

THE IMPACT OF ONE LIFE

By Brittany Shankle

Most of my college peers were still sleeping when I woke up one Saturday morning in April of 2004. I met some friends and drove from our campus up to Washington, D.C. We went to march with thousands of others for women's rights and health in the National Organization for Women's misnamed "March for Women's Lives."

It's hard to believe that morning was not quite three years ago. On that day, however, my eyes and heart were opened. Pro-lifers were everywhere among the pro-abortion activists. I had never been at a "pro-choice" rally before and had never seen "the opposition" out in force. Before that, I thought everyone opposed to women's rights was extreme—but the pro-lifers I saw there were just ordinary people.

The contrast between pro-abortion activists and pro-lifers was stark. Transvestites dressed like Catholic nuns were on the pro-abortion side while pro-lifers stood quietly praying the Rosary. One woman who looked about seven-months pregnant wore a T-shirt that read "I'm going to abort this," with an arrow pointing to her belly. Another woman stood with a sign that said "I regret my abortion." And even though I yelled obscenities at her, she stood strong as a beacon of Christ's light—to this day, I cannot forget her.



A light in the darkness

The summer before, I had met Henry, who became my boyfriend. He came from a strong Catholic family and was one of seven children. His sister Rita had just accepted the job of assistant Catholic campus minister for my college. Henry moved in with Rita and I spent a lot of time hanging around the Catholic center with them, though I was always sure to make it known that I didn't believe in anything they did.

Since Rita, Henry and all of their Catholic friends had awakened my interest in religion I decided to attend Thursday dinners at the Protestant campus ministry, because I had been raised Methodist. But every week after the dinners, I walked over to the Catholic center to meet my friends, often catching the end of some religious discussion.

Henry was a holy man and, at that time, he was the best example of Christ in my life. He introduced me to the virtue of chastity, which showed me the depth of his true self-respect, his respect for me and, above all, his love for God.

Day after day, Henry showed his love in pure and simple ways. Once, while I was sick with pneumonia, he brought me a bag of bagels from my favorite bagel shop so that I never had to leave my room for food. On my birthday that year, which fell in the middle of final exams, he remembered my special request for a cake, made it himself and presented it to me at midnight. Even when our relationship was on the rocks, he wrote songs expressing his love for me. Through the simplicity of his love—his constant, quiet strength and friendship—I knew I was blessed.



Joey and Brittany

I have changed dramatically. After attending one march in Washington a few years ago, I will be heading back this January to the real march for women's lives—the March for Life.

One day, Henry and Rita began talking about the January 2004 "March for Life." Evidently, it was a big deal, although I had never heard of it. They asked me to go and of course I objected. I had been raised staunchly "pro-choice" and I was proud of it!

From that day on, Henry and I had many conversations about the Catholic Church and abortion. One night we talked until dawn about the differences in our beliefs and even though I expressed what I thought to be many good arguments for abortion, I was impressed by Henry's calm, steadfast, defense of the right to life.

On May 9, 2004, Henry had convinced me to forget a family conflict and join them for our annual Mother's Day brunch. Since I would be a gone for a week, I called him to say goodbye and let him know I was on the road. Henry had just attended Sunday morning Mass and received Communion before we talked. That was the last anyone else saw or heard from him.

Henry died later that day alone in his apartment.

The path becomes clearer

For months I grieved Henry's death, and the mysterious cause of it consumed my thoughts. Eventually Henry's family learned that all the valves in his heart had opened at one time, which killed him instantly.

Finally one morning, while praying, I knew that God was calling me to become a Catholic. The next day I asked the priest at the Catholic Campus Ministry to add me to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults list and I started praying the Rosary daily.

I chose St. Mary Magdalene as my confirmation patron because she, also, had dealt with the death of her best friend. Later, it made more sense as I realized that like me, she had turned away from sin because of her best friend. However, mine was not an easy conversion. I grew up in a very non-Catholic family and I

knew nothing about what it meant to be Catholic.

When I found out that in order to be Catholic I had to be pro-life, I accepted it grudgingly. Even as I was confirmed and received my first Holy Communion on Easter 2005, I still struggled with Catholic teachings.

Months later, Joey Kerlin stepped into my life. He works for American Life League and within two weeks I was on my way to the first annual Pro-Life Memorial Day observance that took place outside the Supreme Court in October 2005.

Epiphanies

At the memorial, a lady from Rachel's Vineyard spoke. She reminded me of the post-abortive woman I had encountered at the March for Women's Lives. I remembered how hostile I had been towards her and I related her story to my own life. When I realized that over one-third of my generation had been murdered before they were born, the pain of losing Henry was magnified. I realized that without his influence, I would have chosen the wrong path. I also began to wonder who else was

missing that God may have intended to influence my life.

This sobering thought was enough to push me over the edge. I did not want any more people to live without that one person who might have brought them to God. I remembered one day when my roommate told me that she wished that she had a friend like Henry. I wondered if perhaps that person had been aborted.

Several weeks later, after adoring the Blessed Sacrament, Joey and I were having a discussion on the phone about Eucharistic adoration and indulgences. As we were talking, Joey started to tell me something, but stopped. I prodded him to go on. Then he confided he had offered up a plenary indulgence that he had obtained for Henry's soul. With a good Catholic family praying for Henry for over a year, Joey thought it might be unnecessary, but he wanted to make sure that we had at least one saint in heaven praying for us. He said that Henry was like the "patron saint of relationships with Britt" and that he felt close to Henry simply because he had

made such an impact on my life.

After hearing this, my jaw dropped. When I met Henry, I thought he was too good to be true. Then when he died, I thought I had lost my only chance for love. To my surprise, God gave me someone different from Henry, but equally as amazing, with the same zeal for God and life. I practically hung up on Joey and ran from my apartment in my pajamas with nothing but my keys to drive the 15 miles to his house. I loved Joey and I had to tell him in person.

Over the next year I spent a lot of time talking to people about pro-life philosophy and I started attending the campus pro-life group. Joey and I prayed at an abortion clinic, a first for me, and even though I was nearly sick to my stomach driving there, I immediately jumped into handing out literature to people walking inside.

I dream of one day being able to assist in research to help the pro-life cause, particularly among college students. Because of my experience over the last two years, I believe that college years are defining and vital to developing pro-life leaders for tomorrow.

I have changed dramatically. After attending one march in Washington a few years ago, I will be heading back this January to the real march for women's lives—the March for Life. I have never been happier or more at peace. Now, with Christ at the center of my heart, the light of His truth allows me to be a beacon for those floundering in the darkness.

Brittany Shankle has a degree in psychology and teaches biology at a Catholic high school.

E-mail this article from our web site www.CLMagazine.org.

Spiritual energizer

Be very quick to turn away from whatever leads or allures to lewd conduct, for this evil works without our knowing it and from small beginnings moves on to great difficulties. Such things are easier to avoid than to cure...

Do not associate with immodest persons, especially if they are also loose in speech, as is generally the case... Such corrupt souls and infected hearts can scarcely speak to anyone of their own or the opposite sex without causing them immodesty. Like basilisks they have poison in their eyes and on their breath.

—Introduction to the *Devout Life*
Saint Francis de Sales