

CHOICE/LESS 305: Our Family Business is Abortion Care

Jenn Stanley: Do you like your job?

Calla Hales: You with the loaded questions today.

Jenn Stanley: For Rewire Radio, I'm Jenn Stanley. This is CHOICE/LESS. Just as a warning to our listeners we do address sexual assault in this story.

Calla Hales: My name is Calla Hales. I'm 27 years old. I'm the administrator and co-owner of a Preferred Women's Health Center. Preferred and the APWHC clinics were actually started by my parents in 1998 when I was eight years old. It's kind of a family affair. It's something that as a teenager and college kid I tried to not fall into the family business but I ended up back here and I think I made the best decision.

The first real memory I have of the clinic is my mom painting the hallways in first Raleigh office and my sister and I stealing the roll-y doctor's chairs and racing down the hallway, it had a ramp in it, and just smashing into the walls. That's really the first memory I have of being in an abortion clinic.

I think I've always known what abortion was. I don't remember the term becoming an issue until I was probably around 10 or 11 and someone asked what my parents did and I said, "Well, you know, they do women's health. They specifically help women and families who aren't prepared to be parents." That's how I had always framed it and always heard it.

Some snide little fifth grader was just like, "So you kill babies for a living?" You don't know how to respond to that when you're a kid. My first instinct is, no, I don't think that's what my parents did or what I'm a part of. I was a kid at that point. I think that's when it first was like, "Okay, mom, dad, what's this word mean?"

Absolutely, I felt the sense of shame and weirdness and that whole sense of other growing up. Also, because my parents are in a profession that's not exactly lauded in the South, it's pretty frowned upon, I think I overcompensated a lot as a kid to make friends and to be normal and liked and that kind of thing followed me through high school. I really just wanted to make sure that I didn't give people a reason to not like me or to target me. I wanted to be as approachable and normal as I could be.

I think the first time I realized that I wanted to come back home and to do women's healthcare was my first week of college actually. I went to school in New York. It is an entirely different beast than North Carolina. It is much more liberal.

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When I was in college was when Dr. Tiller was murdered. My parents didn't tell me. I found out because my college roommate knew what my parents did and immediately called me and was like, "Hey, an abortion provider just got murdered. Call your parents." I did. I called my mom and I was like, "Mom, are you okay? Is everything okay?" She goes, "What are you talking about?" I was like, "Someone just said an abortion provider got killed." My mom was just like curses off this blue streak and was just like, "I was trying not to tell you. I didn't want you to worry but dad's friend died."

That really struck something with me that this is not your normal nine to five. This is something that's a problem. It's something my parents really tried to shield me from for a while and I think shield all of us from is how much it affected them. It did. Every now and then I'll hear my dad talking about him and it's hard.

When I first mentioned that I wanted to work in the clinic my mom asked if I was certain. This conversation went on for a couple months of, "Are you really sure you want to do this? Why don't you look for work in New York? You got a good thing going there. Are you sure you want to leave?" My dad was encouraging but also along the same lines of, "I don't want you to be unhappy. Are you sure this is what you want to do?" I had a passion to do this and I'm glad I stuck with it even though it was uncomfortable at the time.

My parents are really shocked that when I graduated college I actually applied to go to business school because, point blank, I've always been awful at math. To apply to business school was a total 180. I felt it was necessary in order to keep the clinics alive, especially with my parents moving into retirement age and clinics are constantly closing. This is such a razor thin margin. This is the type of work we do and as much as I hate to call it an industry but this niche of medicine that we're in really has a lot of expenses and not a lot of profit.

I thought it was really important to understand the ins and outs of business before I came back down here. When I first came back from New York my first role was specifically as a financial coordinator. Just doing inventories, checking logs, running numbers. I kind of got thrown into the role of lead administrator. I don't feel like it was necessarily unnatural. Maybe just overwhelming.

The responsibility of this job definitely impacts personal relationships and friendships. Just a couple days ago I was having a conversation with a friend. She was asking me why haven't I taken a vacation and, "You need to take some time off. You're going to burn out. I don't understand how you do this." I guess the difference is if I don't, no one will. A clinic won't be open. Patients don't get care. I take it very personally.

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Dating is really hard as an abortion provider, especially an abortion provider in a new city. I've only been here a year. I'm still making friends. I'm still finding that group of people that I enjoy and feel safe around.

