“There’s a Lot of Love Out There”

By Dave Andrusko

It was within an hour after I posted a web column that casually mentioned the appearance of Terri Schindler-Schiavo’s family at NRLC’s convention that I received the first of what proved to be many inquiries asking “how did pro-lifers respond?”

The answer was easy. Not since Mother Teresa graced our 1983 convention had pro-lifers embraced someone as passionately as they did Bob and Mary Schindler, Terri’s parents, and Suzanne Vitadamo and Bobby Schindler, her siblings.

Bobby and Suzanne spoke at the jam-packed June 18 general session. Greeted with thunderous ovations, they were interrupted with applause from attendees who repeatedly rose from their seats. If you had the Kleenex concession, you’d have made enough to give a generous donation to the Terri Schindler-Schiavo Foundation.

As I snapped photos and listened to Suzanne talk about the Terri none of us knew—the private Terri—and Bobby talk about the victim of a hideous death by dehydration—the public Terri—I would glance at the crowd. Every eye was riveted to the podium, except when something particularly poignant was said that hit a still very raw nerve. Then, down went the heads and out came the tissues.

Even Mr. Schindler, a tower of strength if ever there was one, occasionally rubbed his forehead before dabbing at his eyes. Mrs. Schindler, who wears her emotions on her sleeve, listened intently as Suzanne recalled childhood memories of her big sister, whom she obviously adored, and Bobby passionately evoked images of a death culture into whose insatiable maw his sister’s life was sacrificed.

I do not know the Schindler family the way other members of National Right to Life do. During the time NRLC helped the Schindlers, several staffers came to be good friends, especially with Bobby, a math and science teacher from Tampa Catholic High School.

During the last few months before Terri’s life was cruelly taken from her, Bobby came to lobby Congress, to implore members to look beyond the oceans of misinformation and distortion to see the real Terri. I remember vividly that brief moment when it seemed as if Terri might be saved.

At the insistence of her estranged husband, Terri’s feeding tube had been removed (for the third time!) March 18. Led by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a law was quickly drafted to give Terri’s parents a chance to vindicate Terri’s rights under the federal Constitution.

Early on Monday, March 21, by a vote of 203–58, the House approved a federal “Terri’s Bill,” just after the Senate had approved the measure by unanimous consent. Contrary to the mythology which has since sprung up, nearly half the House Democrats who had flown back to the Capitol from their Easter break cast votes for life. President Bush immediately signed the measure into law.

A lovely picture later appeared in NRL News showing a smiling Bobby Schindler surrounded by five NRLC staffers. Their happy expressions (as the caption aptly put it) “he successful passage of the federal ‘Terri’s Law,’ at a time before federal judges rendered its seeming promise empty ...

Within hours of that happy scene, there began what became a blur of one heartless judicial decision after another. At the same time Terri was slowly dying a hideous death, the law intended to save Terri’s life was dying a death by a thousand cuts, as one court after another ignored the plain meaning and intent of the federal law. As her life ebbed away, Terri again demonstrated her indomitable willpower. She escaped death’s clutches for 13 days until the morning of March 31. To borrow from a friend of mine, it was as if civilization took a holiday.

I walked into the lobby minutes after the Schindlers arrived at the NRL Convention. Walking up to them, I heard a Minnesota officeholder say to Mrs. Schindler, “You must be exhausted.” Mary Schindler replied with a wry smile, “We’re too busy to be exhausted.”

That non-stop pace did not slacken during the entire convention. It began the day before the convention officially began when the coroner’s report came out June 15.

The conclusions reached were much more measured than anyone reading the popular press would conclude. Most accounts were smugly saturated with an almost palpable “I-told-you-so” attitude.

The media accounts fixated on several conclusions announced by Dr. Jon Thogmartin, the chief medical examiner for Pinellas and Pasco counties, and Dr. Stephen Nelson, the consulting neuropathologist. It was asserted as fact that the report vindicated both the husband and the conclusion that Terri was in a PVS. Not so.

All the carefully measured conclusions said was that the condition of Terri’s brain was “consistent” with PVS. Nothing more could be said, as the physicians pointed out, because PVS is a clinical diagnosis that cannot be confirmed by an autopsy. In other words there are other possible explanations.

During the furious efforts to save Terri, we wrote in “Today’s News & Views” about the 10-hour examination conducted by Dr. William Hammesfahr. Based on his careful evaluation, his opinion of Terri’s capacities was quite optimistic.

He issued a statement a couple of days after the autopsy report, including this assessment:

“The autopsy results confirmed my opinion and Dr. Maxfield’s opinion, that the frontal areas of the brain, the areas that deal with awareness and cognition, were relatively intact. To use Dr. Nelson’s words, ‘relatively preserved.’ In fact, the relay areas from the frontal and front temporal regions of the brain, to the spinal cord and the brain stem, by way of the basal ganglia, were preserved, thus the evident responses which she was...”

