

GROWTH THROUGH OPPOSITION

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JOHN BRUCHALSKI

BY PATTY WHELPLEY, DMC VOLUNTEER

We know that you are the founder of Tepeyac Family Center and Chairman of Divine Mercy Care, but we'd love to hear about your life before your career. What could you tell us about your childhood?

Dr. Bruchalski: I grew up in a great Catholic family in Northern New Jersey, the oldest of three boys. My mom stayed at home and raised us while dad worked three jobs teaching at a Salesian High School, running their alumni office and working as security guard in the evenings. The town was a blue collar town with a Ford car plant and a brake shoe factory dominating the economy.

My grammar school was Catholic and I went to the same high school where Dad taught.

Time outside of school was spent playing baseball, fishing in the local streams and ponds, and building military models.

My parents dedicated me to our Blessed Mother at a very young age. We said a decade of the rosary daily for the conversion of Russia, we asked for the intercession of many saints, and I was an altar boy until the eighth grade. On family trips in August, after Dad finished school and taught summer school, we usually went to New England, upper New York state, or Canada. Shrines and historical points of interest were part of the travel plans.

Where did you go to college and medical school?

Dr. Bruchalski: In my extended family, on both my mom and dad's sides, I had about 60 cousins. The majority of us went to work after high school. I was interested in education, and when it came time for college, dad thought a southern, Jesuit school would be conservative and morally Thomistic. I attended Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, from 1978 to 1982 where I majored in biology and history.

Medical school was a dream for me ever since I was ten years old and was influenced by my older cousin who also had an interest in medicine. I did well in biology, chemistry and calculus in high school, so I continued to pursue this in college while pitching for the baseball team. However, even with a very good GPA I was not accepted to medical school the first years out. Disappointed, my dad wrote me this beautiful letter about how "rests in a piece of music" are necessary for the perfection and completion of the symphony or concerto. He helped me understand that good things come to those who wait, and even though I did not understand even dimly, God's timing is always perfect. I had some more growing and pruning to do.

The next year, 1983, I was accepted to the University of

South Alabama College of Medicine in Mobile, Alabama. During the four years there, I weekend-managed a tennis center, bartended, worked as an orderly in a busy, inner city ER, and ghost-wrote for a world renowned allergist, Dr. Joseph Miller. He taught me the value of independent observational skills, thinking critically and caring first and foremost for the patient. From a faith perspective, I was beginning to drift from the daily habits of the spiritual life I had learned at home. My confusion and ambivalence about how my faith fit into my daily life began.

How did you decide to become an OB/GYN?

Dr. Bruchalski: Because there were no physicians in my family, my family doctor was my role model: simple, straight-forward and busy helping people get well. At medical school I quickly found out that I had a knack for caring for women, treating PMS and performing surgery. My primary professor, who happened to be an abortionist, told me that gynecology was a lucrative and good profession in medicine. I was sold. I told him of my faith background, and he said that this would simply be a plus for me, since many things about our Church were changing.

After doing well on the OB/GYN segment of my initial boards, I wanted to complete a residency in OB/GYN. I applied to several programs on the East Coast and I was accepted to the Eastern Virginia School of Medicine: the home of the Jones Institute of Reproductive Medicine in Norfolk, Virginia, for the summer of 1987. What an opportunity to learn at a mecca for reproductive technology. Not only was it the home of the first test tube baby in the United States in the early 1980s, but it was also a home for CONRAD—Contraceptive Research and Development, and an innovative regional referral center where residents received an excellent and extensive hands-on training in all the aspects of caring for women. It was here that many things began to change for me.

Your conversion story has been referred to in many of your speeches and articles. What really happened?

Dr. Bruchalski: Conversion is a strong word, and I believe that for me it is still happening as I recognize the relationship I have with God and deepen my trust in His mercy.

Growing up in a great Catholic family, I was familiar with daily prayer in the morning, at night and before meals. At the age of 12, I remember shooting hoops in our driveway one January evening when my dad arrived home from work. Even before he exited his VW Bug he told me, "Johnny it's Black Monday. The Supreme Court legalized abortion, the killing of



Dr. John Bruchalski, Founder of the Tepeyac Family Center and Chairman of Divine Mercy Care.

innocent babies. We will be punished.”

But after a Catholic high school education that emphasized only social justice, and a college education that emphasized the same along with an ethics department that was situational and relative, I simply bought the entire argument that humans would be better off economically and socially by controlling their fertility through chemicals, barriers, plastics and surgery.

