

# CRISIS MAGAZINE

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## *Unplanned*—A Pro-Life Film That Doesn't “Play It Safe”

MONICA MIGLIORINO MILLER



Voiced by Amazon Polly

“**Beam me up Scotty.**” These are an abortionist’s words directing a nurse to turn on the suction machine, words Abby Johnson heard when she was unexpectedly summoned to the procedure room of the Bryan, Texas, Planned Parenthood clinic, of which she was the manager, to assist in an ultrasound-guided abortion. She was stunned to observe that the 13-week-old fetus pulled

away from the invading suction cannula. Johnson recounts the abortion in her 2010 book *Unplanned*: “The cannula was already being rotated by the doctor, and now I could see the tiny body violently twisting with it. For the briefest moment it looked as if the baby were being wrung like a dishcloth, twirled and squeezed. And then the little body crumpled and began disappearing into the cannula before my eyes. The last thing I saw was the tiny, perfectly formed backbone sucked into the tube, and then everything was gone.” [Unplanned](#), the film, opens with this riveting depiction of abortion violence. Based on Johnson’s book, the movie chronicles the former Planned Parenthood clinic director’s odyssey into the abortion practice and how her complicity in the killing of this unborn child drove her out of what Johnson herself calls the “death house” and into the arms of the pro-life movement.

Given that Johnson was instantly mentored by founders of 40 Days for Life and quickly catapulted into the role of a pro-life spokesman, perhaps it was only a matter of time before Christian filmmakers would mount her story onto the big screen. Directed by Cary Solomon and Chuck Konzelman (both known for *God’s Not Dead*) it is produced by the same Christian-oriented film company, PureFlix. Ashley Bratcher turns in a very compelling and believable performance as Johnson in a role demanding a wide range of emotion—not the least of which is Johnson’s immediate reaction to the abortion she just witnessed as she isolates herself in a bathroom overcome with heart-wrenching grief which she must keep hidden from her fellow abortion clinic workers.

*Unplanned* starts with the college-age Johnson who, during a volunteer fair on the campus of Texas A & M, stops by a Planned Parenthood display table and is recruited as a clinic volunteer escort. She is lured into the abortion practice believing that Planned Parenthood isn’t simply about abortion, but offers women a wide range of services to which they might not otherwise have access or be able

to afford. The clinic director, Cheryl, who is hard-nosed and intimidating, in contrast to the well-meaning, naïve, and ultimately confused Johnson, soon promotes the newcomer to a real job as clinic counselor. And when Cheryl is herself rising up the Planned Parenthood corporate ladder and moving to PP headquarters in Houston, she encourages Johnson to apply for her position. Oddly, Johnson, who considers herself a Christian, believes that if God doesn't want her to have the promotion she won't get it. As it turns out, she gets the job and celebrates that God blessed her career move! Eventually Johnson becomes seriously disillusioned with the actual goals of Planned Parenthood. The awakening begins when she attends a corporate meeting of clinic directors in Houston, officiated by her former career-driven boss Cheryl. It was becoming clear that the moneymaking "service" provided by Planned Parenthood was abortion; Johnson learned that Planned Parenthood was seeking to increase the number of abortions, including the late-term abortions to which she had always been opposed.

At the meeting, she objects to the new corporate plan prioritizing abortion, only to be harshly admonished by Cheryl for not getting with the program. She tells a nearly cowering Johnson: "We are an abortion provider!" Finally, when Johnson sees the actual killing of an unborn child in that ultrasound-guided abortion, she convicts herself of having facilitated the deaths of 22,000 unborn children and makes a decision to leave Planned Parenthood forever. That very day Johnson appears on the doorstep of the nearby offices of the Coalition for Life where she is warmly welcomed by its director, Shawn Carney, and other staff who, ironically,

faithfully protest outside the very fence of the Planned Parenthood she just escaped. Now Johnson joins them—the very people she once opposed—and pleads for the unborn. The Johnson’s pro-life cause is from personal sadness, of the abortion particular, Parenthood. her resignation go home to live instantly



lives of the benefit of conversion to the that she knows experience the corruption, and lies industry and, in Planned The fact that upon Johnson didn’t just a quiet life, but aligned herself with

the pro-life cause, made her a serious threat to the abortion giant.

*Unplanned* is a valuable movie if for no other reason than that it does something no other pro-life-related feature film has done, including *Gosnell*. *Unplanned* doesn’t hide or sanitize the violence of abortion as did the *Gosnell* movie—to its artistic detriment—to avoid the dreaded “R” rating. This is not to say that no other pro-life movie has ever exposed the violence of abortion. In the 1980s and early 1990s, several very effective hard-hitting pro-life educational videos featured abortion and its victims, such as *Assignment: Life*, *Eclipse of Reason*, *Hard Truth*, and, of course, *The Silent Scream*. The fact that now the reality of abortion itself is revealed in a feature-length movie with the goal of wide distribution makes *UnPlanned* unprecedented.

Some in the pro-life movement are very dismayed that the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) slapped *Unplanned* with the “R” rating,

convinced that the agency was motivated by bias against its message, and that the rating was politically designed to keep audiences from patronizing the film, daunting even a Christian audience that typically avoids such movies, with Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* a notable exception. Those who denounce the "R" rating fail to see that such a rating gives credibility to a film about abortion. After all, films are an innately visual medium. How do you make a movie about a place where people are killed without showing what actually goes on inside an abortion center? Thus, from its opening scene *Unplanned* is a movie with dead bodies and lots of blood.

