

## “Why I Escort” Stories from our Volunteer Patient Escorts



I first learned about the opportunity to be a patient escort as a college student.

Arriving at my local Planned Parenthood the first time, we drove around to the back, surprised to see so many protestors so early in the morning.

We parked, and after steeling ourselves for the roar of the protestors' voices, we made our way to the locked entrance and waited for the receptionist to let us in.

Once inside Planned Parenthood, we could focus on the training ahead. The process is simple; various members of Planned Parenthood enter the room and thank us for coming to training. After signing forms that acknowledge our understanding that we could be injured by protestors, and providing emergency contact information should that happen, a volunteer steps forward and explains our job as escorts.

For many who view the protestors from the outside, it would be difficult not to respond to the outrageous and often offensive things they say. As a patient escort, it is essential never to engage with them. The volunteer assured us that the first day is always the hardest, due to the fact that we are new faces and will likely be targeted by protestors. As time goes on, they explained, it would be easier to ignore what they say.

Our first day as patient escorts began directly after training; the receptionist showed us where to find our vests that marked us as escorts and warned us of known

violent protestors that we should avoid. Walking back out to wait for patients, I realized that nothing can prepare you for the experience; no matter how much you are warned, it is so difficult not to respond to the vicious things the protestors will say about you.

**That first day was difficult, but rewarding. The protestors questioned my clothes, my hair. They called me a baby killer and a murderer. But, it was worth it to stand between a patient and the protestors, asking them about their day and assuring them that once they were inside, none of the protestors could say anything to them.**

A few times, a protester would come on to the property or would be too violent, and we would be told to come inside and the police would be called in, ensuring that we were safe from any harm. In those moments, I was reminded of the danger inherent in being a patient escort; even as the protestors' words became laughable and we joked about it later on, there was still the chance of someone coming on to the grounds and attacking us.

I was a patient escort for more than a year, and in that time I was reminded of the importance of access to reproductive health care and the right to choose. The violence inflicted on abortion clinics is ever present in your mind when acting as the only defense between patients and the protestors.

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Growing up in the 60s, I can remember when abortion was against the law. It was not uncommon for one of “those girls” to disappear for a semester. Of course, they were away having their babies. Those women were never the same. They came back to school the subject of rumors, gossip and derision.

I was always careful to the extreme. Unfortunately, being young and stupid, I was convinced that because my girlfriend was a biology major, she knew her cycle and it was safe. Of course, we were wrong. Having the child to be raised by us was not an option. I was too immature and my girlfriend was not stable enough to raise a child.

Abortion had just been legalized in New York, so the procedure was done in a hospital. There were no complications. That being said, I started to notice how people reacted to abortion. My then wife had a friend who had to go and get a D and C for medical reasons. She was not pregnant. A group of her friends subjected her to unending ridicule and smears, and she wasn't even pregnant! If anyone cared to look, they would have seen that the procedure was done at a Catholic hospital! The poor woman wound up quitting her job.

After that, I started donating to NARAL. I realized that this was an intensely personal situation. Who was I to tell a person what to do? I was living in Boston, and every day at lunch I would walk by an 80-year-old man with a sign on his neck, chanting in a monotone voice “Abortion is murder.” I witnessed the violence of

the protestors outside of the Brookline Planned Parenthood.

When I retired, I looked for volunteer opportunities and I found escorting patients at Planned Parenthood. I was truly unprepared for the vehemence, the lies, and in one case, the violence perpetrated by the protestors. I have been told that we sell baby parts even that we are racist.



**I have seen protestors physically intimidate women going into health centers. Some protestors will scream at anyone who enters Planned Parenthood including women clearly too old to have a child, FedEx and people just trying to deliver lunch.**

I firmly believe that while we are guaranteed the right to protest, no one has the right to force their beliefs on anyone else. If I can help just one woman get through an intensely personal situation without being harassed and ridiculed, then I have done my job. I volunteer with an amazing group of people. We remain steadfastly committed to protecting women's access to reproductive health.