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Week 36: Christmas Shoes and Smiles

Sheila Walsh

Abby Johnson

Sheila: Hi! Welcome to *LIFE Today*. I'm Sheila Walsh. Today I have the privilege of interviewing a guest on my set which I don't often do but this woman is really a hero of mine. I've been hearing about her for some time and it's just wonderful to be able to meet her.

You probably, maybe you saw the movie, *Unplanned*. But maybe you've read the book, and if not, I'll tell you how you can get a hold of it. But first of all, I just want to say, Abby Johnson, what a joy it is to have you here. I'm serious!

Abby: It is an honor to be here.

Sheila: No, you are one of my heroes. You're doing so much at the moment that is fantastic. But before that, just in case there is anyone who isn't as familiar with your story would you take us back a little bit and tell us a little bit how you grew up, what you were hoping to do with your life?

Abby: I grew up in the church. I grew up in a Christian home, an amazing home. I've got two of the best parents I could ever hope for. I tell people I won the parent lottery. Grew up listening to you, reading your books, going to Women of Faith conferences. But you know, I went to college and started hearing other voices and fell away from my faith; and wanting to be an independent woman, started listening to some other voices that were telling me a different -- different perspective than what I was raised to believe.

That's when I encountered a woman who was with Planned Parenthood. She started talking to me about Planned Parenthood and the services that they offered; telling me that

they were there to help women. Who doesn't want to help women? Everything that she was telling me made sense. It sounded good. I jumped right on board. As someone who was not immersed in church, was not immersed in her faith at that time, I was already stepping away from the Lord at that time, it was easy for me to continue down that road.

Sheila: Did you get pregnant in college?

Abby: I did.

Sheila: I just wondered at that point, having an abortion was it something that seemed to you like the natural thing to do? How was it presented to you?

Abby: I just remember being terrified of disappointing my parents -- and my boyfriend at the time. He just said to me, "Well, of course you'll have an abortion. Of course! This is what you do when you're a Christian girl and you get pregnant, and you don't want your parents to find out, you have an abortion. Of course! This was what you do. And don't worry, I know exactly where to go." Because he had taken other girlfriends before.

I would love to tell you that I thought about telling my parents, that I thought about other options but I didn't. I went right along with him; went to have my first abortion. And I just sort of trapped it into a box, put it away and I thought, okay, I'm never going to think about it again. I'm never going to talk about it again. Here I am, a champion for women's rights. I've done this but I'm never going to do it again. And now I'm going to help other women -- I'm going to empower them so that they don't have to have an abortion. I'm going to help reduce the abortion numbers; right? I'm going to help them with preventative services. We're going to make abortion safe, legal, and rare; that was the talking point. That's what I really believed that we were doing. I believed that for years.

Sheila: And you quickly rose in the ranks; didn't you? Didn't you win some award in one year?

Abby: I did. I was Planned Parenthood's employee of the year. I was their youngest clinic director. I did well. I loved my job. People say, "Wasn't it a difficult job? Didn't you have all this internal angst?" I didn't. I didn't. I believed that I was doing the right thing. I was so blinded by the sin that I was living in at that time. People say, "How do you work in an abortion clinic and not be bothered by it?" Well, that's what sin does to you.

Sheila: That's true.

Abby: It can literally, physically blind you to what you're doing every day.

Sheila: Did you ever have to pass... When you were going into clinic, were there protesters outside?

Abby: Every day.

Sheila: Really? Every day? How did that impact you and were there differences in the way they protested?

Abby: There were. There were two different groups. There was a group that was out there that was very aggressive, almost hostile and they dressed up in grim reaper costumes. And they had big huge signs, graphic images and bloody pictures. And they yelled at the women going in and they called them names and they called us names. We were "baby killers" and all these other things. And they yelled at the women. That made me angry. And it made me feel like we at the abortion clinic were the safe haven for these women. So we were the saviors. So the Christians were the bad guys and we were the saviors of these women.

There was another group out there, they were prayerful, they were offering resources to pregnancy centers, resource centers that could help them. But when the other group was out there, they were drowned out and so the women couldn't even hear them. And the

women were so scared of the aggressive group that was out there, they were literally running into our clinic.

