

FAITH & JUSTICE

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The Overcomer

Saved From A Horrific Past, She Lives To Help Others Find Life

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Minutes With Kristen

Facing The Growing Trend Of Censorship

By Kristen Waggoner
CEO, President & General Counsel

Mozart and Beethoven once called Vienna home. And in December, I had the privilege of visiting the City of Music myself — but not for the museums and cathedrals. The occasion was our ADF International all-team meeting, which brought together staff from around the world. During our time, we welcomed a very special guest — a Finnish lawmaker whose fight against censorship has made her the face of a global movement.

Päivi Räsänen's run-in with censorship began in 2019 when her church decided to sponsor an LGBT Pride parade. She responded as many Christians might — by posting a few Bible verses on social media and asking how the church's decision aligned with Scripture. What followed, however, was akin to a modern-day heresy trial. State authorities investigated Päivi. They combed through decades of her public statements. And they brought criminal charges against her — simply because she had expressed Christian views on sexuality.

Päivi's case reflects a larger trend of censorship that has swept much of the world.

“

Kristen Waggoner

With ADF International's help, Päivi was acquitted of all “hate speech” charges in March 2022. But the prosecutor general appealed. This past November, the Helsinki Court of Appeal again dismissed all charges against Päivi in a resounding victory for free speech. And yet, the process has become its own form of punishment for Päivi — creating a chilling effect on others who wish to speak their views.

Päivi's case reflects a larger trend of censorship that has swept much of the world.

In England, ADF International has represented believers who have been arrested or have faced punishment for praying silently near abortion facilities. In Mexico, we're defending current and former government officials who have been charged with “gender-based political violence” for speaking the truth about biology. In Nicaragua, we're advocating for a Catholic bishop who has been jailed for calling out the government's abuses of power. And in Nigeria, we are working to secure the release of a young musician who was placed on death row under a blasphemy law for lyrics he wrote.



Kristen Waggoner (far left) and Paul Coleman, executive director of ADF International, with clients Isabel Vaughan-Spruce and Päivi Räsänen at the ADF International all-team meeting.

We used to think of the “free world” and the “third world” as totally distinct, but it isn't so clear-cut anymore. Fifty years ago, censorship was a defining feature of Soviet communism. Yet the very free nations that prevailed in the Cold War are now suppressing and punishing views they dislike, calling them “hate speech.” This is a tragedy in the making. Free speech is the basis for countless other freedoms we enjoy. Without it, we cannot test ideas, seek the truth together, or achieve moral progress.

The free world owes Päivi — and her lawyers — a debt of gratitude for taking a stand against this dangerous tide of censorship. May God use her witness in Finland to raise up other courageous individuals who will change the course of history. 🏹

News & Quick Takes

Case Updates From Around The World

Texas

The state of Texas and pro-life doctors are challenging the Biden administration's attempt to force emergency room doctors to perform abortions, even if doing so violates their conscience or religious beliefs.

A 1986 law, the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA), requires hospitals to provide stabilizing treatment for emergency medical conditions. The law says nothing about abortion — in fact, it protects the unborn child. But a recent mandate from the Biden administration uses EMTALA to order hospitals and doctors to provide elective abortions in emergency rooms.

ADF attorneys representing the American Association of Pro-Life Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Christian Medical and Dental Associations, alongside the state of Texas, won a permanent court order blocking this abortion mandate. Recently, they asked a federal appeals court to keep that order in place.



Bob Updegrove

Virginia

A Virginia photographer is free to create art according to his conscience following the settlement of his lawsuit against Virginia officials.

ADF filed suit on behalf of Bob Updegrove in 2020, challenging a law that required him to create photography celebrating same-sex weddings if he did so for opposite-sex weddings. The law also prevented him from explaining on his studio's website the religious reasons why he only celebrates wedding ceremonies between a man and a woman.

The settlement follows the U.S. Supreme Court's recent landmark decision in *303 Creative v. Elenis*, an ADF case in which the court ruled that Colorado could not force website designer and graphic designer Lorie Smith to create content expressing messages that violate her beliefs.

Hospitals — especially emergency rooms — are centers for preserving life. The government has no business transforming them into abortion clinics.

“

Ryan Bangert, ADF Senior VP of Strategic Initiatives

Michigan

Two Christian college students are suing their former professor for forcing them to fund speech that conflicts with their religious beliefs.

Amy Wisner, a professor of marketing at Michigan State University, compelled each of her 600 students to pay a \$99 membership fee to join her progressive organization, “The Rebellion Community.” Second-year students Nathan Barbieri and Nolan Radomski discovered that Wisner used the collected fees to fund political advocacy that went against their religious beliefs. ADF attorneys filed the lawsuit on their behalf.

Wisner wrote in a Facebook post, “The Rebellion community is a safe place to coordinate our efforts to burn everything to the [expletive] ground.” The post also indicated that 100% of membership fees are donated to Planned Parenthood.

“Neither of us would do anything to support the taking of a life through abortion,” says Barbieri in an ADF video highlighting the case. “And yet here we were, being forced to spend \$99 supporting abortion.”



Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Supreme Court will hear *U.S. Food and Drug Administration v. Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine*, an ADF case in which a lower court restored important safeguards on chemical abortion drugs last year. The Biden administration appealed the ruling.

The FDA harmed the health of women and overlooked the safety risks presented by the chemical abortion drug regimen by removing safeguards (such as in-person doctor visits) and by allowing the drugs to be dispensed by mail.

“Like any federal agency, the FDA must rationally explain its decisions,” says ADF Senior Counsel Erin Hawley. “Yet its removal of commonsense safeguards ... does not reflect scientific judgment but rather a politically driven decision to push a dangerous drug regimen.”

ADF sent a letter to the Securities and Exchange Commission, calling on the agency to deny Apple’s request to exclude a shareholder resolution aimed at protecting free speech and providing transparency. Shareholders are worried that Apple is “limiting content access within its online services based on viewpoint,” the letter indicates.

Apple’s App Store guidelines warn users against including content that is “offensive, insensitive, upsetting, intended to disgust, in exceptionally poor taste, or just plain creepy.” The guidelines cover a wide range of material, including content promoting biblical views on marriage and sexuality.

“Apple needs to rebuild trust with its shareholders and clients,” says ADF Senior Counsel Jeremy Tedesco. “But that can’t happen unless it answers basic questions about whether it is treating everyone equally, regardless of their political or religious views.”



Isabel Vaughan-Spruce with Jeremiah Igunnubole, legal counsel for ADF UK.

United Kingdom

After a six-month investigation, police in Birmingham, England, have dropped charges against a woman arrested in March 2023 for praying silently near an abortion facility, apologizing for their delay in doing so.

Isabel Vaughan-Spruce was arrested for praying in a censorship zone that bans “influence” of any kind, including prayer. The ordeal caught worldwide attention in a viral video of her arrest, in which police accused the pro-life volunteer of committing an offense by silently praying. “You’ve said you’ve been engaging in prayer, which is the offense,” an officer is heard saying in the video.

“This isn’t 1984 but 2023,” Vaughan-Spruce said after receiving the city’s apology. “I should never have been arrested or investigated simply for the thoughts I held in my own mind.” ADF UK has supported the legal defense of Vaughan-Spruce and others facing prosecution for silent prayer.



Regiane Cichelero

Brazil

A Christian mother in Santa Catarina, Brazil, is facing legal challenges and fines after making the decision to homeschool her son.

Regiane Cichelero began homeschooling her 12-year-old son after the closure of public schools during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. When schools reopened in March 2021, she continued educating him at home, believing it was the best way to ensure that he received a high-quality education that aligned with the family’s faith.