The movie's visual content is at least borderline between a "PG-13" and "R" rating. And yes, since the movie is about the controversial subject of abortion, the scales were undoubtedly tipped toward audience restriction. This is not to say that the film is dominated by bloody, disturbing images. It is not. But to the credit of its producers *Unplanned* does not succumb to cinematic contrivances to avoid the gravity of its subject matter in order to garner a milder rating. Should anyone make a film of my book [\*Abandoned—The Untold Story of the Abortion Wars\*](#) and craft it to escape an "R" rating they would have failed to be faithful to the gravity of the book's content.

*Unplanned* does some things exceptionally well. Oddly, the disturbing opening scene of the suction abortion isn't necessarily the most shocking, nor the most poignant. The film focuses on how Johnson aborted her own two children. While engaged to a man she would marry and then divorce, she discovers that she is pregnant, and while she is ambivalent about whether to abort the baby, her fiancé is not. He tells her, "We'll take care of it," which leads her to the first abortion. Then when divorced, Johnson finds she is pregnant again with her ex-husband's baby. Wishing to sever all ties with this immature, frivolous man, she obtains an RU-486 abortion at the very Planned Parenthood where she volunteers as an

escort. Having been told that such an abortion would simply entail a “gentle emptying of the uterus,” she discovers that her chemical abortion is anything but. As the cramping starts, Johnson writhes in pain, vomits, and runs to the bathroom where film viewers have a front-row seat to Johnson’s chemical abortion ordeal that ends in a bathroom splattered with blood. At the scene’s end, the room is filmed from above with Johnson viewed from afar, lying on the floor in her blood, pathetically curled in fetal position—eerily matching the very fetal position of the unborn baby she helped to abort. A well thought-out cinematic statement takes place here: she and her victim have become one.

*Unplanned* is a well-done, professionally rendered faith-based movie with a strong script and strong performances. It deserves to be seen and promoted.

However, it did succumb to some of the usual pitfalls of this film genre and its directors made some choices that limit the film’s cinematic artistic impact.

*Unplanned*, consistent with Johnson’s book, wants to make a statement about positive versus negative pro-life activism. And there’s nothing wrong with that. But the point is made through shallow, artificial contrivance. The day Johnson arrives to volunteer as a clinic escort, a crowd of pro-life demonstrators is assembled outside the fence separating them from the clinic property. The crude, angry, and judgmental pro-lifers are juxtaposed with those who are peaceful, caring, and compassionate. The pro-lifer representing the wrong kind of activism—calling women “murderers”—is fat, old, and ugly. The “good” pro-lifers are all young, good-looking, and slender. In order to make a quick point, both come off as little more than caricatures. The approved pro-lifers are well-mannered and well-spoken with nary a hair out of place. They always do the right thing, say the right thing, and are never weary, frustrated, or, God forbid, angry. Oddly, Johnson’s abortion clinic colleagues are portrayed with more realism and are more believable as flesh-and-blood persons than the way Coalition for Life members are depicted in the film.

The drama is driven forward by narration supplied by Johnson's character, an unnecessary artifice which caused the movie to initially almost take on the quality of a video tutorial on abortion, rather than a feature film on the subject.

Thankfully, this narrative style subsided as the cinematic force of the film took over.

This movie reviewer is a pro-life leader who has a vested interest in the success of any movie that deals with the injustice of abortion. A good film such as this that deals with injustice should be seen by as wide an audience as possible. However, *Unplanned*, like nearly all faith-based movies, is directed to the audience that will most likely support it and go see it—namely those already against abortion.

Certainly the “R” rating should signal that this movie is a serious treatment of the subject of abortion; nonetheless, *Unplanned* did not completely avoid the overt preachiness of films made by Christians, most evident in the movie's closing climactic scenes dominated by inspirational soft-rock Christian vocals driving home the point of repentance, God's love, and God's forgiveness.

All of this is very edifying to the initiated but potentially off-putting to those who otherwise may be willing to take a leap and expose themselves to a movie that presents abortion negatively. Christian filmmakers try to do too much. They can't just make a movie against abortion, but need to overtly express the Christian foundation upon which the anti-abortion position rests. And it may very well be that the producers and directors believe that they must approach their subject this way because the audience-base to which the movie is primarily directed, namely a pro-life Christian audience, expects such a film to do so and will otherwise leave theaters disappointed and perhaps even complain that the movie wasn't Christian.

In a film such as this, those Christian aspects need to be organically and, dare I say, subtly woven into the fabric of the film's story and not artificially laid over

the story with excessive, needless statements and, quite frankly, sappy Christian music which present Christian themes in a contrived and trite faith-based package. We know Abby Johnson is repentant and that this film is about redemption. Filmmakers just need to *show us*—not tell us.

While *Unplanned* may be accused of these drawbacks, it is, when all is said and done, a bold piece of filmmaking. It will strengthen the resolve of those already committed to ending abortion and bring those uncertain about their position to embrace the pro-life cause should they go see it. On the other hand, we can expect hardcore “pro-choice” activists to hate this movie, ignore it, or try to dismiss it because *Unplanned* dared to shine a light on the sordid violence of abortion.