

“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

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

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



Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL) hosted NRLC 2005. Left to right: MCCL President Leo LaLonde; MCCL Executive Director Scott Fischbach; NRLC Associate Executive Director Darla St. Martin; and Banquet speaker Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Ks.)
Photo Credit: Bill Molitor

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

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

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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 inscribed 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



Pro-lifers from around the world lifted up the family of Terri Schindler-Schiavo (from left to right): sister Suzanne Vitadamo; parents Mary and Bob Schindler; Suzanne's daughter, Alexandra Carr; and brother Bobby Schindler.

Photo Credit: Bill Molitor

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. Schindler 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. Schindler 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.”