Following her decision, she was fined \$300 for not registering her son in school and faces an additional fine of \$20 per day, up to \$1,200, unless she re-enrolls her son in a public school. The judge in the case has even threatened to remove her son from her custody.

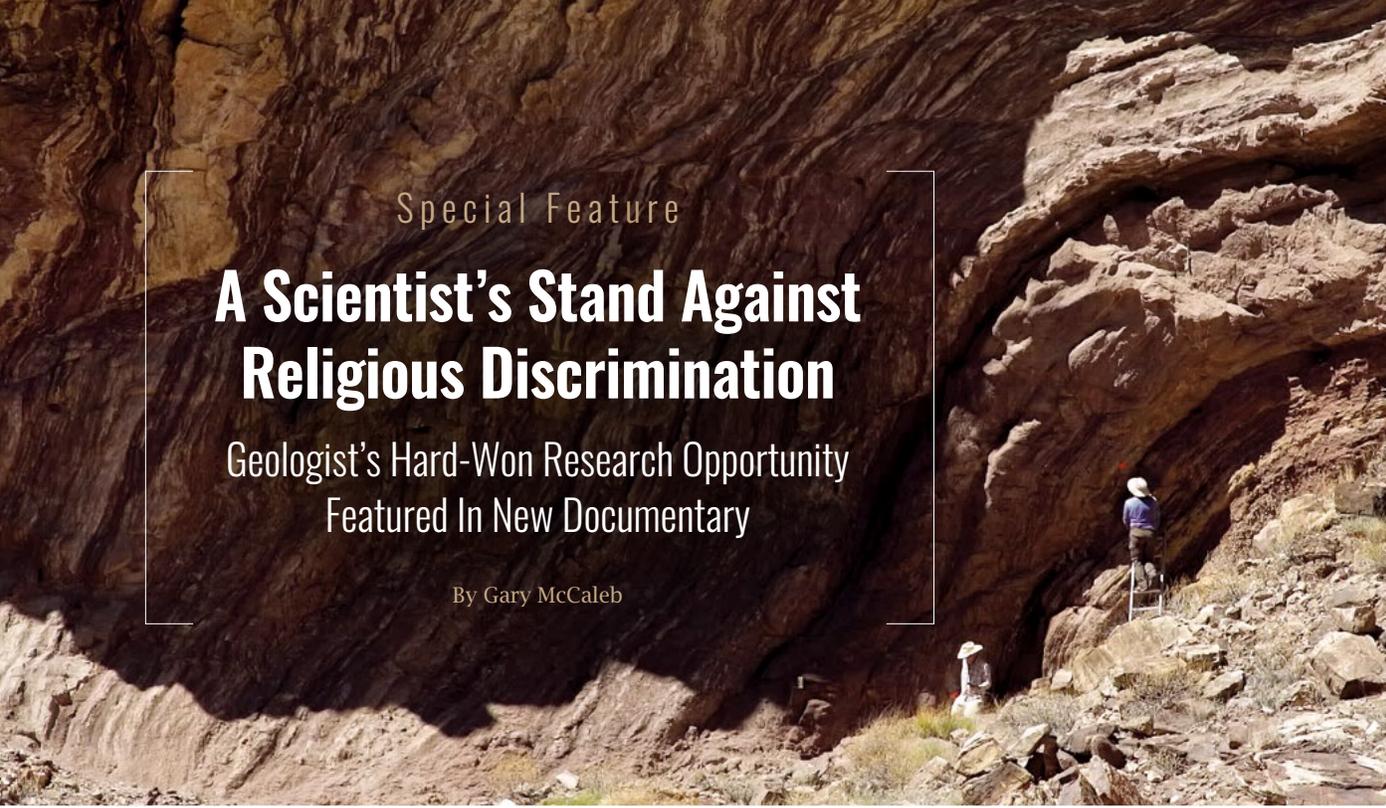
ADF International is supporting her legal defense.

Special Feature

A Scientist's Stand Against Religious Discrimination

Geologist's Hard-Won Research Opportunity
Featured In New Documentary

By Gary McCaleb



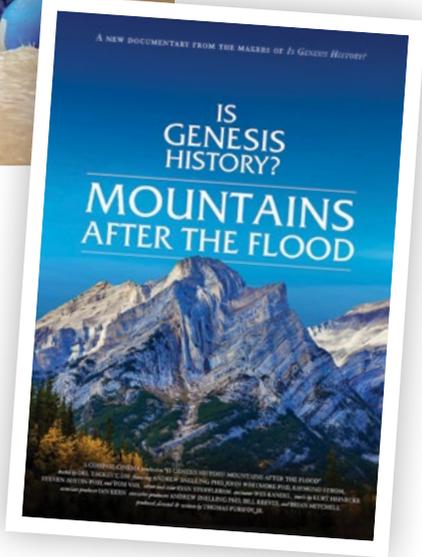
Center left: Rock samples collected during Andrew Snelling's Grand Canyon research trip are labeled and ready to be analyzed. **Above:** Members of the research team climb a cliff face to collect samples from folded rocks. **Lower left:** Snelling examines a rock sample under an electron microscope.

Images are from *Is Genesis History? Mountains After the Flood*.



his own decision to follow Christ at age 9. His firm conviction in the Bible's authority drew him to the creation-evolution controversy in his early teens, and by the time he began his university studies, he had a clear biblical perspective of creation and Noah's Flood.

Soon after, he sensed the Lord was calling him to lifelong work in creation research. He earned a Ph.D. in geology from the University of Sydney and currently works as director of research at Answers in Genesis, an apologetics ministry focused on issues such as creation, evolution, science, and the age of the earth.



A newly released documentary, *Is Genesis History? Mountains After the Flood*, features Christian geologist and ADF client Dr. Andrew Snelling. Produced by Answers in Genesis, the film follows Snelling's team of creation scientists as they uncover new evidence for the biblical flood. This is the story of the legal battle that made that research possible.

When Snelling decided to do his research on the Grand Canyon's rock layers, he anticipated no problem in obtaining a permit, given his long history of scientific study in the canyon. But his 2014 application for the study was swiftly stonewalled.

Park Service reviewers ignored the scientific merit of his proposal, instead seizing upon his Christian young-earth view of creation. Deeming the application "outlandish," they urged park officials to screen out those

When you first peer into the whispering abyss of the Grand Canyon, you will likely be overwhelmed by God's majestic creation. But it is unlikely you will see the canyon as a battlefield for religious freedom.

Such a battle came to the canyon, though, in 2014, when National Park Service officials denied a research permit for Dr. Andrew Snelling, a Christian geologist who had already been researching the canyon for 18 years.

There's a long-standing argument over the way some of the Grand Canyon's rock layers were sharply folded, almost turned back upon themselves. The standard interpretation was that the layers bent ever so slowly over millions of years. But Snelling suspected that they folded while still soft and more recently deposited. The answer could best be found by examining samples from the folds under an electron microscope — something evolutionists had long talked about but never done.

Thus began what Snelling later called "the fight for 53 rocks," an effort that emerged from a calling he'd first sensed as a young man.

Raised in a Christian family in Sydney, Australia, Snelling's interest in geology began soon after he made

representing "inappropriate interests" and suggested that officials should not be "processing the dead-end creationist material."

ADF attorneys intervened, explaining that denying the request because of Snelling's Christian beliefs violated the First Amendment and undercut sound scientific inquiry. Response from the Park Service? None.