Jenn Stanley:

Calla is careful about who she spends time with, and she surrounds herself with people she can trust. She used to work at the Preferred Women's Health Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. She grew up in Raleigh. She was a visible member of the community. People knew who she was.

A few years ago she met someone new and started dating him. She says that after the first date he started asking her a lot of questions about what she does for a living. When she asked him if he had a problem with the fact that she ran the abortion clinics he said no but at the end of their second date he followed her to her car and he raped her.

Calla Hales:

I knew my attack was based on my job because of the really ... There was a lot of terminology and slurs being thrown around when I was being attacked that have stuck with me. Being called a jezebel, being told I deserved this because of what I do to babies. Basically being told that I was worthless and this was just penance.

It's hard. It's hard to think about that and to know that someone hated what I do and just the idea of women having control of their own bodies enough to take that away from someone else just to prove a point. Yeah, it's hard. It's something to live with.

Being attacked has changed certain aspects of my job. Both in good and bad ways. Unfortunately, I can relate to patients differently now. I understand a lot more of the trauma that people go through in certain cases. I understand that not every patient who comes in seeking an abortion is from some traumatic reason but there still are patients that do and it has allowed me to empathize on a different level.

It's allowed me to empathize with patients who feel like they've been targeted by protesters when they're walking in, who are feeling overwhelmed by that presence, who are feeling shamed. It's allowed me to empathize with that a little bit better. I'm sad and kind of ashamed to say that prior to the attack I was so used to people just yelling at me and screaming at me that I may not have been able to connect with patients about that like I should have. Now it's one of the only things that I think about all the time.

I moved to Charlotte as a safety precaution. I was attacked in Raleigh when I was working at that clinic. After the attack there was some lingering harassment, both online, on my phone, mail, at the office, and it got to a point

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where I didn't feel that I could just function without being harassed or paranoid about being harassed.

When I moved down here I already knew Charlotte had numerically more protesters. I was prepared for it. On the flip side, I think that has also helped me heal because now I have an outlet. I can do activism about anti-choice legislators and just protests in general and just making sure that my patients are safe.

In Raleigh that was a problem but we didn't have anywhere near the amount of protesters we had here. I had a really intense fear in Raleigh that I don't know if I ever want it to overshadow my patient's fears with my own. Here, it doesn't feel like that.

Driving into the Charlotte office is chaotic. Latrobe Drive is this ... It should be a private business park. It's a side road. As you're driving down the front end of the road it's small little business offices, all kind of match-y match-y. Nothing out of the normal. It looks almost like a medical park because of the fact a lot of these businesses are medical offices.

The first sign you know something is about to be weird is when you see the Adopt-a-Road sign as you're driving down. Latrobe Drive has been adopted by Cities for Life. That first sense of kind of weirdness. As you get farther down the road you realize that there are cars parking on both sides of the road. Again, maybe not that weird. A lot of places have on-street parking. At the very end of Latrobe it splits into a circle.

When you begin to turn into the circle the first thing you encounter is a large purple RV and four to five women standing outside in purple clothing or scrubs waving at you, smiling, but trying to get you to stop where they can talk to you. This is your first encounter with a crisis pregnancy center. This is a well-known CPC here in Charlotte. They constantly are trying to stop patients from making it into the clinic.

If you make it past that roadblock without getting stopped you are pulling up to the clinic and you're probably going to see 10 to 15 people standing with signs like, "Please stop for information before your appointment", the Malachi signs, the typical ... I call it the gore porn of abortion. Those always standard signs.

Parked in front of the clinic is another ultrasound RV that is run by Cities For Life and also they're trying to wave you down and come into their RV. The issue is that these protesters will walk in the street and wave you down. I can't tell you how many times I've slammed on brakes to not hit someone. They'll walk in front of your car in the driveway and try to prevent you from coming

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in. If my window was open, I've had literature thrown in my car. It's stressful to say the least.

Jenn Stanley: Calla had learned firsthand how clinic protests can sometimes escalate from an exercise in free speech to targeted harassment, threats, and violence.

Calla Hales: When a patient comes in to receive safe and legal care and something that's their legal right to do there's this odd conversation about the idea of free speech and whether or not a protester can really sit there and talk to them and preach and say what's on their mind. However, there's a line between free speech and harassment, intimidation, and threats.

For a person to say, "There's another option. Have you thought about it?" That's free speech. For a person to say, "Don't kill your baby." Traumatizing, yes. Probably still free speech. For a person to sit there and say, "You're a murderer. You're killing your baby. You're going to Hell." That's harassment.