Eventually, a group called "40 Days for Life" sort of took over this side walk and the aggressive group left and it was more of the peaceful group that was out there, the prayerful group that was out there. And that was incredibly damaging to us inside of the clinic because now you have a group of people, some of them are out there with their children, and they're out there just peacefully praying and they're being kind. And now we have people going to the fence, taking the information and they're actually leaving and that is cutting into our bottom line -- that is cutting in to our budget.

Sheila: How much pressure was there on you in the clinic to keep the numbers up?

Abby: Tremendous pressure. We had a quota that we had to meet every month. We had an abortion quota. So a certain number of abortions that we had to sell to women coming into our facility. And people, "How do you sell an abortion?" Actually, it is pretty easy. You have a woman who comes in that's scared, who's vulnerable, who is feeling pressure, whether it is self-imposed or whether she is feeling pressure from outside, people in her life. And particularly, I mean, people...

Sheila: I know what you're going to say.

Abby: Particularly if she is a Christian woman. You get a woman who has been sitting in church all her life and now she is single, she is unmarried and she is pregnant, that is a very easy sell for someone like me who is a counselor in an abortion clinic because that's why I had my abortion.

Sheila: So what changed for you, Abby because you're now known as this advocate for life, for workers who still work in those places? What was the day that changed everything for you?

Abby: I was asked to participate in an ultrasound guided abortion procedure, which is really rare inside abortion clinics. Abortions are not usually done via ultrasound guidance. They're usually done as a blind sort of procedure. Which is one of the reasons I believe that abortions continue to be so pervasive in the United States because you don't actually see the victim die during the procedure.

We had a visiting physician, and this was the typical way that he performed abortions. So I was called in to assist and my job was to hold the ultrasound probe on the woman's abdomen during the abortion so the doctor would actually be able to see the baby during the procedure. We did the measurement. We found that the woman was 13 weeks along; by 13 weeks everything is fully formed on an unborn child. I watched in horror as this 13-week old baby fought and struggled for his life against the abortion instruments. I knew then that there was life in the womb, that there was humanity in the womb. I knew that if those things were true then I was on the wrong side of this debate.

Sheila: So what did you do? Were the next few days agonizing for you?

Abby: Confusing. I felt like I had been lied to but not in a way that I was a victim. I had eagerly believed these lies. So I felt not like a victim, I felt like I had been lied to. But also like I was a perpetrator of the lies because I had believed them and then I had spoken them. I had lied to thousands of women who would come into my clinic. And then if I admitted it, then what? Then I have to admit that what? That I've participated in thousands and thousands of killings? And how do I live with that? How do you live with that kind of burden? How do you live with that kind of sin? At the time it seemed easier to just not admit it. Honestly.

Sheila: So what changed?

Abby: I was sitting in my office one day, it was a couple days later, and I was trying to make sense of all of it. I was so naive. I remember thinking maybe I can change the organization. I mean that's just so... I just remember thinking, how can I make this work?

How can I change the organization? Maybe I can get them to see what abortion is. I remember sitting in my office thinking that. And I saw these women walking out of the clinic and they were holding these little brown paper bags. And I knew inside of that bag was a series of pills for them to go home and take at their home so that they could abort their babies and their babies would go into their toilets and they would flush their babies down the toilet. I sat there saying, "I'm still doing it. I'm not standing there in the room and I'm not holding that ultrasound probe and I'm not watching that baby die but I'm still here and I'm still doing it. And I cannot do this anymore."

And so I ran out of the clinic and for all these years, for eight years, those people had been standing outside of my clinic, and they had been my enemy! But I ran out of the clinic and I got in my car. I could have walked to their office because the Coalition for Life office, it was conveniently located next door, but I thought that would look suspicious. So I got in my car and I drove next door. And I called them. I parked in their parking lot and I called them on the phone. And this woman named Heather answered the phone. And I said, "This is Abby Johnson. I'm sitting in your parking lot." I was crying. And I said, "Can I come in your back door? I need to talk to you."

She said, "Can you hold on please?" [Laughing] She put me on hold, and she came back on. She went and talked to the people that she worked with and they were all like, "Abby Johnson wants to come in. What do we do?" And they said, "Well, we think we should let her in."

Sheila: Good call.

Abby: So she came back on the phone and she said, "We'll meet you at the back door." So they met me at the back door and they opened the door really slowly and I'm standing there and I said, "Can I come in?" They were all just sort of staring at me.

They said, "Yes, yes! Come in."