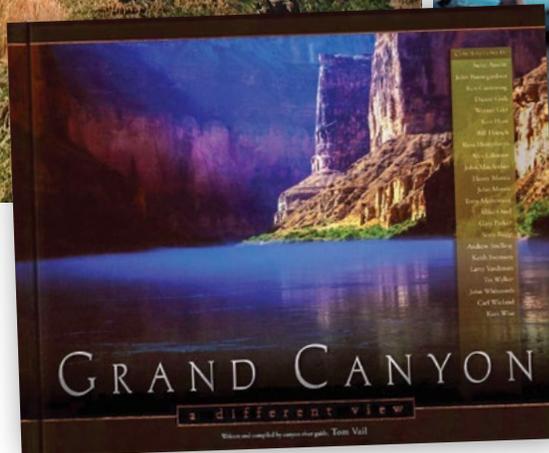
Snelling resubmitted his request in 2016, responding to the criticisms of his first application, but the stone wall stood. So ADF went to court in 2017, just after then-President Trump issued an executive order instructing federal agencies not to discriminate on the basis of religious belief.

The Park Service quickly changed course. The proposal once deemed "outlandish" was now "well-stated with methods that are similar or equal to standard scientific practice." Finally, Snelling had permission to collect his 53 rocks.

With his permit secure, Snelling and a team of scientists launched a raft trip through the Grand Canyon on the Colorado River in August 2017, spending a week studying the rock layers and collecting samples.

Following the lengthy process of preparing and analyzing the rock samples, Snelling’s findings were published in the peer-reviewed *Answers Research Journal* in June 2021. His research helps demonstrate the rapid formation of the canyon layers by massive flooding and contradicts the commonly accepted belief that they were formed over millions of years.

Christian essays, *Grand Canyon: A Different View*, in the park’s bookstore. His book joined many others offering religious, spiritual, or mythical thoughts about the canyon. But only his book garnered a complaint from outside science groups, demanding that it be removed because of its “nonscientific” religious content that supposedly undercut the park’s mission.



Tom Vail (above) took legal action after his book of Christian essays about the Grand Canyon was removed from the park’s bookstore because of its religious content.

Interestingly, Snelling’s legal battle was not the first time ADF had fought religious discrimination at the Grand Canyon.

In 2003, an American Civil Liberties Union paralegal emailed the Park Service superintendent, asking what he knew about “two wooden plaques, which contain inscriptions of the Psalms” displayed at the Grand Canyon. The plaques had been placed in popular viewing areas in 1970 as a reflection of the canyon’s stunning vistas. Rather than explaining that the plaques were for private religious expression and well within constitutional protections, the park superintendent simply removed them and returned them to their owner, the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary.

It happened that ADF founding CEO Alan Sears often visited a prayer garden maintained by the Sisterhood in Phoenix. When Sears heard that American bureaucrats were censoring the sisters, he put ADF attorneys to work, and a swift legal demand letter restored the plaques to the canyon’s South Rim.

Meanwhile, Tom Vail, who founded Canyon Ministries, a Christian tour service, had started selling a book of

which promptly obtained public records related to the complaint. Documents revealed that senior Park Service officials had colluded with the science groups to manufacture the complaint. One had even offered to help senior officials in Washington, D.C., respond to the complaint. With this astounding tidbit in hand, ADF sent another demand letter. The book was soon back in the store, where sales soared once the story hit the news.

Religious liberty is a value that falls squarely within the Park Service’s mission to preserve “unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.”

Should the Park Service again lose sight of that value and impair religious freedom, ADF is ready to step up to the precipice — and keep the doors open for the Gospel. **A**

Ambassador Profile

Mike and Jenny Vondra

By Marshéle Carter

It was a conversation with a colleague about conscience, a cake, and a Supreme Court case that first captured their attention.

In that chat, Mike and Jenny Vondra learned that cake artist Jack Phillips was facing a major legal battle after declining to create a cake to celebrate a same-sex wedding. That raised their concerns: since they, too, tried to conduct their business in accord with their Christian faith, could their own rights be at risk?

That question soon had the native Montanans looking into Alliance Defending Freedom, which had defended Phillips in the case.

“I remember being very skeptical,” admits Mike, a certified financial planner in Billings. “But we did our own research and heard a consistent message: Jesus and His Gospel.”

Then, two years ago, an incident in the couple’s home state prompted them to become personally involved with the ministry. When their local zoo scheduled a Drag Queen Story Hour, many members of the community — including the Vondras — expressed concern. Response from the zoo’s leadership was disheartening.

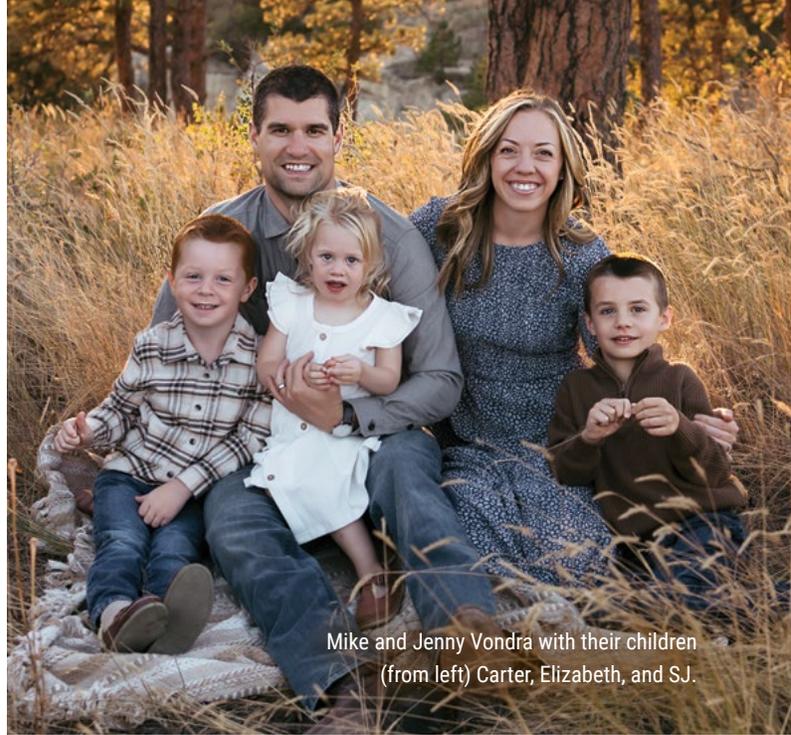
Anyone who pushed back was accused of “hate” in the zoo’s social media posts, says Jenny. “It woke us up to the fact that we’re not going to be shielded from these issues. So we needed to engage.”

Mike and Jenny signed up for the ADF Ambassador program a month later, joining a network of volunteers who help defend faith and freedom by

It woke us up to the fact that we’re not going to be shielded from these issues. So we needed to engage.

“

Jenny Vondra



Mike and Jenny Vondra with their children (from left) Carter, Elizabeth, and SJ.

Photo by Mackenzie Scheie Photography

connecting the people around them — friends, family, church members, and community members — to the ministry’s mission.

The couple immediately went to work, planning and then hosting “An Event with Alliance Defending Freedom” in a rented room at the local country club. Nearly 35 people gathered for a talk on parental rights by ADF Senior Counsel Emilie Kao and to learn about the organization’s mission. Eleven signed up as new volunteers.

“We knew we weren’t alone,” says Mike. “We are surrounded by a great community of young, Christian, conservative, traditional families.

We just wanted to get everyone together, break some bread, encourage one another, and pray.”

The couple hosted a second event a year later, this time drawing nearly 120 guests and resulting in 17 new volunteers.

“I’d love to see these Ambassadors engaged in discussion within their spheres of influence,” Jenny says, “helping to educate on what’s happening in Montana and across the nation, supporting our legislators, voting well, giving generously.”

The couple agrees that volunteering for ADF in this way is like taking a pledge to live out biblical values publicly.