For someone to sit there especially and follow you from your car and all the way of you walking into the door of the clinic, just walking in time with you along the sidewalk, just to keep screaming at you and say, "You're making the wrong choice. This is wrong. What you're doing is wrong. You're going to Hell. I hate you. Do you hate yourself?" Things like that. All the way to the door of the clinic. That's targeted harassment. For someone to turn around and say, "Someone is going to die here today. The question is who it's going to be?" That's a threat.

Every Saturday they congregate farther up the street and they march down in front of the clinic. They congregate in front of the mouth of the driveway and have a prayer concert. Not just a prayer but a full-on concert in the street. They've also gone out of their way to get parade permits to have these parades walk in on the clinic and just create a chaotic circus that prevents patients from making it to their appointment.

In December was their first real parade on the clinic and Love Life Charlotte managed to get almost 5000 people. The streets were flooded. You couldn't drive in. Police officers didn't really do anything. They just let it happen. They didn't try to direct traffic.

In more recent history there was another parade. I want to say about two months ago. That was attempting to get 1000 men to march on the clinic. They managed to get about 600. The police ended up cordoning off half of the street to let Love Life Charlotte march. It was such an impact on traffic and trying to correctly direct patients to their appointments when you have another group of people directing patients elsewhere.

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It was so confusing. A couple days after that happened there was an article that came out online saying, "Abortinist triggered by men's march." Yeah, hell yea, I'm triggered. There's 600 men screaming outside my clinic telling me I'm a murderer. I'm a little upset.

Jenn Stanley: The increasingly loud and chaotic scene outside Calla's clinic, and the repeated lack of concern showed by local police led Calla to become more involved with pro-choice activism. She started to speak up publicly about what was happening outside the clinic. She was scared for her patients and for herself. She had seen how things can get violent really quickly and she believes that her patients have the right to care without harassment.

Calla Hales: I think the largest difference between my parents and myself is that I'm much more willing to be vocal and get in the media and get into the politics and get into really the more governmental enforcement issues than they were. That's not saying they were wrong.

Sometimes, and I feel like a lot of providers feel the same way, it feels safer to not acknowledge it. To just go about your business and not draw attention to yourself. My parents had kids to think about. I think that that factored into their decision a large amount was wanting to protect us from that kind of targeted harassment. I don't have kids to think about. I have a cat. That's about it.

Jenn Stanley: Earlier this year Calla and the clinic were featured in the Rewire documentary Care in Chaos, which highlighted the protests outside the clinic and the Charlotte police department's failure to respond to any of the harassment claims. Around the same time she was featured in a piece in Cosmo about clinic violence where she told the story of her attack.

Calla Hales: The decision to do Cosmopolitan and to do Care in Chaos, both decisions were probably the hardest I've ever had to make, particularly Cosmo because it was more personal. I thought that it was very important to shed a light on just how awful the anti-choice crowd can be. It's not necessarily that every pro-life protester comes out with the intent to be violent or to cause pain and suffering. I try to understand and be mindful of that when I'm interacting with protesters that not every protester is the same.

The Cosmopolitan article came to me or the request for the article came to me through a friend who reached out and told me that there was a freelance journalist who was looking to write an article about clinic violence. I guess Preferred had come up on a lot of lists because of the growing anti-choice population here in Charlotte. As much as that story became about my personal attack that necessarily wasn't the intention.

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The intention was to talk about the escalating senses of violence with abortion clinics. Unfortunately, I do think it took a story like mine and being able to put a face to it for people to really understand just what that meant. It's not these statistics or these numbers getting higher. It's a real person who's having to live with this every day.

I have received so much negative publicity and negative pushback from the Cosmopolitan article. Much more than I was expecting and maybe that was really naïve of me. That has been really frustrating and really infuriating that the victim blaming in our culture is so strong. Becca and Cosmo both went out of their way to make sure that they were able to tell my story and my experiences without casting blame on a single individual. It wasn't enough for some people.

It's been hard to not fight back and just say Cosmo had access to my medical records and proved the authenticity of the story. At the end of the day, I realized that no matter what they had, no matter what I do, no matter what I say or prove or whatnot, someone is going to be unhappy and someone is going to find a reason to think, "Oh, nope. Didn't happen." That's not just with me. There's a massive culture of victim blaming. Mine may be a little more polarizing because of the abortion aspect but it's not uncommon.