I sat on the couch and I just wept. I said, "I can't do this anymore." I think just... not the full weight but just a glimpse of the realization of what I had done started to hit me at that moment. And I decided I was going to leave. And I ended up going back and turning in my resignation, and I walked out that day.

You know what? I should have had the weight of the world on me at that moment. I was leaving a very lucrative job. I was married, we had a child, one child, at that time. My husband was a teacher. So I was definitely the breadwinner at that time. I didn't know how we were going to pay our bills. I had no job prospects. I didn't know what my employer was going to do when they found out I had left. I wasn't giving a two weeks' notice. I was losing my whole support system. I was losing all my friends. I didn't know what was going happen. I should have had all of this worry. But when I walked out of that door for the last time, I physically felt this unburdening take place in my body. I felt joy unlike anything I think I've ever experienced.

When I left, I knew I'd made the right decision. But I feel so fortunate because I knew that I could trust God in that moment, even though I had been away from him for eight years, he had still been chasing after me. I tell people, no matter how fast you run from God, he's always faster. He can always run just a little bit faster. I had been trying to run from him for eight years -- I mean really running. But he never stopped pursuing me. I feel so thankful that I was raised in a home with a Christian foundation, with Christian parents, with parents who were consistently praying for me for that entire eight years.

That's really been a message that I've been saying to parents and even people listening now. I go around and I speak, and I talk to parents and they say, my daughter or my son, they're doing this, they're doing that. They're wayward in their faith. They've lost their faith. I say to them, "Never stop praying for your child."

Because yes, I saw this ultrasound that changed my life. Yes, I did this. Yes, I did that. But I'm telling you the most powerful part of my conversion story, I believe, was the power of my praying parents.

Sheila: That's beautiful! Abby's book, *Unplanned* did you get a lot of opposition from Planned Parenthood when you joined the other side?

Abby: Well, they took me to court. They tried to get a gag order against me. That obviously failed. But ever since they failed in court, I really don't hear from them anymore. I think they were incredibly embarrassed. They were really trying to set an example. They were trying to make an example out of me. And they lost, they failed. And I really just don't hear from them anymore. I think they want to try to pretend that I just don't exist.

Sheila: Well, according to the body of Christ, yes, she does. I'm actually going to ask Abby if we can maybe do another program this week because I think there is so much to her story to the great news of... because I think what your story shows so clearly, Abby is the redemptive nature of Christ; that no matter how dark something gets that Christ is the light of the world. He is always there and will use the very things that you thought would destroy you to bring hope to so many women. Do you think you would be able to do another program with us?

Abby: Of course!

Sheila: Well, I'm going to tell you, this is Abby's book, *Unplanned*: "The dramatic true story of a former Planned Parenthood leader's eye-opening journey across the life line." You want to get a hold of this book. Even if there is some young girls in your life and you think, it would just be good for them to read this, then I want to send this to you.

But one of the things I would like to ask you to do, as you know, at this time of the year we get ready for Christmas. We get ready for sending shoes and smiles across the world and I want to show you how you can help make a huge difference. So please watch this.

On the mission field:

Announcer: There is nothing like the sights and sounds of Christmas to bring a smile to one's face, especially to the face of a child. But for tens of thousands of children around the world, there is little to smile about at Christmas time. That all changes when they receive a brand-new pair of shoes -- many for the first time in their lives.

Without shoes these children must face the very real challenge of disease and infection entering their bodies through their feet. A very real danger is being infected with hookworms that can lead to stunted physical and mental development.

The smiles on their faces upon receiving their new shoes reflects the joy of Christmas that comes from giving to those in need. And yet, there are still others that cannot share their gratitude because they simply cannot smile without corrective surgery for cleft lip or palate. Now you can help bring smiles to so many with a gift these children will never forget no matter if they smile for a season or for a lifetime.

Won't you please consider making a lasting difference in the lives of these precious children? There is a child waiting for someone to help them smile this Christmas. You can be that special someone to give them a smile.

End of video

In the studio:

Sheila: Gosh, can you imagine what it would be like to have a little one and they can't smile because of a deformity in their face? And the thing that I love about this particular campaign is that you and I can change that. We have some amazing doctors on the ground who will do these corrective surgeries for \$500. I have no idea what that would cost normally in the states. But to do that for \$500 and to change the life of that child. When you see that kind of deformity whether it is cleft lip or cleft palate, the child can't swallow properly. So many cultures, so many villages when children are born like that, they're seen as cursed by God and they're kind of kept to one side and not allowed and

grow up and be a normal child.