It was sometime during this period in my life, from 14 through 27, that I became lukewarm about my faith. I was afraid of what others would say, and felt that the Church had lost touch with regular people and was wrong on the point of women’s issues and reproductive freedom.

During my medical education I placed IUD’s, provided contraceptives, learned sterilization and abortion procedures, and moved toward a more secular view of “helping others.” During my residency, the same program simply continued but on a larger scale. We worked with Planned Parenthood at public health clinics. We helped the Jones Institute harvest eggs and freeze embryos. We even learned all the latest in abortion technology. And in that sloop, Christ and His Mother came a-callin’.

The summer before my residency started, a friend of mine took me to Mexico City to help out a priest-friend. While there, we visited the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Her image above the main altar kept us in a trance for three days. My friend and I returned daily to the ark shaped church and stood silently before the image, knelt and sat quietly or attended Mass. I was touched by the young men, off from work, shirtless but respectful, coming to the Basilica to pray and venerate the Mother of God. One of those days in the church, I heard a female voice very distinctly, but gently and firmly say to me, “Why are you hurting me?” Looking around and seeing no English-speaking people I thought the heat was getting to me. I tried to rationally explain it. That tape played in my head and heart weekly for the next two years.

How did you act on your calling?

Dr. Bruchalski: At Eastern Virginia, I became involved with a pregnancy center that cared for women in crisis pregnancies. It was funded mainly by a tremendously active Assembly of God Church. I began to attend church services. My eyes were opened to an entirely new way of approaching patients, an entirely new way of praying and trusting in the Holy Spirit, and an entirely new way of seeing daily coincidences as “God incidences.”

In the midst of this evangelical experience, my mom went with me on a pilgrimage to Medjugore, Yugoslavia, where the Mother of God was supposedly appearing to several young people for many years and was giving them messages to bring people back to Christ. Their messages all focused on the Eucharist, penance, fasting, prayer with the heart, and almsgiving. I didn’t tell my friends at Church; to them this was “Satanic.” I didn’t tell my friends at the Medical Center; to them this was “foolish.”

While there, half believing in this evolving story, I asked three questions: 1. Would I be married and if so, to whom?, 2. Could I care for my parents?, and 3. Would I practice medicine in a way that would maximize my faith? Not only were all three questions answered in about six months, but I received a “word of knowledge” that focused on my being called to medicine by the Father. From that moment, an adventure began that is still continuing to this day. The Mother of God, clearly and constantly and confidently told me to “Do whatever He tells you.” I am still trying to do this today, and help others to do the same.

How did you resolve your moral conflict with working as a secular OB/GYN?

Dr. Bruchalski: Upon returning to Norfolk, I slowly knew what I had to do. Over eighteen months, I stopped treating women as

objects to be manipulated and stopped practicing medicine as a technician. Abortions, egg retrievals, sterilizations and eventually providing contraception were all left behind. The Lord put me in contact with a couple who taught me Natural Family Planning. He brought me into contact with the greats of the NFP movement in John Kippley, Mercedes Wilson, Hanna Klaus and Dr.

Tom Hilgers. It all began to make sense. The puzzle pieces were being shuffled. I began to find out that their approach to fertility awareness had a valid, scientific background.

Seeing the underserved was a duty we all have as Christians, and time spent in Appalachia and rural Alabama cemented these faces of Christ into my soul. Eventually, I came to understand Scripture through the eyes of Scott Hahn. The Gospel of John chapter 6 came alive and I reverted to the Catholic faith. This was obviously the beginning of a journey that is continuing to this very day.

How did the Tepeyac Family Center start?

Dr. Bruchalski: After being affected by my encounter with the crucified Lord, I felt I had to try to undo the wasted time and the devastation I was propagating by pouring chemicals into women’s bodies and using surgical skills to mutilate organs and unborn children. It was during this time that two of the young women whom I had provided with condoms and pills contracted the HIV virus and passed away. My life was coming full circle.

I began to debate for the crisis pregnancy center in Virginia Beach and the Virginia Society of Human Life, and gave guest presentations at Regent University. At a debate at William and Mary where I did very poorly, a young man from the back caught my attention afterwards. Though I thought he was going to mock me as did many during the debate, he explained that his dad, Bill Hogan, MD, worked at a practice in Silver Spring, Maryland, that needed a partner—a prolife partner. Bill Junior, that contact, became a friend. He helped me with formation in specifically how to work in the world and how the talents given to us by the Holy Spirit affect change: transforma-

DMC’s mission is to restore the hope in the only answer for our anxiety, our cynicism, our pessimism, our resignation, which is the divine mercy of the Father. We are prodigal and DMC is a vehicle to get us back to the house of the Father, all of us.

tional change. I was hooked and took their offer.