I think at first my parents thought, "Oh, this is cute. I'm really glad she enjoys what she's doing." Then it wasn't something that went away. My activism was something that just continued and got bigger and more public. They had to stop and reevaluate, "Okay, are you taking your safety precautions seriously?" Every now and then my dad will just stop and call me and be like, "Hey, where are you? What are you doing? What's to your left? What's to your right?" He jokingly calls it the constant vigilance model. He's not wrong. It's something that I really do have to live with now.

I feel there's a combination of both the culture at the time and personal choice for why my parents weren't very open activists when they were running the clinic. I think there was a conscious decision for safety and I think that it's a little bit different now. With the internet, nothing is private anymore. You can find just about anything online. Ten, 15 years ago that wasn't the case. They could actually slide by unnoticed.

Before Cosmopolitan and before the documentary came out, before Care in Chaos came out, protestors would yell at me but I don't think they recognized that I worked there. They were just yelling more along the lines of, "Miss, we can save your baby. You don't have to do this." Or once they realized I was showing up more frequently it was, "Miss, you don't have to work here. We can find you another job. Miss, come outside and talk to us."

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When Cosmo came up, I think it was three days after Cosmo came out, the dialog became, "You're a whore. You're the devil. You're killing babies. You're a murderer." I was in line for a bagel at the bagel store I always go to and I'm minding my own business. A little girl probably about six or seven comes up and grabs my hand and pulls on my hand. I look down at her and I was like, "Hi." She goes, "Are you really a lying slut?" I'm just so taken aback I don't know what to say and I'm like, "Excuse me?" She says it again but louder.

At this point, everyone around me is silent. The two older men she was with I guess realized that she had gotten up and left. I turned and looked at them and she says it a third time. They just scoop her up and run out the door. Did this little girl just overhear their conversation when I walked in? Did they notice me and that's what's going on?

Then I went and sat in my car and cried. I'm not going to lie. It's not a proud moment. There were some days I regret doing more public media. Days like that day in the bagel shop or when I recognize that I can't go out by myself.

Since being more open about my profession and my attack it really has affected a lot of my personal relationships. There's the sense of discomfort and just general unease about the topic among friends and family. I'm not sure if it's because they're still unsure of how they feel about the topic of abortion or violence or reproductive rights in general. I don't ever want what I do or my experiences as a person to hover over my head and define who I am.

On the flip side, there's also positive feedback, particularly from strangers. I went to the mall and I was standing in a store. The awkward part is I was standing in Lush and I was looking for anti-chafing powder because standing outside in the summer is not necessarily fun, guys. Someone came up to me and tapped me on the shoulder and it was someone who worked in the store. I thought that they were going to ask if I needed help.

The question was, "Are you Calla Hales?" I just look around and I said, "Yes." "Do you work for Preferred Women's Health Center?" "Yes." She just threw her arms around me and hugged me and was like, "I saw Care in Chaos. I just want you to know that what you do is so important. I really appreciate it." I cried a little. I won't lie. That awkward moment when you're hugging a stranger and crying but still holding anti-chafing powder in your hand. It's a little weird.

Jenn Stanley:

Calla has seen some other positive changes since these stories came out. The Rewire documentary Care in Chaos focused heavily on the police response to clinic harassment and the disproportionate number of amplified sound permits given to anti-choice activists.

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Since Care in Chaos came out, Charlotte mayor Jennifer Roberts announced that she would be pushing for changes to the permit process and to, "Preserve fairness, improve efficiency, and to protect women's access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare." She later released a more comprehensive statement on her commitment to protecting abortion rights recalling many of the issues addressed in the film.

Calla may do things differently than her parents but having this job has helped her understand them more. She says she's inspired by the commitment they had to providing comprehensive reproductive health care and that's what motivates her to forge on through the protesters, the threats, and the violence.

Calla Hales: I think my parents are rock stars. I like to think they're proud of me. I'm very proud of them. At the end of the day, my parents would ask if I'm proud of myself and that was most important. Right now I'm proud of myself.

Jenn Stanley: CHOICE/LESS is produced by me, Jenn Stanley, for Rewire Radio with editorial oversight by Marc Faletti, our director of multimedia and executive producer. Jodi Jacobson is our editor-in-chief. Brady Swenson is our director of technology. Music for this episode was by Doug Hesel. Thank you to all the staff at Rewire, especially Rachel Perrone, Lauren Gutierrez, and Stacey Burns, our communications and social media team for getting the word out about CHOICE/LESS. Thanks for listening.