

# SECURE FENCING

*One Saturday morning, Abby waves goodbye to her husband and little girl for what should have been a routine day of work at the largest abortion clinic in the US*

By Gerard Condon

**T**HE PRO-LIFE side of the abortion debate is well presented in the latest movie from Pure Flix studios. *Unplanned* is based on a memoir of the same name by Abby Johnson, a former director with Planned Parenthood, the single largest provider of abortions in the United States.

“My story isn’t an easy one to hear,” intones Johnson’s voiceover. The movie’s pivot occurs in those opening moments, in September 2009, in Bryan, Texas. Johnson (Ashley Bratcher) waves goodbye to her husband Doug (Brooks Ryan) and their little girl for what should have been a routine Saturday morning at the family planning clinic. It was on Saturdays that terminations were carried out. When a medic didn’t show up, Johnson herself conducted an ultrasound to guide the surgeon’s

catheter. But she became distraught when she saw the 13-week-old foetus “fighting for its life.” Her Damascene conversion was underway.

Directed by Cary Solomon and Chuck Solomon, *Unplanned* is the first Pure Flix movie to be restricted to adult viewers. Indeed, it does not shy away from the gruesome realities of abortion. Johnson had herself procured two terminations, after pregnancies by an unfaithful husband whom she eventually divorced. Her abortions (one surgical, the other chemically induced) were not the painless procedures she had been promised. Even when the physical discomfort subsided, she was left with deep psychological wounds. Johnson’s “anger was replaced by self-loathing”; somehow she “stashed the experience in a dark corner of my soul and pretended it never happened.”

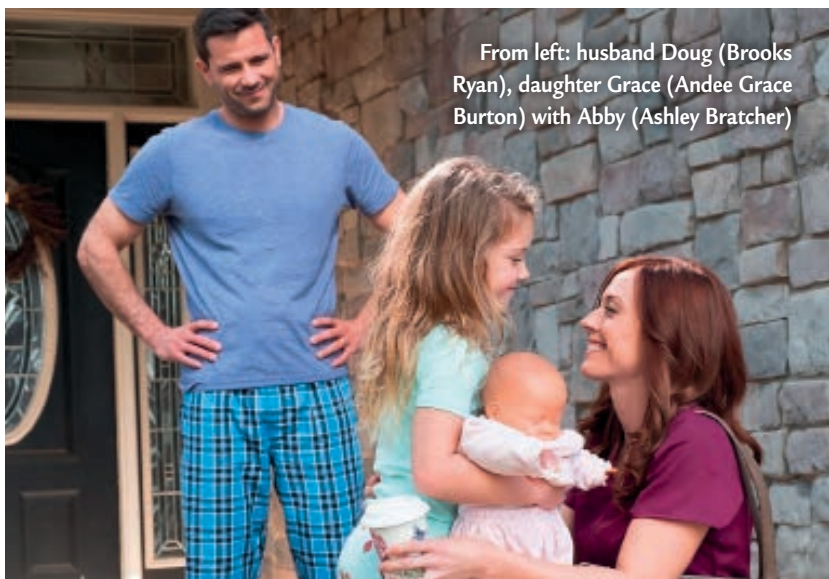
Ironically, one of the expressions of her self-loathing was the act of joining Planned Parenthood in 2001. It was as if Johnson wanted to double-down on her own bad experience. Initially she didn’t tell her parents, both of whom were pro-life. Later, there are family scenes where she vociferously defends the “reproductive rights of women.”

## Volunteer escort

The most effective parts of *Unplanned* are shot at the perimeter fencing of the Planned Parenthood clinic. It epitomised the sharp divide between the pro-life and pro-choice arguments, but it also became a place of dialogue. Starting off as a “volunteer escort” Johnson needed the fencing to protect her from the pro-life protestors, whose raw hostility did them no honour. However two of the demonstrators, Marilisa (Emma Elle Roberts) and Shawn (Jared Lotz), struck a more measured note.

A fellow escort advised Johnson to engage the client as soon as she arrives, “Talk about the weather, her clothes, anything to distract her from the voices through the fence. They’re going to be harassing her. You need to make sure yours is the voice she hears.” Inside the clinic, director Cheryl (Robia Scott) assures Abby that their aim was “family planning and education. We resort to abortion only when absolutely needed.”