“We are called to obedience,” Mike says. “The Lord has given us a big playbook with the big steps to winning the game. But there’s a lot in between those steps where we get to be faithful.

“Then we sit back and watch the Spirit move. I think that’s the safest place to be.” 

VISIT ADFLegal.org/Get-involved
to learn how you can be part of the
work of Alliance Defending Freedom.

Cover Story

The Overcomer

Saved From A Horrific Past, She Lives To Help Others Find Life

By Chris Potts

Like most of us, Jean Marie Davis knows enough not to pick up hitchhikers. Unlike some of us, she knows a nudge from the Lord when she feels one. A few months ago, she felt one.

She was headed to work when she felt like grabbing something to eat. The warm smell of a breakfast sandwich and fries filled the car. She glanced over to see a young woman walking along the roadside — and the Holy Spirit, Jean Marie says, told her to pull over.

The young woman had a cigarette in her mouth. “You’ve got to get rid of the cigarette,” Jean Marie told her. “You can’t smoke in my car.” The woman threw away the cigarette and climbed in. She got a good whiff of the food, looking longingly at the bag. Jean Marie offered her some of the fries.

“I’m eating all the time,” the woman said, helping herself to a handful.

“Oh, yeah,” Jean Marie said. “I remember. Doing drugs and stuff, I used to eat all the time.”

If the young woman was startled at her driver’s deduction, at least she didn’t deny it. “I smoke crack,” she confessed.

“I used to do crystal meth,” Jean Marie said.

“Man, that’s a hard drug,” the woman said — impressed, in a backward kind of way.

Jean Marie shrugged. “I used to be a prostitute,” she said, by way of explanation.

The young woman absorbed that. “I’m a prostitute, too,” she said.

“Are you tired of living that life?” Jean Marie asked. “Cuz I know I was.”

The young woman was trying to decide who exactly her chauffeur could be. Jean Marie fished

out a business card. “I’m the director of Branches,” she said, naming a pregnancy care center that, under her leadership, has quickly become known to virtually everyone in the community.

The young woman mused on the information. “I’ve had four abortions,” she said, finally. “I want to keep this one.”

“Well, I’m here for you,” Jean Marie said. “Whenever you need me.”

“I don’t want an expiration date,” the woman said. “I want to do my own expiration date. I don’t want people to do their expiration date on me.” She paused. “They cut my brake cords.”

Jean Marie nodded.

“Yep,” she said. “I remember people wanting to kill me. I remember wanting to kill myself.”

“How’d you get out?” the woman asked.

“Because of Jesus,” Jean Marie said. She looked directly at the young woman. “I love you,” she said, pulling the car to a stop. “Can I pray with you?”

The young woman looked at her.

“I know you love me,” she said. “You gave me food.” A pause. “Yeah,” she said. “You can pray with me.”





You have to learn how to love. How to receive love —
because ... out on the street ... you can't trust anybody.

“

Phyllis Phelps

Jean Marie Davis was just 2 years old when she tasted her first beer. She was 6 when a family member first put a cigarette in her mouth. She grew up in a house where the parties never stopped, the alcohol overflowed, the sex was everywhere, and drugs of every kind were close at hand.

“I was always by myself,” she remembers. From her earliest memories, she made all her own meals and walked the four blocks to her school alone. Her father beat her; family and friends molested her. She and the children across the street — facing the same brutalities — took turns hiding in each other’s homes.

“Love,” she says, “was people buying stuff for me. That’s what my family said. ‘I love you, because I bought this for you.’”

She was told, constantly, that she was ugly. Fat. Stupid. That no boy would ever find a girl like her attractive. One relative told her the only way she’d ever be married would be in a “pimp-and-ho” relationship.

She was being groomed to be trafficked. The trafficking began when she turned 12. By the time she reached high school, she was fair prey for any boy who complimented her. Sleeping with one invited gang rape

from his friends. A raped girl was considered a “slut.” That made it easy — once she was 18 and kicked out of the house — to start sleeping with men for money and with dealers for their drugs. It was the world she had lived in all her life.

Every day her life hung by a thread, held in the hand of whatever arrogant pimp she worked for at the moment. Many abused her, most threatened her, and some tried hard to make good on their threats. For almost 10 years, in 33 states, she earned her traffickers tens of thousands of dollars, dodged cops and criminals and hails of bullets, suffered countless rapes, and did enough drugs to kill herself a dozen times over.

Nearing 30, she learned she was pregnant. She was into drugs more heavily than ever. Five different pimps laid claim to her body and her money.

“That life is a chaos life,” she says. “They keep you in this state where ... you’re mentally unstable. I was losing myself.”

One pimp, learning of her pregnancy, called in a fit of jealousy: “Get out of the state, or I’m going to kill you.” Pimps say things like that all the time. This one meant it. She caught the first bus out.

She found a women’s domestic violence shelter in New Hampshire whose director, on hearing her story, was willing to pay for her airfare to get there. Jean Marie came off the plane four months pregnant, with \$1.38 to her name. She stayed in the shelter, started attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and pondered what to do next. Soon enough, men started hitting on her. Drugs became available.

“But it didn’t feel right,” she says. “I thought, ‘I don’t want to do this.’”

She was thinking of aborting the baby. People at the shelter suggested she meet with someone at a nearby pregnancy care center.

“She came with all that she owned in one bag,” remembers Phyllis Phelps, then a counselor at the center, now executive director of the House of Hope New Hampshire women’s program. Phyllis still recalls how busy she was that day — too busy for one more appointment. Then she saw Jean Marie.

“She was so hurting. Just ... lost. I said, ‘Jean, how can I help you?’”

“I’m so tired,” Jean Marie told her. “I’m *so* tired.”

They talked. Jean Marie shared her story. “There’s a better way,” Phyllis finally told her gently, remembering days when she herself had found that hard to believe. “I can’t heal all those things that you’re going through. But I know a Man named Jesus who can help you.” She began to share some Scriptures. She hadn’t read but one or two before Jean Marie interrupted.

“I don’t trust any man,” she said. “But I’ll give this one a try. I want Jesus. I want to pray with you.”

“So we prayed,” Phyllis says. “She asked the Lord into

her heart. And *boy*, did He come in! You could feel His presence in the room. We were holding hands, and tears were falling. Hers was real repentance. ‘I’m done with this life,’ she said. ‘I want to live for Jesus now.’

