislation," said Scheidler. "That's not the real battle. We must get the American people to respect life or to convert their hearts to respect it. There's no easy fix. Overturning one thing won't solve the problem."

"There is no real victory for the pro-life movement and for the unborn child if we still fail to recognize them as persons and if their lives remain unprotected," added

Miller.

"The real battle is to convince the public and the whole world that human life begins at conception and that is it sacred," she said. "Right now, I would say that we're winning the battle. We are seeing more and more states passing restrictive legislation where the beginning of life is being more clearly defined."

Scheidler, once referred to as the Green Beret of the pro-life movement by columnist Pat Buchanan, said it is not clear where pro-lifers are in that battle.

"We may be in the beginning and we may be in the middle. But it's impossible to put a time process on it," he explained. "However, there are changes that we are seeing. Many of the pro-abortionists that we have dealt with in the past are now militantly pro-life. And you see that happening a whole lot more than the other way around."

The increasing numbers of young people who are pro-life fills Scheidler with optimism about the movement, he said.

"They will keep up the fight long after we're gone because they are true believers and they learned morality from their parents and from one another," said Scheidler, adding that there are "100 pro-life teens" to every "25 pro-aborts."

Some in his own generation, he said, were "caught off guard" when they were young, "and a good deal of us fell into the error," but today "people can find out all they need to know about abortion with things like the Internet and there is very little room for ignorance."

"We will win and we will prevail. It's just a matter of when," he said.