

# Mission Possible Lives On

By Dave Andrusko

“For many National Right to Life Committee leaders, the Minnesota convention will be a homecoming.”

[Minneapolis] *Star Tribune*, June 15.

By any measure, NRLC’s 2005 convention was an unqualified success. The four general sessions and Prayer Breakfast drew large (and emotional) turnouts, the workshops covered every pro-life topic from abortifacients to the United Nations, and even the media coverage of the local abortion-loving newspaper was surprisingly even-handed.

Minnesota’s role as host of the convention spotlighted what the *Star Tribune* described as ‘the state’s prominence in the national abortion debate.’ The reporter noted that a number of NRLC staff came to NRLC from the pro-life Movement in Minnesota, including Executive Director Dr. David N. O’Steen and Associate Executive Director Darla St. Martin.

What the reporter didn’t mention (probably because she didn’t know) was that Dr. O’Steen and Mrs. St. Martin held comparable positions with Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life (MCCL) before they came to Washington, D.C. During their tenure at MCCL, they launched a daring initiative whose significance only a small number of veterans remember.

“Mission Possible” was their brain child, and it is no exaggeration to say that this outreach project changed the face of the Pro-Life Movement. Mission Possible, which obviously drew its inspiration from the wildly popular television program, *Mission Impossible*, took flight in 1975.

The need for what it undertook is as obvious in retrospect as it was unprecedented at the time it was undertaken: shore up the pro-life presence in states, especially in the Southeast, many of whom were badly underfunded and thoroughly outgunned by the pro-abortionists.

At the time much of the Movement’s emphasis was on passage of a Human Life Amendment (HLA). Such an amendment faced staggering difficulties.

Just for starters, an HLA would need to be passed by 2/3rds of the Senate. Were that hurdle to be overcome, it would require ratification by 3/4rds of the state legislatures.

In both cases, nationwide strength was required. Local pro-life organizations across the country needed to be able to help elect pro-life Senators and to persuade state legislators to ratify any HLA sent out to the states. Yet the Movement’s strength was confined largely to the Midwest.

What was the answer? To build up state-wide groups that, in a number of cases, were either non-existent or only skeletal organizations. It sounds simple, but executing the plan demanded incredible patience, planning, and endurance.

The Pro-Life Movement has never had more than a fraction of the financial resources available to abortion advocates. To “spread the wealth” meant dipping into a pot that was not very deep to begin with. Thus, from the very beginning, one primary emphasis was to teach pro-lifers to raise their own funds.

While Mission Possible had limited funds, it did possess a wealth of experience that MCCL shared with local leaders. Pro-lifers in eight selected Southeastern states learned the basics, the nuts and bolts organizational techniques that are essential to building a thriving organization.

At educational training sessions, they learned the ABCs of chapter development. They learned how to educate, especially by going into the schools and by having booths at county and state fairs.

They learned the critical importance of a functioning state office, which could help local chapters thrive by providing expertise and ways to raise funds. They learned how to create their own newsletters and to have an impact on local newspapers.

And they learned the fundamentals of fundraising without which organizations could not thrive.

As an article in a 1975 edition of MCCL’s newsletter put it, “Many states assisted by Mission Possible didn’t even have an organized right-to-life group until the project brought

the financial aid and technical assistance they need to get started.” But the article also pointed out that Mission Possible didn’t always need to start from scratch: sometimes they “helped already active groups.”

After the fact, it’s easy to see that this outreach was absolutely critical. Back then, from a pro-life perspective, the Southeast was essentially barren.

Nowadays there are thriving groups in a number of states who are able to pass pro-life legislation.

In a sense Mission Possible never stopped. MCCL and other established pro-life organizations continue to offer expertise to any state group that asks for their help. On the national level, NRLC’s State Organizational Development Department is a major source of guidance for the Movement, whether the topic is grassroots organizing, chapter development, fundraising, or passing legislation.