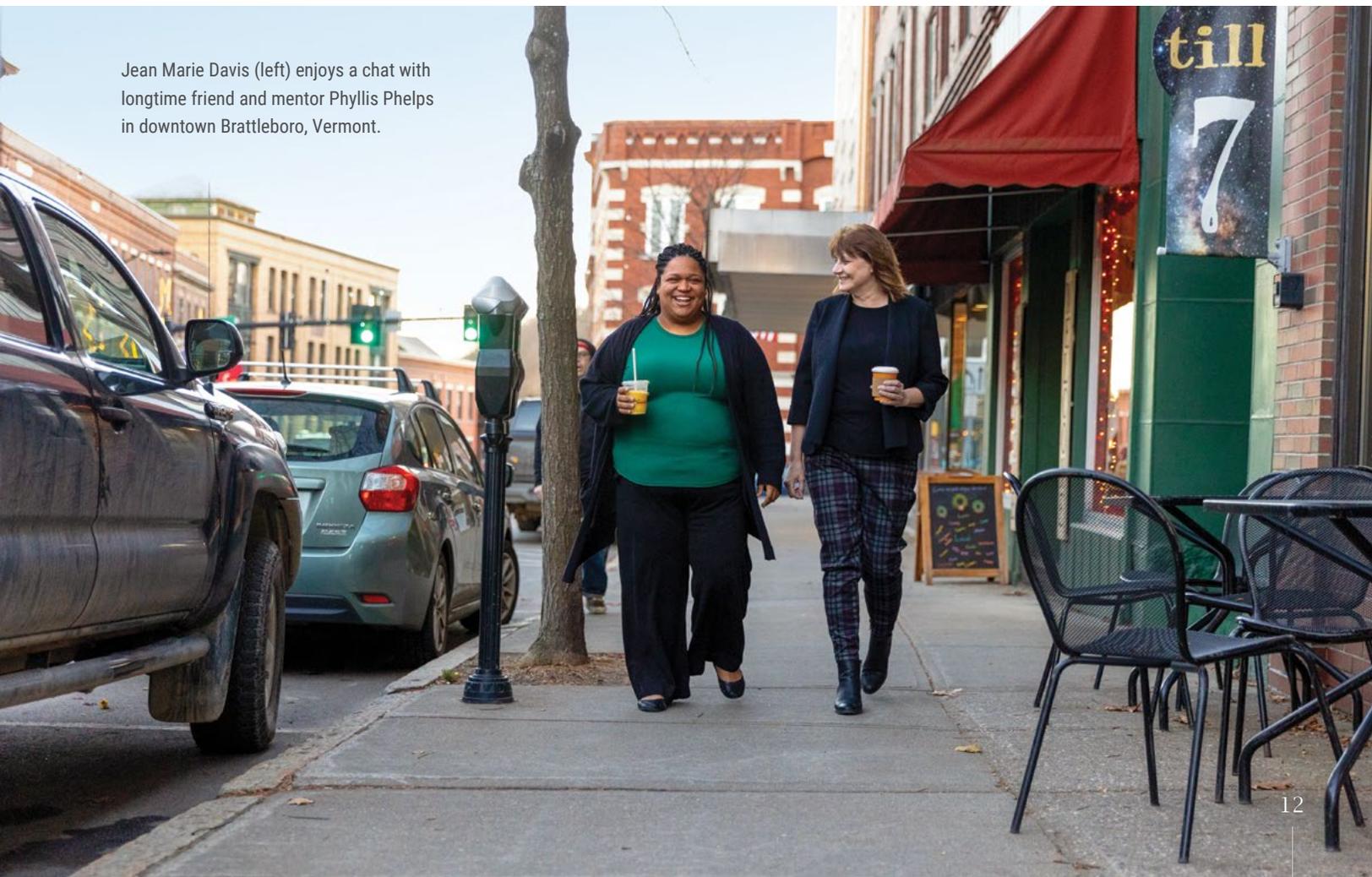
“And God just ... swooped in.” Phyllis smiles. “He was waiting to run to her when she called upon Him. He’s good at that.” The smile grows bigger. “It was a beautiful day.”

I don’t call myself a survivor. I call myself an overcomer.

“

Jean Marie Davis

Jean Marie Davis (left) enjoys a chat with longtime friend and mentor Phyllis Phelps in downtown Brattleboro, Vermont.



Jean Marie and her son, Jonah, take a break after sorting through donated clothing at Branches Pregnancy Resource Center. Jonah, 9, often lends a hand at the center.



Jean Marie's newfound faith transformed her soul but didn't immediately change certain cold, hard facts about her life. She was broke, homeless, addicted, and pregnant. With no prospects whatsoever.

"It's such a culture shock," says Phyllis, who'd walked her own harrowing road to faith and a new life. "Such a different life. You have to learn how to love. How to receive love — because when you're out on the street, you're always watching your back. You can't trust anybody."

Phyllis encouraged her new friend to enroll in the same program that had helped her so much, years before. Over the next 27 months, Jean Marie says, she learned "how to be a woman."

Coming into the program, "I mentally shut down," she says. She had to relearn how to cook and clean, wash and iron, present herself as a lady — even how to read and write. "Normalcy," she calls it. "Normal people," she learned, "get up at 6 o'clock in the morning, not 2 o'clock in the afternoon."

She immersed herself in the Bible. "I read it cover to cover in eight months," she says. "The Scripture says, 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.' Well, I needed to know who this Man was that I was trying out." What she read sank so deep and rang so true that she committed herself to full-time ministry, earning her degree from a Bible college after finishing the women's program.

She also gave birth to a son, Jonah, now 9 years old.

He's living a childhood as different as it can possibly be from his mother's, and he already knows things she was a long time learning: the kindness of friends, the wisdom of the Bible, and how much his mother and his God love him.

Jean Marie found work in the human resources department of a local hospital, pouring her free time into Jonah, church,

and volunteer work alongside Phyllis at House of Hope. But the call to ministry — especially women's ministry — wouldn't go away. One day Phyllis handed her an application. Nearby, in Vermont, Branches Pregnancy Resource Center was looking for a new director.

Her personality, her way of doing things, her way of *looking* at things are very different because of her experiences. ... She's very positive and visionary.

“

Lynn Kuralt

Jean Marie's reached out into the community, and she's brought a lot of people together. ... She's brought a lot of life.

“

Phyllis Phelps

I can't do this," Jean Marie told her. "I'm not qualified." "What are they going to do?" Phyllis replied. "Say no?" "I just felt like that place needed some life," she says now, looking back. "And Jean is *full* of life. I knew she would reach out to the community. She has a heartbeat for the lost. She has a prayer life and three years of Bible college behind her. And she has a heart to help other women. I knew God would equip her with what she needed." Apparently, the Branches board agreed.

"I was quite impressed that the board hired her, because she had so much to offer," says Lynn Kuralt, who helped found Branches almost 40 years ago. Now a board member herself, she and Jean Marie have become close friends. She sees in Jean Marie a big change from those who've led Branches before.

"Her personality, her way of doing things, her way of *looking* at things are very different because of her experiences and what she's been through and how she's fought through things. She's very positive and visionary. I think the board picked up on that. They were right. She's been a very effective leader."

"Most women who have been trafficked still have a 'survivor' mindset," Jean Marie says. "I don't call myself a survivor. I call myself an overcomer. My mindset has changed. I don't think like I used to think. I have overcome, and now I help others get out."

That changed mindset has also changed the whole nature of Branches' ministry. A pregnancy center that once drew mostly high school girls and college coeds now draws walk-ins of every kind: prostitutes, drug dealers, and trafficked women like Jean Marie herself.

"If you're an addict, you get pregnant," Jean Marie says. "You're homeless, you get pregnant. You're a prostitute, you get pregnant. Our focus is still on babies, but some of the people we help have changed. It's now people who are under the wire, that people don't pay attention to. We're sharing the Gospel in so many different ways now ... but at the same time, we're saving babies' lives."

"She's doing amazing," Phyllis says. "She's a servant. She leads by serving, by encouraging. She's not afraid to receive correction. And she's a go-getter."

It's that last quality that has had the most impact, not only on Branches and its low-income neighborhood but on the larger community of Brattleboro, Vermont.

"We were very hidden," Jean Marie says. "Not a lot of people knew about Branches. So I decided to go out on the streets, where the homeless people are. The pimps. The addicts. I said, 'Hey, if you need help, we're here. Come check us out.'"

She's done the same with city leaders — dropping in on the police chief, the fire chief, the principal of the high school, the head of the local hospital. She introduces herself and asks, "How can we help?" Her sincerity, her spunk, and her testimony quickly get their attention.



Jean Marie talks with Michael Gantt, a Branches board member who oversees the Mercy Ministries Food Pantry as senior pastor of Agape Christian Fellowship in Brattleboro. Jean Marie volunteers at the food pantry as part of her community outreach efforts.

"Jean Marie's reached out into the community, and she's brought a lot of people together," Phyllis says. "She's gained support, and she's gained clients. She's brought a lot of life."