The reality proved quite different. Later, when Johnson had herself been appointed the clinic’s director, she was encouraged to double the rate of abortion referrals, in order to boost Planned Parenthood’s finances. When she reminds Cheryl of the clinic’s mission to keep abortions rare, she is given a stern lesson on the economics of the abortion industry: “Abortion is what pays your salary.”



From left: husband Doug (Brooks Ryan), daughter Grace (Andee Grace Burton) with Abby (Ashley Bratcher)

Abby (Ashley Bratcher) became distraught when, during a “termination,” she saw the 13-week-old foetus “fighting for its life”

### Hidden in plain sight

Johnson rose through the ranks of Planned Parenthood to become its youngest clinical director. In 2008 she earned the dubious honour of ‘Employee of the Year’. Prior to the promotion, Cheryl had called her to a meeting in the POC (Products Of Conception) room, considered the facility’s “holy of holies,” where foetal body parts were reassembled in petri dishes to ensure that nothing was left in the patient’s womb. Each Saturday produced 30-40 such dishes at the Bryan clinic. Johnson showed no emotional reaction to the petri dish, just as Cheryl had hoped.

All the time Johnson saw herself as a “champion for women’s rights,” reassuring expectant mothers that the foetus was no more than a “piece of tissue,” “like a blood clot” and that an abortion would be painless. Telling lies had become routine. She was unmoved by her attendance at Sunday worship, even by Psalm 139, the biblical *magna carta* on the rights of the unborn.

But the truth, hidden in plain sight, gradually dawned on her. When a teenager’s surgical abortion is botched, it took some time to recover her composure. The uncondi-



tional positive regard of her parents and husband kept her reasoning open to dialogue. Most of all it was her encounters at the security fence with Shawn and Marilisa that formed the background to Abby Johnson’s sudden departure from the clinic on that routine Saturday morning in 2009.

### Conversion

One hour later, Johnson turned up at the *40 Days for Life* offices of Shawn and Marilisa, pledging to resign from Planned Parenthood. The clinic then sued her for leaking confidential information about their operations. With the help of a laid-back lawyer (Kaiser Johnson), the movie’s only source of light relief, a courtroom quickly ruled in favour of the defence.

Abby Johnson went on to join those keeping vigil at the other side of the fence, offering expectant mothers alternatives to abortion. Though wracked by guilt for her involvement in 22,000 abortions at Bryan from 2001 to 2009, she found healing through faith in God’s mercy. At the end of the movie, there is a powerful image of her tying roses to the fencing in memory of the unborn children whose right to life had been denied at Planned Parenthood. In 2013, the clinic at Bryan was closed.

Johnson became a Catholic in 2012, though this fact is not reported in the movie. Today she organises *And Then There Were None* a ministry that lobbies abortion clinic workers to follow her example and leave their “industry.”

### Credentials

While *Unplanned* presents both sides of the abortion debate, there is no doubting its pro-life credentials. The movie was part-financed by the well-known American pro-life businessman, Michael Lindell, who was given a cameo role. As with previous Pure Flix productions, the cinematography is very good, but is let down by clunky editing, tedious pacing and, at times, a jarring soundtrack.

Ashley Bratcher gives a great performance in the leading role, one obviously based on her real-life commitment to the pro-life cause. Another character, the doctor shown performing an abortion (Anthony Levatino), had previously worked as a medic in an abortion clinic. However, the character of Cheryl, who epitomises all that is wrong with the “industry,” is demonised to the point of caricature, right down to her high heels. Brooks Ryan, as Johnson’s husband, is impossibly sweet. At times, *Unplanned* plays like a docudrama, with its rather wooden presentation of the facts. I think that the 2018 pro-life movie *Gosnell* achieved a better narrative quality.

Despite its flaws and poor reception from the film critics, *Unplanned* has been a box-office success, reaching number four in American cinemas after its premiere last March. This is a movie that informs rather than entertains. Its appeal is to those who already believe that, in pregnancy, there are two lives that matter. But will it win converts from the pro-choice side of the fence? ♦

