

UNBORN IN THE USA: *Inside the War on Abortion*

a film by
Stephen Fell and Will Thompson

105 minutes, color, video, 2006



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UNBORN IN THE USA: Inside the War on Abortion

An unprecedented view of the deep secrets and deep pockets of the pro-life movement, *UNBORN IN THE USA: Inside the War on Abortion* weaves a riveting story from more than 70 exclusive interviews with pro-life activists and seldom-seen archival footage. This provocative film documents one of the most controversial social movements in American history.

When the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* affirmed a woman's constitutional right to privacy, a new movement—dedicated to criminalizing abortion—was born. Now, more than 30 years later, with President George W. Bush's conservative appointments to the Supreme Court, *Roe v. Wade* teeters on the brink of reversal. The film asks and answers the question “in the struggle for dominance over a woman's right to privacy, who wins?”

Filmmakers Stephen Fell and Will Thompson gained unprecedented access to pro-life groups, movement icons, fundraising machines, and even university students being specially groomed to carry the pro-life message for college credit. Fell and Thompson traveled across 35 states in a single year to report this riveting story.

The film is executive produced by Edgar-nominee Suzanne O'Malley, a former editor of *Esquire* and *New York* magazines, screenwriter of *Law & Order*, author of “*Are You There Alone?: The Unspeakable Crime of Andrea Yates*,” and a freelance producer for *Dateline NBC*. She is currently a lecturer at Yale University.

SALLYPORT

THE MAGAZINE OF RICE UNIVERSITY

Documentary Sends Students on Journey of Discovery

Rice University seniors Will Thompson and Stephen Fell began their documentary on the pro-life movement almost by accident. The two were required to create a portrait of a person they did not know as part of Brian Huberman's Documentary Production course. For this project, they interviewed a pro-life activist in northwest Houston who constructed artificial graveyards representing aborted children.



Stephen Fell, left, and Will Thompson in their editing room in Fondren Library.

Thompson grew up near one of the graveyards, which contain pink and blue crosses, each tagged with imaginary dialogue that might have been spoken by an aborted child in protest of the practice. Shocked, Thompson believed that the field must have been put up by extremists.

"My initial reaction was, 'Wow, who would do that?'" Thompson says. But both he and Fell were surprised by the relatively moderate views of their subject. "He wasn't the prototypical extremist we'd expected," Thompson says. "He didn't fit any stereotype."

Intrigued by the idea of making a documentary on the pro-life movement, they continued their research, interviewing the leaders of Texas Right to Life. The activists were leery of the filmmakers' intentions but allowed the two access because they were students.

With each interview, the project grew, eventually

becoming too big for Texas. Their desire to capture the nuance and depth of the pro-life movement led Thompson and Fell out of the state and around the country.

Traveling nearly 12,000 miles in 46 days, they interviewed more than 70 people to capture what they hope will be the first unbiased look at one of the most controversial social issues in America. Huberman, associate professor of visual arts, who guided the two in the early stages of the project, praises the film, titled *Unborn in the U.S.A.* "It's truly an extraordinary piece of work, albeit in the making," Huberman says.

The journey across the country gave the project a whole new direction. Fell began to see the pro-life movement not as a group of activists but as an expression of a complete worldview. "The battle over unborn children," Fell explains, "is a religious battle being fought on a secular battlefield."

Thompson admits that, at the beginning of their documentary, he and Fell were not open-minded about the pro-life movement. His filmmaking partner agrees. "We had our original reactions to the movement," Fell says, "but we kept trying to be journalists throughout and not have a particular opinion that we were going to superimpose on the film. We just wanted to show what happened, because no one else is covering it. That was our original aim."

Fell and Thompson lived the lives of pro-life activists to develop a better understanding of the movement. Fell, an aspiring screenwriter, gained new insight into the film's "characters" as he traveled with them, sharing sleeping quarters and meals. "They sleep on the floor of churches, they distribute handouts, they travel in caravans. They're families," he recounts. "They're not really rich people. They just get up early in the morning and stay there all day until their feet hurt and they can't walk anymore, holding these signs, because deep down this is what they truly believe. That kind of strong conviction really comes across. That's what really interests us in these types of characters." The two witnessed physical as well as verbal confrontations between pro-life and pro-choice activists during the filming. Staying unbiased in such a volatile environment was difficult, but Thompson and Fell recognized that bias

would relegate their documentary to the realm of political propaganda, not art. “We tried to step back as much as possible, to not take a side,” Thompson says. “The best thing to do is keep a dialogue, to talk to as many people as possible, to try and moderate yourself. There is no way to guarantee objectivity, but we’re giving it the old college try.”

Maintaining objectivity came at a cost. Fell and Thompson rejected funding for their documentary offered by churches, production companies, and other groups that might influence the film. Luckily for the pair, funding for student projects was available from several sources at Rice: the Envision Grant fund, the Student Activities Commission, and a fellowship from Rice’s new visual arts department. Asked if this is the essence of low-budget filmmaking, Thompson laughs. “We went over budget. We’re always over budget.”

Thompson and Fell are modest, refusing to brag about their accomplishments or expound on the sacrifices inherent in such a consuming project. At 22, Fell and Thompson are completing a documentary that is not only ambitious, but groundbreaking, according to Huberman. Starting this summer, Fell and Thompson will submit the 100-minute-long finished work to several film festivals, including Sundance, Toronto, South by Southwest, and the Austin Film Festival. Sundance and Toronto are two of the most competitive film festivals in the world.

What sets their documentary apart from others, Huberman says, is their insight into the importance of this movement at this moment in history and their ability to capture moral controversy as it happens. “What these two filmmakers have done is packed off with the gear and gone to all parts of the country to get these events on film. We are there as history is unfolding before us. It’s the purest form of the medium.” The two have gone beyond interviewing the politicians and pundits, Huberman adds, and actually have lived the movement.

The film is in postproduction, and as they edit scenes and begin festival submissions, both recognize that the project has changed their views. Fell admits that his position on abortion has been challenged: “I think that throughout the course of the project, I’ve become more on the fence than ever. I see fanatics on both sides, and I see people who are moderate on both sides.” And both filmmakers say that this project has redirected their careers.

As they come closer to completing the film, Fell, an English major, and Thompson, a computer science and visual arts double major, speak of future artistic ventures together. “I never knew I wanted to be a filmmaker before this film,” Thompson says. Fell, who has been writing narrative screenplays since high school, did, and the documentary has allowed him to combine his creative energies with Thompson’s technical strengths. Theirs is a vibrant partnership, and both seem ready for their next project. Thompson seems certain of the future. “If Stephen and I can, we will be making another film. Definitely one more, if not many more.”

Thompson and Fell do most of their work in Fondren Library, in a cement brick room wallpapered with movie posters. The room is hidden behind shelves of books on the Spanish Armada and the American Revolution, and it is perhaps fitting that these two—armed with talent and artistic vision—are surrounded by the past as they work to capture one of the most complex stories of modern American political history.

—Christina Davis