"We are known in the community now in a positive way," Lynn says. "They know who she is, and she's very clear who we are. She doesn't pull any punches. She's here to help, and they know that. They can see it and hear it. They know her face ... and they trust her."



New and gently used clothing is available to new moms in Branches' boutique room.



That trust is increasingly important in a state whose leading officials have largely declared war on pregnancy care centers.

About the time Jean Marie became director of Branches, Vermont passed a law that threatens to put centers like hers out of business. It's a law that explicitly targets the free speech of pro-life pregnancy centers like Branches, and it's unconstitutionally vague — so the centers can't be sure exactly what speech is prohibited. If a pregnancy center advertises in a way that Vermont's fiercely pro-abortion attorney general deems misleading, the law provides that the center can be fined up to \$10,000.

A fine that hefty, Jean Marie says, would cripple Branches.

What's more, the new law requires that any "health care counseling" at pregnancy centers be conducted by licensed medical professionals, not volunteer peer counselors offering pregnancy options. It is unclear whether nonmedical pregnancy centers, like Branches, can continue providing peer counseling or over-the-counter pregnancy tests — without hiring licensed medical staff. Interestingly, no such limitation applies to the staff of abortion facilities.

Branches is one of three clients Alliance Defending Freedom is representing in a lawsuit challenging the Vermont law. The case is currently pending in a federal district court.

"This is part of a concerted attack against pregnancy centers across the country in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision overturning *Roe*," says Julia Payne, legal counsel with ADF's Center for Life. "Lawmakers often accuse pregnancy centers of 'misleading' women to believe that they are an abortion clinic, even if those centers affirmatively disclose to potential clients that they do not provide or refer for abortions."

"We don't force anything on women," Jean Marie says. "I don't care what you believe in. If you need help, we're here to help you. Our focus is resources."

Branches specializes in locating and providing any resource or support that hurting people might need — physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Food, clothing, diapers, baby toys, high chairs, and parent training classes, along with support groups for addicts, victims of domestic violence, and survivors of trafficking. If the Branches staff cannot fulfill a need themselves, they connect women and families with other services and programs that can.

"Branches offers free services to women," Payne says, "and it should be free to serve women and offer them the support they need without fear of undue government punishment."

"If the attorney general and her allies were *truly* pro-choice," she adds, "they would want to give women as many options as possible. Pregnancy centers like Branches empower women to choose life by providing the support that they need to carry a pregnancy to term." Ultimately, she says, that allows them to decide whether to raise the child or to give their baby up for adoption.

We're sharing the Gospel in so many different ways now ... but at the same time, we're saving babies' lives.

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Jean Marie Davis

"Working with ADF has challenged me to see how much God can move," Jean Marie says. "This is a case that can go either way. We have to trust in Jesus. And for me, this is personal. If it wasn't for Phyllis and the pregnancy center, I'd be dead. And if it wasn't for ADF, I wouldn't have this chance to tell my story."

She pauses. "Actually, it's not my story," she says. "It's God's story."

If the attorney general and her allies were *truly* pro-choice, they would want to give women as many options as possible.

“

Julia Payne

You know that Scripture that says, ‘He that is forgiven much, loves much’?” Lynn asks. “Boy, is Jean Marie a testimony of that. She’s been snatched out of the pit to have purpose and hope — and she’s running with it. She makes a point of bringing the name of Jesus into everything she does. She never hides the fact that she’s serving Him first.”

“With Jean, it’s ‘I want to share Jesus,’” Phyllis says. “He just bubbles out of her. Like the ‘woman at the well,’

she wants to go back and say, ‘Come meet a Man who told me everything about me.’ She wants to let the world know that there is hope and there is a way, and that’s through Jesus Christ. Coming from someone who didn’t even know the *name* of Jesus. ...” Her eyes grow wet.

“Wow. I’ve had a front-row seat ... to see what God can do with a life that was totally ashes.

“Thank You, Lord.”

Jean Marie saw her again, the other day. The hitchhiker, out walking her dog. She waved as Jean Marie drove by. She looked healthier, with a little more weight. But, despite their prayer together, the woman still works the streets.

Jean Marie waved back.

“I know how quick I could go back into that lifestyle,” she says. “I think that’s what scares me the most. It’s why I hunger after Jesus. I fight for what I believe in — and I fight for who I am. Because my identity is in Christ. I know who I am now. I know what I’m worth.

“Lord, use me ... however. Help me to help the next person. I’m here.” **A**



Branches staff members (from left) Jennelle Harvey, Jean Marie Davis, and Caroline Gold in the Branches lobby, where the center’s motto is displayed.



My View

Standing Against The Tide For My Daughter

By Tammy Fournier

I remember the winter's day in 2020 when I realized my husband and I were the only ones advocating for our 12-year-old daughter's best interests.

Autumn was struggling with severe depression, anxiety, and low self-worth. "I loathed myself," she remembers. "I hated my personality, how I looked, everything about me." At that time in her life, the idea that she might have been born in the wrong body and could become someone else appealed to her.

As her mother, my heart broke for her. I know puberty is a jarring experience. Adolescence ushered in physical, emotional, and social changes that were

uncomfortable and overwhelming for her. On top of that, COVID-19 school shutdowns had separated my outgoing daughter from the social connections she relied on.

Autumn was hurting, and she needed the space to process who she was and what she was experiencing. She asked to be admitted to a mental health facility to get help, and I obliged. I never anticipated the events that followed.

Rather than helping Autumn work through her feelings and heal her self-image, mental health counselors "informed" me that she was a boy. We were told that if we wanted to save her life, her father and I had to affirm her supposed male identity, using a male name and pronouns — or bear the blame if she committed suicide.

I've known my daughter her whole life, and I am attuned to her needs more than anyone else. When Autumn started questioning her identity, I immediately began doing my own research. I found studies showing that 80%-90% of young children who experience gender dysphoria grow comfortable with their biological sex and stop experiencing gender dysphoria as they age — as long as no one interferes with the natural course of puberty.

The staff at the medical facility, on the other hand, were blindly pushing a one-size-fits-all approach to Autumn's struggles. They barely knew her, and they had failed to address the root issues underlying her individual crisis of identity. I was not about to let them

tamper with my daughter's life and future.

That's why, when Autumn was ready to return to school, I reached out to officials at Kettle Moraine Middle School. I let them know what she was going through and how my husband and I had decided to respond to it. We wanted to give her the space she needed to address all she was feeling without pushing her toward medical interventions with lifelong consequences. I asked that they respect our decision by using her name and female pronouns.

But the school refused to honor our request. They told me it was their policy to advocate for the child, not

The school refused to honor our request. They told me it was their policy to advocate for the child, not the parents.

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Tammy Fournier

the parents, and that they would refer to Autumn by a male name and pronouns no matter what I said.

I was shocked.

It was surreal to watch medical staff and then school officials — people I had raised Autumn to respect and trust — fail my daughter at such a vulnerable moment in her life. I knew that being affirmed in a different identity five days a week would be catastrophic. I was forced to move Autumn to a different school for her well-being.

The last thing I wanted my struggling daughter to feel was that I was dismissing her pain in my approach. Yet the adults who blindly pushed her toward the dangerous path of gender transition made it seem that way.

In that moment, Autumn’s father and I were the only ones with a different message: “There’s nothing we want you to be other than yourself. Life will be better if you can love yourself as you are.”

Thankfully, we were not alone for long. We found Luke Berg, an attorney at the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty (WILL) and an Allied Attorney of Alliance Defending Freedom. With his help and the help of ADF, my husband and I sued the Kettle Moraine School District for trampling our parental rights, which are recognized in the Wisconsin Constitution. Our lawsuit was joined by another family who realized the same thing could happen to their child.