Now, it wasn't ideal, but it was a start. The practice was prolife, but the economic realities of decreasing reimbursements and medical malpractice kept them from seeing the poor. The partners both prescribed contraceptives or barriers and/or provided sterilization services. There had to be something more. I thank God for them giving me a start, but God wanted abundance for me and that was not it. So just after passing my Boards in Chicago, and my second anniversary with the group, I went out on my own. I had been contemplating this move for quite some time, but did not have the guts to, as Nike says, "Just Do It." I could have done it better, but by January 1, 1994, I was without a job and trying to start the Tepeyac Family Center.

The philanthropist who promised \$50,000 to start the practice backed out, and friends began to feed my family and me. At that point, mom and dad were also living with us in Northern Virginia because Northern New Jersey became too expensive for a Catholic school teacher. Always with perfect timing, something had to give and it was in the form of my friend Bob Laird.

He rolled over a \$5,000 IRA, and helped convince several of his priest friends to do the same. Against their investment coupled to several families that did the same, through hand written promissory notes, I raised \$60,000 to be paid with better interest than the banks within three years.

By February 10, my wife Carolyn and I opened the Tepeyac Family Center in our basement with our home phone as the office number. Tepeyac is the hill outside of Mexico City where the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared to native Juan Diego. It was included in the name to constantly remind me why I am doing this. Being frail, and unfaithful, I needed the encouragement. My chairman of OB/GYN at Fair Oaks Hospital where I applied for privileges told me to join him when I failed because he couldn't believe that a faith-filled, non-contracepting practice could survive. John Paul, our first child, was our entertainment, and slowly through word of mouth people came to our practice.

Drs. Joe Evers and Bill McCarthy provided a day of office space each week for a nominal rent, and we began to see patients. Each month we made enough to pay our bills by pennies. By the end of the first year, the bank notes to my friends and their friends were all paid off. I did not need budgets; I needed trust in His mercy in the face of adversity from the world around me.

What would you say are the foundational principles of Tepeyac Family Center? Have they changed with its growth and success?

Dr. Bruchalski: The foundational principles of the Tepeyac Family Center were and still are: practice excellent medicine; see all patients in your daily practice—especially those in crisis pregnancies—as the face of Christ, and follow the teaching of the Catholic Church in regards to biomedical ethics.

What was your biggest challenge in starting Tepeyac?

Dr. Bruchalski: We have been here in Fairfax since 1994, so that makes this our fourteenth year. Dr. Anderson joined us ten years ago and Dr. Fisk joined us five years ago. Drs. Periera, Cvetkovitch and Brown all joined this past year.

God's timing is always perfect. I am impetuous. Wanting to walk with Him, and not in front or in back has been a weak area of mine. The idea of a Catholic health center was foremost on my mind even though I was working alone during those early years. I wanted to run before I could walk, or even crawl. God helped me trust in His timing with testicular cancer in 1996, when during my chemotherapy weeks, another practice that was pro-choice filled in for me. Through their encounter with our patients, several of their providers began the slow journey of stopping their abortion services. A broken neck in 2000, and pancreatitis in 2005 had similar effects. Growth through opposition is the premise of the book of Acts and seems to be the premise of any authentic spiritual growth.

What would you say are the reasons for the amazing growth of Tepeyac Family Center?

Dr. Bruchalski: Today, being the largest admitter to Fair Oaks Hospital Labor and Delivery (L&D), the Tepeyac Family Center delivers almost 600 babies per year and has 6,000 patients in the files.

I am not surprised at the growth. The Blessed Mother promised that if we were able to see the poor in our daily work, and follow the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding sexual ethics and the theology of the body, we would be blessed abundantly. What Jesus promises, He does not joke about or revoke.

The other practical reason for our growth is that we do not see ourselves as "NFP-only." I know that is the mantra that practices across the country use, but we don't. "NFP-only" is not accurate concerning our services. "NFP-only" is not good public relations. "NFP-only" is not true.

We practice excellent obstetrics and gynecology. We see women of all ages and by facing the reality of the body, soul and spirit integration, and treating diseases and not desires, our patients do well. Because we utilize many modalities in treating patients, from dietary to hormonal, NFP-only is limiting. Even from a public relations point of view, we offer many more services than natural family planning.

What do you see as the future of TFC?

Dr. Bruchalski: With the stability provided by more physicians, our outreach to the next generation in providing a location where we can, by example, teach the integration of spirituality and medicine is growing. We are a medical training site for several of the local medical, nursing and physician assistant programs.

