



# THE SCHINDLERS FIGHT BACK

**Terri Schiavo's family turns tragedy into triumph**

*By Anita Crane*

It's the anniversary of a frightening American tragedy. Last March 31, Terri Schiavo died of thirst after being deprived of food and water for 13 days. I met with Terri's parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, as well as her brother Bobby, in Washington, D.C. on January 22. At almost every step, someone approached the Schindlers in support. Throughout our brief conversation, the Schindlers' strength and conviction far surpassed my expectations.

## Fresh wounds

**Robert:** We came from generations in the Catholic tradition. Certain moral standards were instilled in us, therefore I object to euthanasia and abortion. Despite the role of some Church leaders who tested our faith, ultimately the terrible ordeal of Terri's suffering and death made our faith stronger.

**Bobby:** Our faith was tested because we had little to no support from our bishop and because of that we were getting little support from the priests. When the bishop and priests didn't openly support us, people on our own home turf were confused. So very few of our fellow parishioners supported us.

**Mary:** Our pastor at the time did support us.

**Robert:** We were told that our bishop, Robert Lynch, instructed diocesan priests not to mention Terri's name from the pulpit.

**Bobby:** A few friendly priests told us that. And the lack of support

continues to this day—we just found out that the Diocese of Saint Petersburg let Michael Schiavo marry in the Catholic Church. To hear of him getting married in a Catholic ceremony—after cohabitating with another woman while he was married to Terri—after he denied our family the right to take Terri to Mass and denied Terri the sacrament of Holy Communion as she was being starved to death—after he threatened to have Monsignor

[Thaddeus] Malinowski arrested [in 2003] for attempting to get her Communion—it's scandalous for a Catholic bishop to endorse Michael after all that. We got tens of thousands of condolence cards from people, but none from bishops.

## The real love story

**Mary:** The name of our book is *A Life That Matters: The Legacy of Terri Schiavo*.

**Bobby:** It's about our family struggle, with all of our thoughts told by my mom.

**Robert:** It's about our family's love for one another and how the struggle made our family stronger.

**Mary:** It's the story of a family who fought—like any family would—to keep our daughter alive.

**Robert:** It illustrates what could happen to any family.

**Bobby:** When the guardianship laws were made, I don't think anyone envisioned that someone like Michael would use them against



*Terri out and about in her wheelchair 1990*

## Bishop Lynch's response

In Canon Law 1090, the Catholic Church declares: "Anyone who with a view to entering marriage with a certain person has brought about the death of that person's spouse or of one's own spouse invalidly attempts this marriage. Those who have brought about the death of a spouse by mutual physical or moral cooperation also invalidly attempt a marriage together."

Consequently, I contacted Bishop Robert Lynch's executive secretary respectfully asking the bishop why Michael Schiavo, a professed Lutheran, and Jodi Centonze, a professed Catholic, were allowed an official Catholic wedding in the Diocese of St. Petersburg. Vicki Wells Bedard, the diocesan communications director, said that Schiavo had been granted permission by Miami Archbishop John Favalora and thus Bishop Lynch wouldn't make a statement—although she brought up the fact that both Bishop Lynch and the parish pastor had full authority to block a wedding. She added that Bishop Lynch would not hold Schiavo responsible for what the civil courts had decided. I reminded her that it was Michael Schiavo who petitioned the courts to starve and dehydrate his wife. Bedard didn't dispute that but said, "Terri was a great wakeup call for everyone."



Before Terri's 1984 wedding



Terri 1986



Terri's First Holy Communion day, 1972

the victim's family. He used his guardianship to inflict pain on my parents and Terri. Any decent person would've sat down with my parents and said he wanted to move on. But he completely severed the relationship between my parents and Terri with correspondence from his attorneys. They first found out he wanted to remove her feeding tubes through an attorney.

**Robert:** After Terri's collapse in 1990, we discussed the future and told Michael we'd take care of Terri—we wouldn't stand in his way if he wanted to leave her.

**Mary:** We told him that he was a young guy and if he wanted to move on with his life, we would take care of her.

### Shameless journalists

**Bobby:** The people who went after my sister are dishonest. Talk about aiding and abetting my sister's death—the mainstream media put out false information. It was difficult to listen to the way they spoke of her—to listen to their lies. She didn't have to be confined to a bed. She was bedridden because Michael wouldn't allow her to leave her bed—all she needed was a wheelchair. You don't know how many people we've met who are in worse condition than Terri was,

but they came to the hospice, they came to the court room.

