

At odds with many of their peers, these young people embrace pro-life advocacy

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BY NICKI GORNY / THE BLADE



Katherine Shanks, right, listens as Autumn Sekerak asks a question during the monthly meeting of the SEAL Team at the Foundation for Life in Toledo.

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Autumn Sekerak has been advocating for the dignity of life for as long as she can remember. She stood beside her family, pro-life signs in hand, at a “life chain” as a first-grader. She marched for life alongside her parents each year growing up at St. Joseph Parish in Maumee.

“It wasn’t until third grade that I really started wondering, Well, what is this? What is abortion?,” she recalled. “What is all this stuff they’re talking about?”

It would be a few more years before she really dug into those questions, Ms. Sekerak said, and still a few more before her views began to mature beyond a child’s black-and-white. At 17, Ms. Sekerak, a junior at Cardinal Stritch Catholic High School in Oregon, brings a better informed, more nuanced, and more woman-focused perspective to her continued pro-life advocacy.

And she’s still marching — both in Maumee and in Washington.

Thirty-four percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 self-identified as pro-life as of 2020, according to Gallup. That compares to 61 percent who identify as pro-choice.

They're numbers that position pro-life young people like Ms. Sekerak somewhat at odds with her peers: Gallup reveals a notably wider gap between those who identify as pro-life and pro-choice in this youngest polled demographic than among those age 30 to 49 (52 percent as pro-life, compared to 42 percent as pro-choice); 50 to 64 (46 percent, compared to 48 percent); or 65 and older (48 percent, compared to 47 percent).

Several local high school and college students who identify as pro-life spoke with The Blade, sharing that they, like Ms. Sekerak, generally grew up in Catholic or Christian families that instilled in them at an early age a value for life from conception to natural death. But in their teens or early 20s, these young people began to explore, to own, and to act on their beliefs.

They participate in pro-life youth groups or student organizations. They volunteer at pregnancy centers, and they bear witness at local and national marches like March for Life.

They're conscious that their views are out of sync with many of their peers. And in some cases, they said that in itself is an imperative to speak up.

"Seeing that other people don't care about it is kind of a motivator," Frank Kennedy said. At 20 years old, a junior at the University of Toledo, he's the president of Toledo Students for Life. "If the majority of people were pro-life, then I don't think, to me at least, it would be as important ... to talk to people about it as it is now."

The SEAL Team

At the Foundation for Life, a small office tucked into a business park in South Toledo, a handful of teenagers gather once a month for pizza and conversation.

Abortion and its lingering effects was the conversation this month, as sparked by the moving testimony of Sam Byrne of Project Rachel. Sometimes they talk about abortion alternatives like adoption or resources like pregnancy centers; other times they go in a different direction under the same umbrella, like organ donation, euthanasia or virtue and sexual integrity.

In recent years, they've hosted an annual shower for a mother-to-be who chose to carry her child to term in consultation with a local pregnancy center.

These are the SEALs, or Students Equipped to Advocate for Life, and their modest numbers in the office these evenings are bolstered by parallel campus organizations that gather during the week at several religiously affiliated high schools in the region.

Ed Sitter is the executive director of Foundation for Life. He sees it as an outlet for students to build leadership skills, to connect with like-minded peers, and, importantly, as indicated in their acronym, to "equip" students to be effective advocates.

"I like to use the analogy that everyone's opinions or worldview is a mile wide and an inch deep. We have opinions and thoughts about everything, but very few of us actually know why we believe what we believe and are able to give a defense of that belief," Mr. Sitter said. "One of the goals of the SEAL Team is to equip the youth with a pro-life worldview, so that they know why they believe what they believe. It's not just rhetoric, it's not just slogans. They have a really in-depth knowledge of why they believe what they believe."

Ms. Sekerak has been a regular since middle school. Katherine Shanks, 18, a homeschooled senior who's serving as this year's captain of the SEAL Team, said she started attending regularly as a freshman.

Both young women credit the team with educating them on key issues, as well as setting them up to be effective in their advocacy, whether that's in the peer-to-peer conversations or in the physical witness they bring to events like March for Life.

St. Joseph Parish Maumee held a local march on Jan. 17. National organizers are asking advocates to participate virtually rather than travel to Washington on Jan. 29.

Ms. Sekerak has marched twice in Washington, and Ms. Shanks went for the first time last year on a scholarship through the Foundation for Life. Before national organizers announced the shift to a virtual format earlier this month, she'd been hoping and planning to return this year.

Ms. Shanks said her family taught her at an early age to respect life at all its stages, but that she explored and developed her own understanding of the issues as she grew older. As she's taken ownership of her continued advocacy through high school, she said she's drawn to the cause because, as she puts it, "I can do something for this movement."

She knows hers is the next generation of adults whose decisions will have real-life impacts.

"We need to be aware of what's going on, and to be able to protect life," she said. "If my generation isn't aware of these things, nothing is going to be done."

Engaging peers

When Capital Care of Toledo is open for appointments, Ashley Wiedbusch, 21, is there.

She's been a consistent presence outside the clinic since a friend invited her to sidewalk ministry there within the last year. And especially in the hottest stretches of summer, she got to thinking about her generation.

“There were only two people under 40. Everyone else is 60-plus,” she recalled of one such scorching afternoon. “This is sad that young people aren't passionate about this, because we have this older population who's standing out in 80-, 90-degree weather. Where are the young people? Where are the college students who have the physical ability to stand out here?”

Ms. Wiedbusch graduated this spring from Bowling Green State University, said it was that first outing to the clinic after graduation that “really opened my eyes,” as she explained it, and pushed her to shift from passive to active pro-life advocacy.

She now works with End Abortion Now, setting up and working with pro-life ministries in local churches on both sides of the state line. Aware of the ideological divide that exists between herself and many in her demographic, she also said she's been prioritizing outreach to her peers: She's planning a movie night and conversation in her home later this month, for example.

At the University of Toledo, Toledo Students for Life is also engaged with peer-to-peer outreach. They count around 80 members, with a core of maybe 20 who participate in their meetings and events. They aim to spark thoughtful conversations at tabling events on campus, asking fellow students about when they think life begins; they bring in speakers on topics that go beyond just abortion, and they connect pregnant or parenting students with resources.

Molly Ross, 19, spearheads the latter from her position on the executive board. The sophomore advocates on campus alongside Mr. Kennedy, and echoed him in saying that she feels she and her generation have an opportunity and a responsibility to make a change.

The way she sees it, the stakes are high.

“Lives are the cost of being quiet,” she said. “That's one of the reasons it's such a big deal to me.”