But you and I can change that. And I know it probably feels like a little bit early to be showing you Christmas trees and presents but that is very intentional because it is our commitment this year here at *LIFE Today* that we want to be able to provide a pair of shoes for 150,000 children. And it will literally be the first pair of shoes they've ever had in their life.

This is one of the campaigns, it is very doable. There is an entry level for every single one of us. Do you know that for \$36 you can provide ten pairs of shoes for ten children? That's amazing! For \$72 you can provide 20 pairs of shoes. Now perhaps you watched the images of those little ones who had the corrective surgery and how they looked before and you think, that's what I want to do this Christmas. For \$500 you can do that.

And for any gift at all, we'll send you this year's little Christmas shoe. It is beautiful cobalt blue crystal. It is absolutely lovely. I know you don't do it for the gift, but it is simply our way of saying thank you. Even though it is a little bit before Christmas, we're getting in early because we want to make sure that we're able to send all the shoes and get them there before Christmas day and bring smiles to a lot of children who have never had a pair of shoes in their life.

But not only that, can you imagine? It would be like a miracle for a mom who holds her baby for the first time and sees that horrible deformity where they can't smile, where they can't swallow properly and what a gift it would be that somebody from around the world cared enough about them to want to make their baby whole? Such a beautiful, practical way to show the love of Christ.

So please will you go to your phone? Will you dial that number on your screen? Will you make the very best gift possible? Or you can go online. We just want this to be the best Christmas ever. And I honestly believe if you're a family and you have young children, make them part of this. Maybe they just want to give a couple of dollars of their

allowance and put it together with something that you're sending so they have the joy of giving, of realizing that not every child is hoping for a new iPhone, some would simply love their very first pair of shoes. Would you call now?

Begin video clip

Announcer: Poverty is a killer and because of it children needlessly suffer, not only from a lack of food and clean water, but also from a lack of things we often take for granted like a simple pair of shoes. Far too many children living in extreme poverty have never owned a new pair of shoes. And while that may seem minor in light of all their needs, walking with bare feet puts them at risk of life-threatening infections and disease that could lead to crippling consequences and even death.

By responding today, you will help secure and make ready 150,000 Christmas shoes to be shipped and delivered to children around the world just in time for the holidays. Your gift of \$36 will help provide ten pairs of shoes. A gift of \$72 will help provide 20 pairs. And a gift of \$180 will help provide 50 pairs of Christmas shoes for children in need.

As a thank you for your gift of support, be sure to request this beautifully crafted blue crystal shoe ornament. A treasure to display at each Christmas. With your gift of \$100 or more, you may also request this keepsake boxed set of all *LIFE's* Christmas shoe ornaments.

Finally, please consider a gift of \$1,000 or more to help provide 275 pairs of shoes or two children with corrective cleft lip or palate surgeries. And you may request the beautiful "A Mother's Strength" bronze sculpture.

Please call, write, or make your gift online today!

End of video

On the mission field:

Randy: As we travel around the world, one thing we've noticed is the condition of the feet of so many children. We see children all over the world running around barefoot in some terrible conditions. It is not just unsightly, it is unhealthy and potentially deadly.

As we give shoes, which is a wonderful Christmas gift, keep in mind that we are actually giving them a chance for better health, potentially even saving lives. We are protecting them from some really debilitating diseases; things like hookworm, several things that can happen in their feet. These protect them just like the smiles when we go in and correct a cleft palate. We're not just giving them a cosmetic change, we're actually improving their health.

Everything that we do is to improve the health of others physically and spiritually. So go to phone or go online now. Give the best gift you can as we give Christmas Shoes and Smiles.

End of video**In the studio:**

Sheila: Isn't that a great thing to do for Christmas? And all of us can do something. And for any gift at all, we will send you this darling little shoe. This 2020 shoe, it's beautiful cobalt crystal. Please, ask for a copy of Abby's book and we will be happy to send that to you.

I just want to say thank you so much for being with us and for sharing some of your story. But I want you to do another program with me because God's using you to do really incredible things right now. So for now, let me just say thank you and we look forward to touching base with you again.

Abby: Okay.

Sheila: And thanks so much for being with us, for all of us here at *LIFE Today*. We love you!
God loves you! And we will see you next time!