While our perspective as parents had been ignored in the medical facility and the school, it stood up in court. In October 2023, the Waukesha County Court ruled in our favor. The court recognized that the school district’s policy of changing students’ names and pronouns at school without parental consent violates parents’ rights.

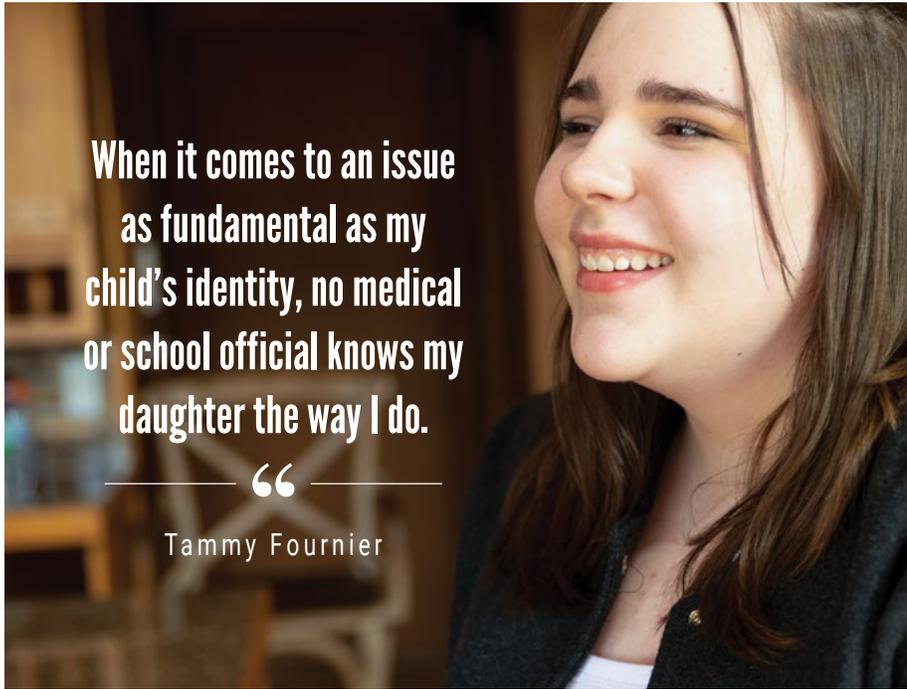
My children are the most important part of my life. When it comes to an issue as fundamental as my child’s identity, no medical or school official knows my

daughter the way I do. That’s why parents, not the government, should make decisions about their children’s health and well-being.

With time and patience, Autumn’s struggles gave way to a new season. She found a counselor who helped her become more confident and comfortable in her own skin. I pulled out my old yearbooks to show her that adolescence is an awkward experience for everyone. Her father and I reminded her daily that we loved her, no matter how she felt. In a local theater group, Autumn found a place where she could be herself and be accepted.

Today, Autumn no longer feels like she was born in the wrong body.

When I see how far my daughter has come, I’m grateful that I fought for her. Kettle Moraine Middle School missed the value of the relationship between children and parents and instead tried to pit my daughter’s wishes against mine. Autumn was too young to know that her feelings would not last forever. That’s why she needed adults in her life who had the courage to tell her the truth.



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Tammy Fournier

That day in 2020 is now just a memory. Three years later, through ADF and WILL, I’ve found a community of adults who stand for parents like me.

No parent should feel alone when they advocate for their child. I am grateful a Wisconsin court saw that, too. 🐾

Q & A

Riley Gaines

Why Men Don't Belong In Women's Sports

By Karen Kurtz

Riley Gaines is a former University of Kentucky swimmer who was a 12-time All-American and five-time Southeastern Conference champion. In 2022, she famously tied with a male athlete, Lia Thomas, at the NCAA Women's Swimming and Diving Championships. Since then, she has been outspoken in support of fairness for female athletes, challenging the rules of the NCAA, USA Swimming, International Olympic Committee, and other governing bodies that allow male athletes to participate in women's sports. She has traveled the country as an Independent Women's Forum spokeswoman and has testified before the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, and state legislatures. Last summer, Gaines shared her story at Alliance Defending Freedom's 2023 Summit on Religious Liberty.

F&J: How did you first become aware of the men-in-women's-sports issue?

RG: My college experience was nothing short of interesting. My sophomore year, in March 2020, COVID hit. So, three days before we were supposed to leave for the NCAA championships, our coaches told us, "Pack your stuff up in the dorms. You have to go home today." This is the meet we train for all year, and we were robbed of the championships. In my junior year, I finished seventh in the country — which I was pretty proud of. At that moment, I made it my goal to win a national title my senior year, which would mean becoming the fastest woman in the country in my events.

In the middle of my senior year, I was right on pace to do that. I was ranked third in the country, behind one girl I knew very well. But I'd never heard of the person who was ranked first — someone named Lia Thomas. There was a lot of head-scratching, talking to my coaches and my parents and my teammates, asking, "Who is this person?" No one knew until an article came out disclosing that Lia Thomas was formerly Will Thomas, who swam three years on the men's team at the University of Pennsylvania before switching to the women's team.

F&J: What led you to speak out with such determination about this issue?

RG: I knew what was happening was wrong. But what pushed me over the edge was when Lia and I competed in the 200-yard freestyle. We had the exact same time, down to a hundredth of a second. We got out of the water and went behind the awards podium. The NCAA official standing there looked at us and said, "Great job, but you guys tied, and we only have one trophy. So we're going to give this trophy to Lia." When I asked why, he told me that [other officials] had made it very clear that Lia had to have the trophy when pictures were being taken.

I waited for a coach to stick up for us. I waited for a parent, an official, someone with political power — for someone to protect us. Then, on the podium, I realized that if we as women weren't willing to stick up for ourselves, we couldn't expect someone else to.

I've seen how ... it's a spiritual battle.

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Riley Gaines



My story is not unique. This is happening all the time, everywhere, in every state.

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Riley Gaines

F&J: You and other female swimmers were also forced to share a locker room with Lia Thomas. Were you prepared for that?

RG: We weren't forewarned that we would be sharing a changing space. We became aware that we'd be undressing next to a man when we turned around, and there was a 6-foot-4, 22-year-old man, fully exposed, inches away from where we were undressing. When we complained about it, we were told we needed to seek counseling. We were anywhere from 17 to 23 years old; I was 21 at the time. Technically we were adults, but it still felt like there were people in place to prevent this kind of thing from happening. And they had failed miserably.

It felt like a betrayal. Of course, it was awkward, embarrassing, and uncomfortable. But it was also traumatic to think about just how easy it was for them

— the NCAA, the Biden administration, all the people pushing these guidelines — to dismiss our rights to privacy.

This is happening across the country. I can't even reiterate the number of messages I get reminding me that my story is not unique. This is happening all the time, everywhere, in every state.

F&J: How has your faith shaped and guided you through this journey?

RG: I've always been spiritual. Growing up in the Church of Christ, we went every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, and I couldn't be more grateful for that now. This past year I have been spiritually awakened because I have seen just how God moves through people and things, and how He has His hand on me. But just as clearly, I've seen how ... it's a spiritual battle. [Those advocating for men in women's sports] are desperately looking to put their identity in something, but the only place that we can find satisfaction is by putting our identity in Christ.

F&J: What would you say to those who want to speak up but feel they don't have a voice in this arena?

RG: Being in the position I'm in, I get messages from female athletes and coaches, and [I hear from] parents who call me, crying, watching their daughter be sidelined or injured in her sport. But what a lot of people don't understand is that you don't have to wait to be directly impacted by this to take a stand. If we wait until we are all directly impacted ... we [will be] too far gone.