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able to express to her family and to
the clinicians seeing her or viewing
her videotape.”

So, too, was much made of the
conclusion that Terri had been blind.
So we starve and dehydrate blind
people to death?

This still begged the question: her
family is adamant that as evidenced
by her responses, Terri recognized
her when Mary Schindler came into
the room. (And, you might ask, what
effect might 13 days without food and
water have had on her condition?)

The press conference the family
held to respond was a model of controlled
fury. Suzanne explained to reporters
point by point what the report didn’t
say.

It didn’t say that Terri was brain
dead, because she wasn’t. Terri was
profoundly brain injured but
otherwise in amazingly good
condition. It didn’t say she was
terminal, because she might well
have lived another decade had her
feeding tube not been removed. As
Dr. Thogmartin said, Terri died of
dehydration.

The report also essentially ruled out
bulimia or a heart attack as the cause
for her condition, speculation that had
been endemic. The Schindlers
pointed out that the basis on which
her husband, Michael Schiavo, won
an over $1 million medical negligence
suit was the allegation that the doctors
who had supervised Terri’s infertility
treatment had “failed to pick up the
potassium imbalance,” as Joan Didion
wrote in the New York Times Review
of Books.

“The potassium deficiency, it was
widely suggested, had been caused by
what was sometimes described as
‘bulimia’ and sometimes, more
generally, as an ‘eating disorder,’”
Didion wrote. But “the suggestion (no
diagnosis exists) of an ‘eating
disorder’ appears to have been
entirely assumptive, based on no
evidence beyond the unexceptional
facts that she had some years before
gained weight, gone on a diet, and lost
the weight.”

At the press conference, the
Schindlers said that since bulimia had
been effectively ruled out, “the
underlying basis of the malpractice
case appears to now be disproved.
Our family would encourage Michael
Schiavo to do the right thing and
return the funds that were paid by
the doctors who were sued for Terri’s
collapse. In addition to returning the
funds to the doctors who were sued,
we would also ask Michael to bring
closure to Terri’s death for our family
by allowing us to give her a proper
Christian burial as required by our
faith. To this day, we have no idea
where Terri’s ashes are. That is
particularly hard on our mother.”

Within a couple of days, they would
get answers that only made things
worse. While they did learn where
Terri’s remains were buried, Michael
Schiavo had not notified the
Schindlers beforehand. To their
anger and chagrin, he subscribed on
her grave marker, “I kept my
promise.” More salt was poured on
the wound when Schiavo listed
February 25, 1990—the day Terri
collapsed—as the date Terri
“Departed this Earth.”

Three days later, following Bobby
and Suzanne’s convention speeches,
a talented volunteer, Bill Molitor,
snapped a photo of the entire family
(plus disability rights activist and
convention speaker Mark Pickup) for
NRL News. I took that opportunity
to talk with the Schindlers.

I asked them what many people had
asked me: how in the world were they
able to hold it together? “Duct tape,”
Mr. Schindler said, tongue in cheek.

For her part Suzanne spoke of her
husband, whom she described as her
“rock.” In his Saturday morning
speech to the convention Bobby made
it clear that friends (one in particular)
were instrumental in helping him
battle through a temporary but serious
loss of faith.

Yet, what is clear to the outsider is
that what made it possible for them
to survive an ordeal straight out of
Franz Kafka was that they had each
other.

I cautiously asked about reporters
and, unsurprisingly, the family railed
against the media. Mr. Schindler
emphasized how reporters more often
editorialized than reported the facts
of Terri’s case, which were typically
delivered in a “one-sided manner”
and often inaccurately.

Yet they also pointed out how
reporters outside the hospice in
Pinellas Park, Florida, where Terri
lived would “give us our space.”

Others who were there told me how
some reporters were so distraught by
what they saw that they asked their
news outlets to take them off the story.

And some cable correspondents
obviously came to identify with Terri
and her family.

As we left the room, Mr. Schindler
said, “I’m ready to fight.” To that end
the Terri Schindler-Schiavo
Foundation is being reorganized. Mr.
Schiindler said they will be seeking to
recruit volunteer lawyers and doctors
in all 50 states to be on standby in
situations, like Terri’s, where family
members disagree about treatment
decisions.

Bobby said they also look forward
to educating the wider public and to
helping promote legislation to protect
medically vulnerable patients “so this
won’t happen again.”

The ordeal had clearly sharpened
the Schindlers’ own sensitivities to the
plight of similarly situated families.
Mr. Schindler said that many, many
people with injuries and disabilities
as severe as Terri’s had congregated
outside the hospice. It was “like
Lourdes,” he said.

As if thinking out loud, he said, “I
had been somewhat oblivious to their
pain.” Eyes now wide open, Mr.
Schiindler could see how the
caretakers looked after their charges
“with a smile.”

After all that they had been through,
he had come to a conclusion: “There’s
a lot of love out there.”