Kansas is deadly battleground in abortion debate

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WICHITA, Kan. — In a nation divided by abortion, Kansas has become perhaps the fiercest battleground — with mass protests, prosecutions, lawsuits and now a killing keeping the issue almost constantly in the public eye.

Dr. George Tiller, shot to death at his church last Sunday, had been the target of a relentless protest campaign for most of the 36 years that he performed abortions at his Wichita clinic. He was a focal point of the abortion conflict, but it transcended him, often becoming the state’s dominant political topic.

Some Kansans are sick of the rancorous debate; for some, it permeates their lives and affects their personal relations.

“Most of my adult life has been in the middle of this fight,” said Peggy Bowman, who lives near Tiller’s church and oversees a fund that helps women cover the cost of abortions. “I have people in my neighborhood who, once they found out I was pro-choice, turned their back on me.”

In part, it’s a power struggle — conservative Republicans, many of them evangelical Christian, battling over abortion and other hot-button social issues with moderates of their own party and with the Democrats.

“When you get down to the heart of the split among Kansas Republicans, it always comes back to abortion,” said University of Kansas political science professor Burdett Loomis. “It may pop out in gun laws, homeschooling, evolution — but it starts and stops with abortion.”

Unlike many states — where either supporters or foes of abortion hold sway politically — Kansas often seesaws. For example, the Republican-dominated Legislature passed numerous bills to restrict abortions during the past six years, only to see many vetoed by Democratic Gov. Kathleen Sebelius, now President Barack Obama’s health and human services secretary.

As a result, the frustration of some anti-abortion groups, abortion remains relatively available in the state despite widespread opposition to it among legislators and the Kansas congressional delegation.

Mary Kay Culp, executive director of Kansans for Life, said she and her in-state allies differ from many of their counterparts elsewhere in pressing for rigorous observance of the restrictions that are in place.

“In Kansas, we’re working and working to try to see the enforcement of the law,” she said.

Tiller also played a part in intensifying the debate. He became one of the nation’s few providers of late-term abortions and, unlike many of his peers, embraced a high profile even after he was shot in both arms by an anti-abortion activist in 1993.

His clinic, heavily fortified after a bombing in 1986, became the target of both peaceful and violent protests. In 1991, a 45-day “Summer of Mercy” campaign organized by Operation Rescue drew thousands of anti-abortion demonstrators to Wichita. More than 2,700 arrests resulted.

Abortions opponents gained strength in the Legislature in the 1990s and began pushing annually for new restrictions — often citing Tiller’s clinic as a reason. A 1998 law restricting late-term procedures was aimed at him.

Tiller also found himself under investigation by the attorney general’s office and, most recently, the Kansas Board of Healing Arts, which regulates doctors.

The doctor himself became a significant player in state politics, forming a political action committee in 2002 that funneled $153,000 into unsuccessful efforts to defeat anti-abortion Republican Phill Kline as attorney general.

Just months into his term in 2003, Kline began investigating Tiller’s clinic and one operated by Planned Parenthood in the Kansas City suburb of Overland Park. Through a judge, Kline tried to obtain access to patients’ medical files, touching off a lengthy legal battle that helped lead to his re-election defeat in 2006 by an abortion-rights Democrat.

Kline’s successor as attorney general filed misdemeanor charges against Tiller in 2007, accusing the doctor of failing to comply fully with the 1998 late-term abortion law, but a jury acquitted Tiller on all charges in March. The Board of Healing Arts immediately went public with its own complaint.

Kline, meanwhile, became district attorney in Johnson County; home to affluent Kansas City suburbs, and continued investigating the Planned Parenthood clinic there. In 2007, he filed 107 criminal charges against the clinic; that case is pending, though Kline was voted out of office in 2008.

“There’s a very prominent vein in Kansas politics that tends toward moral righteousness,” said Kansas State University political scientist Joe Aistrup.
That contributes to the unending abortion battle: "It's an unsettled debate that produces extremists on both sides."

Peter Brownlie, as CEO of Planned Parenthood of Kansas and Mid-Missouri, has been on the front lines on the conflict for a decade and describes Kansas as "the epicenter of the abortion debate."

"There is a very clear and growing gap between the general public and the political leaders who are committed to this being such a constant and volatile issue," Brownlie said. "On issues relating to family planning, abortion, sex education, Kansans' views are not markedly different from most Americans — but there are political forces at work, some of them well beyond the state borders."

Conflicts over social issues go back to Kansas' early days. It became a state in 1861 amid the sometimes violent battle over slavery, was among the forerunners in granting voting rights to women, and also attracted Carrie Nation with her anti-liquor crusade.

In the past decade, Kansas public schools have had five sets of science testing standards because of debate about how evolution should be taught. Twice, a conservative-led Board of Education rewrote the standards to convey skepticism of evolution, leading to international ridicule and a voter backlash that elected new board majorities and restored evolution-friendly standards.

"The state used to be a very liberal place," said Tom Frank, Kansas-born author of the 2004 political best-seller "What's the Matter With Kansas?"

"Tiller was kind of a relic of that Kansas. ... He had that sense of Kansas stubbornness," Frank said. "The anti-abortion movement personalized the fight, made it about him. ... It's one Kansas colliding with another."
Area students to take part in Duke TIP recognition ceremony
June 7 at KU

The University of Kansas will host a state recognition program at 1:30 p.m. Sunday, June 7, at the Lied Center for more than 300 of the more than 900 academically talented seventh-grade students selected for the 2009 Duke University Talent Identification Program. Abigail M. Kaiser of Erie is among those selected.

Students being recognized represent 128 Kansas cities in 61 counties.

Kevin Willmott, associate professor of theatre and film, will deliver a special address on his approach to filmmaking to the students and their families and guests. Willmott directs and produces most of his films in Kansas with locally based production crews and actors. His works include “CSA: The Confederate States of America” and “The Only Good Indian,” both selected for the Sundance Film Festival, considered among the world’s preeminent celebrations of independent film.

Teresa Porter, Duke TIP representative, will present the awards.

Selection to Duke TIP is based on college entrance exam scores that are in the top 5 percent while the students are in middle school. Students participate by taking either the SAT or ACT national achievement tests. Working with host academic institutions such as KU, Duke TIP sponsors 35 ceremonies in its 16-state talent search region.

Each Duke TIP student receives a medallion. The state recognition ceremonies honor seventh-graders who earned scores above the average scores of college-bound high school seniors. Of more than 74,000 applicants this year, 24,204 students qualified and have been invited to state recognition events, including more than 900 students being recognized at KU.

The Duke program is in its 29th year, and this is the 11th year KU has hosted the Kansas recognition program. Information tables to answer students’ and parents’ questions about KU programs and activities will be in the Lied Center lobby during the event.

Duke TIP is a nonprofit educational organization that identifies and helps cultivate the talents of academically gifted youth. Since 1980, more than 1.5 million students have taken part in the program that is supported by student fees and donations from individuals, corporations and foundations.

Other local students are listed below by name in order of hometown and online at www.news.ku.edu/2009/may/29/duketip.shtml.

From Chanute: Robert T. Klauman.

From Parsons: Klayton L. Beasley; Brett M. Collins Parsons; Sierra N. Goddard; Brock S. Willard.