

PPFA Chooses Political Operative: New President at Planned Parenthood

BY Randall K. O'Bannon, Ph.D.

Turning to an experienced political operative with a fresh face, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) named Cecile Richards, the daughter of former Texas Governor Ann Richards, as the organization's new president. Richards will take over the helm of the nation's largest abortion chain in mid-February.

Richards replaces interim president Karen Pearl, who took over from Gloria Feldt in 2005. Feldt led the organization from 1996 to 2005. She stepped down in January 2005, saying she felt it was "time for me to be making a transition."

The number of abortions performed at Planned Parenthood clinics increased by two-thirds during Feldt's tenure—from 153,367 in 1996 to 255,015 in 2004. This occurred at the same time the number of abortions nationally was declining.

But PPFA experienced setbacks. The group also saw its favored candidate twice lose the presidential election, closed several clinics, had to face the media after the death of a teen given the abortifacient RU486 at one of its California clinics, and was publicly embarrassed by a Consumer Reports study finding PPFA-brand condoms substandard.

Feldt rose from within the ranks of Planned Parenthood. She assumed the presidency after running one of the group's larger regional affiliates. Though Richards did at one time serve on the board for the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, most of her experience comes from the political arena.

According to an August 2004 profile in *Texas Monthly* (TM), Cecile Richards is "ambitious, successful, and highly partisan." She is "as pure a creature of the Democratic left" as the magazine says George W. Bush is of the Republican right. The periodical describes her as "a striking six-footer and longtime labor organizer with a bright, explosive laugh who can stop a room when she walks into it."

Her mother a woman who would become governor, her father a top labor-union lawyer ("even more radical, more partisan than Ann"), Cecile and her siblings grew up stuffing and sorting political mailings, learning precinct politics, and hosting at least one anti-war rally at their home, according to TM. "I grew up in a very political family," Cecile told TM. "Other families did bowling. We did politics."

After graduating from Ivy League Brown University in 1980, she first worked as a labor organizer in California and in Louisiana. She met her husband, Kirk Adams, in 1982. Adams was also a labor organizer, and as of 2005 was chief of staff for Service Employees International Union, the largest union in America. The couple has three teenage children.

Richards and her family moved back to Austin in 1990 to help with her mother's campaign for governor. According to TM, in 1994, when Ann Richards lost her bid for reelection to George W. Bush, Cecile formed the Texas Freedom Network with the goal of countering the influence of conservative Christians in Texas politics. She also recruited sympathetic clergy to form the Texas Faith Network, a political

advocacy group that TM says now has 500 members.

When husband Kirk took a job as organizing director for the AFL-CIO in Washington, Cecile moved with her family in 1998 and took a job at the Turner Foundation for media mogul and abortion propagandist Ted Turner. Her job, Richards told TM, was “to help build the infrastructure of the choice movement in America.” In that job, TM says, Richards “worked closely with organizations like Planned Parenthood and distributed grant money around the country.”

In 2002, Cecile Richards became deputy chief of staff to pro-abortion Democratic House Minority Whip Nancy Pelosi (D-Ca.), who now is the House minority leader. In the summer of 2003, she left that job to become president of America Votes, the position Planned Parenthood plucked her from after a year-long search for a new leader.

To get a better idea of what Planned Parenthood saw or was looking for in Richards, it helps to learn more about America Votes. America Votes came into existence in July 2003, coordinating the “get out the vote” activities of what opensecrets.org identified as “more than 20 Democratic interest groups trying to defeat President Bush in November [2004].”

Members of that group, who opensecrets.org says contributed \$50,000 each, include stalwart Democratic Party supporters such as the AFL-CIO, the National Education Association, the NAACP National Voter Fund, and the Sierra Club. Also notable are the inclusion of explicitly pro-abortion groups such as EMILY’s List, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and the Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

While the group itself spent over \$3 million on the 2004 election, perhaps more significant was its coordination of the efforts of some of its more powerful members, such as MoveOn.org (\$21.5 million in its own 2004 election expenditures), America Coming Together (\$78 million), and the Media Fund (\$57.7 million), headed by former Clinton White House deputy chief of staff Harold Ickes (figures from opensecrets.org).

America Votes sought to make sure that member activities weren’t duplicated, that voters were contacted by groups with whom they were most likely to be sympathetic, and that the timing and placement of advertising best suited the candidate they supported. According to Richards’ Planned Parenthood bio, the member groups of America Votes collectively spent more than \$350 million on political activities in 2004.

Texas Monthly says, “The new organization, fueled by huge personal donations from the likes of billionaire activist George Soros, yielded immediate dividends.” Expenditures from member groups like the Media Fund and the MoveOn.org Voter Fund “allowed Kerry’s message to stay on the airwaves in March while his campaign scrambled to refill its coffers.”

Ultimately, of course, Kerry and America Votes lost the 2004 election, but Richards’ work and political skills obviously impressed the board of Planned Parenthood. There is some concern that America Votes will founder without Richards according to Chris Cillizza’s Washington Post blog, 1/11/06).

However, despite its declared commitment to “reproductive health care,” there is little doubt that Planned Parenthood has landed, not a doctor, a nurse, or some experienced medical administrator, but a new leader with deep political roots, extensive political connections, and access to some of the political left’s deepest pockets.