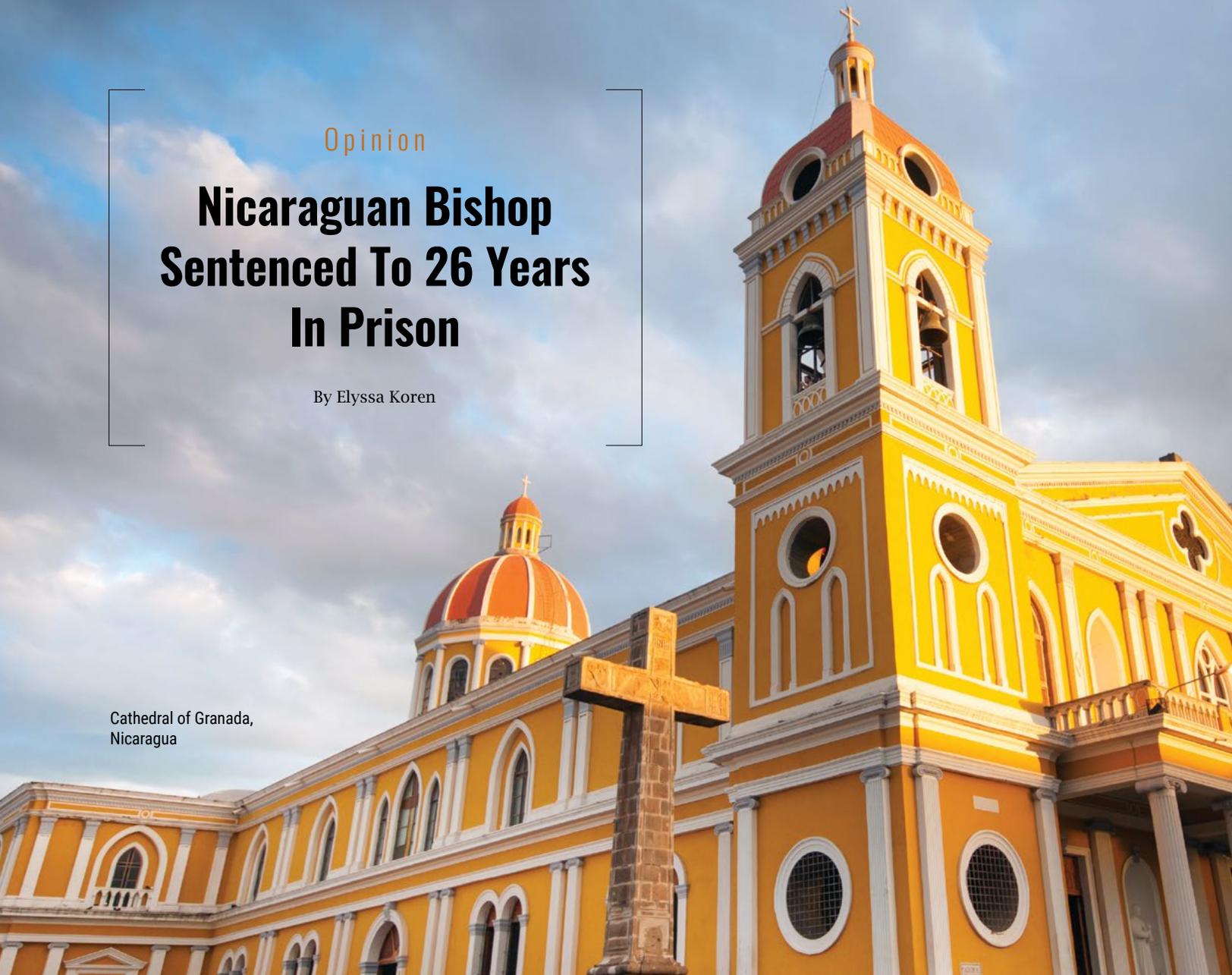
This is a slippery, slippery slope, and it's scary that the people leading this country are actively taking us into this downward spiral. Be bold, and know that it's liberating to say the truth. There are recent polls showing that over 70% of Americans [reject] gender ideology. So know that you are in the majority — the overwhelming majority. 🏹

Opinion

Nicaraguan Bishop Sentenced To 26 Years In Prison

By Elyssa Koren

Cathedral of Granada,
Nicaragua



Everyone has the fundamental human right to live out and speak the truth, and when repression hits, these are often the first liberties under attack. The right to freely speak one's mind exposes repressive regimes for what they are, driving dictatorships to clamp down on free speech and the free exercise of religion.

The crisis of human rights happening in Nicaragua today highlights this age-old trend in action. All who dare to speak out against the Ortega regime risk silencing and brutal punishment at the hands of the state. One leader in particular, Bishop Rolando Álvarez,



has garnered international attention for his steadfast fidelity to the truth.

Nicaraguans are experiencing significant oppression under President Ortega.

Though the country is primarily Catholic, the government has targeted the Catholic Church in its efforts to dismantle any remaining opposition to its consolidation of power. Nicaragua has been in a state of turmoil since April 2018, when massive protests against the government erupted.

Bishop Rolando Álvarez



For sharing a message of faith with the people of Nicaragua, the bishop was held under house arrest and subsequently charged and convicted as a criminal.

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Elyssa Koren

Although the Church initially was approached to moderate tensions between the government and the protestors, the regime has since done an about-face. President Ortega accused participating bishops of attempting a coup, then expelled bishops, priests, seminarians, and even the Vatican’s top diplomat from the country. The government also seized several radio stations owned by the diocese in the city of Matagalpa.

Bishop Álvarez, responding to his sense of duty as a Catholic pastor, became a peaceful but insistent witness against these actions, delivering words of hope to the people in his church sermons.

For sharing a message of faith with the people of Nicaragua, the bishop was held under house arrest and subsequently charged and convicted as a criminal — a

violation of his human rights in blatant contravention of international law. He caught the world’s attention when he rejected an offer of exile from the Nicaraguan

The Ortega regime’s hostility toward Bishop Álvarez and others broadcasts to all of society that religious expression is not allowed.

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Elyssa Koren

government, refusing to board a plane to the United States with 222 other political prisoners and choosing instead to remain with his people.

First arrested in August 2022, last February Bishop Álvarez was stripped of his citizenship rights and sentenced to 26 years in prison in a sham trial he did not even know was happening. He was convicted as a traitor for “undermining national integrity” and the “propagation of false news.”

Further, the bishop was denied his lawyer of choice, and the lawyer he was assigned was later prevented from obtaining essential information about his case. A request for an appeal of his conviction was summarily denied, which reflects the current state of the justice system in Nicaragua.

With no effective avenues for justice in a country overrun by oppressive forces, the bishop’s only recourse is international action. ADF International has filed a petition for urgent intervention at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the body charged with the protection of human rights in Latin America. It is imperative that the commission act now to demand his release and an end to the human rights abuses besieging the people of Nicaragua.

In September, another Nicaraguan priest was arrested for the “crime” of praying for Bishop Álvarez. The regime is sending clear signals — dissent will not be tolerated. In times of repression, people look to their leaders, and the Ortega regime’s hostility toward Bishop Álvarez and others broadcasts to all of society that religious expression is not allowed.

No one should suffer persecution at the hands of the state because of their faith. All concerned with the protection of human rights should be outraged by the Nicaraguan crisis, speaking out in defense of Bishop Álvarez and the people of Nicaragua. 🇳🇮

Elyssa Koren serves as director of legal communications for ADF International. This was adapted from a Daily Wire article originally published on October 3, 2023.



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