

In Memoriam: Nellie Jane Gray (1924–2012) Fr. Paul Sullins

Nellie Gray was an unlikely activist. Highly patriotic, she volunteered for the Women's Air Corps in World War II. A government bureaucrat for years before becoming a government lawyer, and notably self-effacing, she was, by her own description, somewhat shy. It was therefore a testament to the irony and even humor of God's ways—an irony she well appreciated—that this Catholic convert from West Texas ended up founding and leading the largest recurring protest event in the history of the United States.

The facts of Nellie's life can be briefly recounted, here as reported by the *New York Times* two days after her death, which occurred on August 13, 2012:

Nellie Gray was born in Big Spring, Tex., on June 24, 1924. Her father was an auto mechanic, and [she once described that] her childhood had been “economically debilitated.” After high school, she worked as a secretary for a year to raise money for college, then enrolled at Texas State College for Women in 1941. After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor that year, she joined the Women's Army Corps. She finished college after the war under the G.I. Bill, earning a bachelor's degree in business administration and a master's in economics. She received a law degree in 1959 from Georgetown University, which she attended at night. . . . Gray, a lawyer in the Labor Department, was galvanized by *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that established a woman's right to abortion. She retired from her legal career and devoted the rest of her life to overturning that decision.

Nellie herself said that she didn't pay much attention to *Roe v. Wade* at first, as she didn't think it would be taken seriously, and never planned to start the March for Life; but she was asked to help with the first one and “one thing led to another.” Before long she had quit her day job to work full-time for the pro-life cause, and the March grew from 20,000 in 1974 to, in 2013, an estimated half-million marchers. By her account, it was mostly an experience of grace, being chosen rather than choosing to have a leading role in the pro-life movement.

Grace it was, but also grit. The one quality that was immediately apparent about Nellie to anyone who ever met her, was her unreserved determination and commitment to the protection of unborn human life. She often said simply, “No exceptions! No compromise!” She described the rise of legalized abortion as a “juggernaut of evil” invading this good land, and, like the earlier evil of Hitler’s Nazis, victory over it would come only by total effort on the part of the advocates of life. The difficulties perennially facing the March for Life—frigid weather, sometimes fractious participants, the disregard of politicians and the media—which may reasonably have discouraged lesser souls, only strengthened Nellie’s resolve.

In June 2011, I had the privilege to be present as the Society of Catholic Social Scientists presented Nellie Gray, a longtime member, its Frederic Ozanam Award for Catholic Social Action. Following the presentation, she spoke in response to the idea of expedient compromise, as in laws that might provisionally limit, for example through parental notification, the number of abortions while not eliminating them altogether. She would hear nothing of it—literally. Her position was not the result of some process of moral reasoning about proportionate means and ends or material cooperation; it was a direct apprehension of, a visible revulsion against, the evil involved. She was gracious to the other side, but unbending. It was, to her, simply unthinkable that reasonable people, impressed by God’s love, could ever tolerate the taking of unborn life by violence.

Perhaps (without prejudice to the strategy question) the greatest tribute we can give to the life of Nellie Gray is to celebrate with gratitude the gift of moral acuity that she brought into our midst. The intractable and diffuse cultural forces of modernity—the banality of evil, morally corrosive relativism, legal nominalism, sexual license, compulsive consumerism—that crystallized a generation ago in the policy of discarding unwanted unborn life did not figure on a person like Nellie Gray, who simply refused to accept any part of it. Abortion continually shocked her. I’m sure her prayer for her memory was, and is, that it will never cease to shock us. May she rest in peace.