The future is now. We are providing care for the individual who visits us, providing educational and spiritual resources for the next generation. This is where TFC has positioned itself.

You started Divine Mercy Care in 2000. Why? What is your

vision for Divine Mercy Care?

Dr. Bruchalski: My vision for DMC is the transformation of hearts through health care, and returning medicine, especially Catholic medicine, to its roots.

What do these phrases mean? In medicine today, we have replaced the patient with profit. This reality has had several consequences. First, patients feel used, not listened to, ignored. Secondly, doctors have become alienated from the reasons they went into medicine, and their caring and compassion are buried underneath technology and technical skills that have turned the art and science of medicine into a mechanics garage.

Lastly, the insurance system reflects this profit structure by being out of reach for 47 million Americans, and by punishing people with illness by kicking them out of plan for “preexisting conditions.” Everyone, from the providers to the patients to the hospital systems, plays these games.

We went non-profit to help providers see their role in medicine as a vocation and not simply a pay check. We went non-profit so we are able to see all people who enter our doors including the underserved.

By recognizing our vocation and our need to care for our neighbor, we change our hearts, and we learn that we are not the healer, Christ is. We are not in control, Christ is. We are instruments. We are clay. This is how we transform hearts; hearts of providers, patients and payers. This transformation begins with us, DMC.

Tell us about your family. How did you meet Carolyn?

Dr. Bruchalski: I met Carolyn in Portsmouth, Virginia, during my first year of residency. She had been working on an ocean yacht between Key West and Martha’s Vineyard. Looking for more stability, she took up a challenge from her best friend: using her nursing degree, she moved to Virginia to be with her sister who worked in labor and delivery and who had asked Carolyn to work alongside her. We met in that L&D of Portsmouth General Hospital. Four years later we got married. We both had sworn that we would never marry within the medical community because we had outside interests, but after looking over her mask in the operating room that first day doing a Cesarean and looking into those beautiful green eyes I was smitten. When I asked her if she was dating someone, she said, “Not here.” Relieved, I soon realized the other man was an ocean tanker captain from the Vineyard. It took some work to win her over! Over time, I realized how much faith and depth this woman had and finally popped the question three years later. I wish I would have asked her sooner, but I know God’s timing is perfect.

What about the rest of your family? Do you have any kids?

Dr. Bruchalski: Of course, my rock, my support, my heart is

Carolyn, my wife of 17 years. She has more faith in her small finger than I had in my entire life. She continually shows me how to trust in the Lord.

I have two sons: John Paul a freshman, and Joseph Francis a seventh grader. Both boys are active in sports, baseball and football. To spend a summer afternoon watching my boys play ball provides memories that I will cherish into the next life. With their fun and curiosity and constant desire to help me become the father I ought, I am the luckiest man in the entire universe.

We have also lived in a “Polish Commune” with my father.



Dr John Bruchalski, with his wife Carolyn and their two sons, John Paul and Joseph.

I mean that literally and metaphorically. My dad had no pension, no 401k, and no retirement after working for Catholic schools for 35 years. He could not afford the taxes of Northern New Jersey and moved in with us along with mom in 1991. To have two families in the same domicile makes for interesting and dynamic encounters between generations and families. Many close and some not so close friends with psychiatric or psychological backgrounds told us it would ruin our marriage. Instead it made it stronger. The fact that my boys grew up with their grandparents was, as the commercial says, “priceless.”

What are your hobbies?

Dr. Bruchalski: Fly fishing is my relaxation. Being in the outdoors, and listening to the rushing water, is therapeutic for my soul. Also the command of Bishop Loverde to “cast our nets into the deep” and to become a “fisher of men” echoes often in my daily recollection.

Is there anything that you would like to tell your patients or other women?

Dr. Bruchalski: I wish I could convey to women how much God loves them, just as they are. Most of the self destructive behaviors I encounter in the practice are directly the consequence of a poor self image. Oftentimes, it can be traced to a difficult relationship with her mom or dad. Men have taken advantage of them. They have made poor choices in their lives. Relationships with others are in a shambles.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the light that shines in the darkness. To connect with Him, she must develop a relationship with Him; cultivating quiet time, asking Him the deepest, darkest questions from her heart, and then listening for His response. He will answer, maybe in a least expected way, but He will answer. Use the Eucharist, and Scripture, to encounter the living God.

But to encounter the Lord we must first remove the planks from our own eyes and see ourselves the way He does. Only in this way can we influence those around us. Prayer helps us identify those planks. The Holy Spirit is the source of our power. Jesus redeemed us and He is the source of our joy. He wants us to have abundant life and complete joy.