**Robert:** Before the malpractice claim was awarded, Terri was mobile. We used to bring her home.

**Mary:** We took her everywhere. We brought her home every holiday. We got her hair done.

**Robert:** Terri was out and about. When the malpractice award was made, and the money was given to Terri, everything stopped. Her whole life changed. Michael put a DNR [do not resuscitate order] on her. And yes it's true, he wouldn't even allow caretakers to brush her teeth.

**Mary:** She got no therapy, nothing. The nurses said they were feeding her and she ate Jell-O.

**Bobby:** She was talking in 1991 and/or 1992. And we didn't write this stuff down. The medical people wrote it. Even Michael wrote it—he wrote how much Terri was improving in his own diary. None of that was ever reported. That's why 25 disability organizations were fighting for her.

People should read Diana Lynne's book *Terri's Story: The Court-Ordered Death of an American Woman*. It exposes everything that happened to Terri—how the hos-

pice, the judge and the county officials were all connected. It's a racket. She exposed it and it's getting no media attention.

We shouldn't be sitting here—I shouldn't be going around speaking about what happened to my sister. It's so outrageous to me that this was allowed to happen. It just blows my mind.

**Mary:** It's outrageous that we have to defend ourselves. The most important thing I can say is this; you shouldn't starve someone to death. It's the most horrific, unbelievable thing you could see. I would hope that parents with disabled children just love them and keep them home and take care of them. That's all we wanted to do. Terri was the light of my life; she lit up every time I walked in the room. What happened to Terri allowed the world to see what's happening to disabled people all over the world.

### The family's mission

In December 2005, Michael Schiavo launched his political action committee called Terri PAC. Schiavo's mission is to spite the Schindler family and the Republican members of Congress who sought to save Terri—even

though many Democrats took the same position.

On the other hand, the Schindlers formed the Terri Schindler Schiavo Foundation to protect vulnerable persons of all ages. There are no egos in this organization. Each family member's business card simply shows his or her name and contact info, minus any title.

**Bobby:** It's vulgar for him to claim on his web site that politicians trampled over the sanctity of marriage and I can't believe he said that when he desecrated his own marriage. If he wants to dedicate his life to killing the disabled by getting involved in politics, that speaks for itself. I pray to God that people can see through him and what he's doing. He's using Terri's name to further his own motives. We're gonna do what we can to protect the disabled. You have no idea—we were mourning for months, just the four of us—and we had so many people contact us and we had to get the foundation organized. So finally we're ready to get into the fight.

**Robert:** I don't care about Michael Schiavo or what he does. The only thing that connected us to him before Terri passed away was Terri. Now he's out of our life and he's just one of a hundred other people advocating euthanasia. We got together as a family because we don't want any other family to suffer what happened to Terri. In June 2005, we decided we'd dedicate our foundation to preventing euthanasia—and like the Jewish motto regarding the Holocaust we say, "Never again."

**Bobby:** My parents and sister Suzy will run the Terri Schindler Schiavo Foundation. I'll run the Terri Schindler Schiavo Center for Health Care Ethics, working up in Washington, D.C. with pro-life and disability organizations. I want to bring pro-life groups and disabled groups together—like they came together for my sister—to change public policy. The disabled community has such powerful influence on public policy that we have to have them working with us.

**Robert:** When we had breakfast this morning and we were leaving, a girl in a wheelchair said, "Mr. Schindler, may I talk to you?" Her name was Ann and she couldn't speak clearly, but I listened carefully and she said, "I keep praying that somebody does something because I'm frightened that people will come and kill all of us." I almost broke out in tears because she was absolutely frightened. So I told her, "Don't worry, we're going to do something to protect you." And I mean that.

**Mary:** Our ultimate objective is to open a facility to care for disabled people who have no one to care for them.

**Bobby:** We'd like to establish a chain of facilities and get involved in wills to live. We'll set up a network of doctors and lawyers to protect the disabled.

**Robert:** Yes, because the bioethics committees in some hospitals are saying they won't treat people and those people are dying. Some people are being starved to death in hospitals or they're thrown out on the street and they have nowhere to go. So we'd like to be able to take those people in.

**Bobby:** We're trying to live according to what Jesus said. We're trying to care for the vulnerable, care for the weak and promote the Gospel of life. You asked about Michael Schiavo and if he's going to do everything to kill, then I want to do the opposite.

Anita Crane is editor of *Celebrate Life*. For more about the Terri Schindler Schiavo Foundation, visit [www.TerrisFight.org](http://www.TerrisFight.org).

E-mail this article from our web site [www.CLMagazine.org](http://www.CLMagazine.org).

The Schindlers were awarded at the 12th Annual Memorial for the Pre-born

