



Stephanie  
**Kight**  
CEO,

Planned  
Parenthood of  
Southwest and  
Central Florida

**S**he's Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida's new CEO having started in February. Now with PP 15 years, most recently, at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Stephanie brings decades of experience in health care business strategy, brand and marketing, public policy advocacy, and program development. Stephanie also held senior leadership roles at Planned Parenthood affiliates in Ohio and California.

PPSWCF serves over 51,000 patients at its 11 Health Care Centers in 22 counties across Florida. Her predecessor, Barbara Zdravecky, dealt admirably for over 24 years with the attacks and threats that PP receives. Stephanie knows the CEO spot comes with that but is well-trained to stand firm. "For every person who belittles Planned Parenthood there are ten who support us. I stay focused on that."



**I**nterviewing a newcomer to this community makes me always want to ask what her first impressions are. Stephanie Kight, Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida's new CEO, who has lived in a number of places including Washington, D.C., as well as California and Ohio and overseas in England, observed that, "This is a community that knows not just to welcome you...Sarasota makes room for another person at the table."

At the time of this interview Stephanie was but eight weeks into her new job and readily admits to not knowing exactly how the security works, as well as having some computer issues and was still learning local places and names. And her office is still the way Barbara Zdravecky (her long-time predecessor) left it. The reason for all this is she's been on the road visiting PP's 11 Health Care Centers spread out over 22 counties. Staff, she admits, is her top priority.

I mention that this chapter of PP started in 1966, just four years after schools here were desegregated in a seemingly odd sequence in history. But tapping into her 15 plus years at PP in policy and advocacy, she notes that back in the 60s, Nixon and even Reagan took "a pragmatic view" towards family planning.

Google Nixon and Planned Parenthood and you'll find this interesting tidbit: "It is my view that no American woman should be denied access to family planning assistance because of her economic condition. We know that involuntary childbearing often results in poor physical and emotional health for all members of the family...Unwanted or untimely childbearing is one of several forces which are driving many families into poverty or keeping them in that condition."

These words did not come from a Planned Parenthood official or a "radical feminist." They came from President Richard Nixon in the 1960s. Another history flashback: in 1965 The Supreme Court (in *Griswold v. Connecticut*) gave married couples the right to use birth control, ruling that it was protected in the Constitution as a right to privacy. That's 53 years of access to birth control. Anyone want to go back to 1964?

Stephanie adds to this "way we were" moment by noting that Betty Ford and the recently passed Barbara Bush were pro choice. Stephanie also relays that Barbara Pierce Bush (granddaughter of the late matriarch) strongly supports Planned Parenthood and even spoke at a PP luncheon in Bush-country Texas.

I also found that Laura Bush broke with her husband and his administration by saying she backs abortion. Heck, even Prescott Bush (President George Herbert Walker Bush's father) served as the treasurer of the first national capital campaign of Planned Parenthood in 1947.

And then, to wildly condense the story after that, women's right to choose and make their own decisions regarding their bodies has been used politically to divide both political parties into imprecise and strict "pro life" or "pro choice" encampments. Even the wording is contentious.

Back in the day women made their own choices. Is it any wonder that "pro choice" advocates now state simply "trust women?" And it's not just abortion—again—being challenged, it's access to reproductive services...things like family planning, birth control, etc.

The federal Title X grant program, which provides planning services to low-income families, was championed by President Nixon and George H.W. Bush. In 1970, Title X of the Public Health Services Act became law. It established public funding for family planning and sex education programs in the U.S.

While Stephanie's organization receives no Title X funding, it's alarming to read that in the year 2018, Teresa Manning, the deputy assistant secretary of the Office of Population Affairs charged with administering the Title X program, believes that "contraception doesn't work" and that "family planning is something that occurs between a husband and a wife and God."

It's all enough to make you check what year it is despite the well known fact that more than 99% of women aged 15-44 who have ever had sexual intercourse have used at least one contraceptive method. How times have changed—politically. To somewhat counter all that anti-choice blowback, Planned Parenthood's policy, Stephanie explains, "is based on facts," believing that "women should have equity."

Back to present day, and perhaps an easier discussion is how it feels to follow in the

path of Barbara Zdravecky. (Barbara retired at the end of January from PPSWCF after 24 years as CEO)? Actually, Stephanie has known Barbara for some 15 years and was aware of her work in Florida but adds, "You here (in Florida) didn't see what a leader she was nationally." Calling PPSWCF an "amazing organization to step into," Stephanie admits that she has "no fears."

It helps that Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) was designated as a top-ranked nonprofit by the philanthropic experts through Philanthropedia in 2014 and that Planned Parenthood Federation of America was rated 4 stars overall by Charity Navigator in 2018.

According to her bio, "Kight brings decades of experience in health care business strategy, brand and marketing, public policy advocacy, and program development to Planned Parenthood of Southwest and Central Florida. Stephanie has held senior leadership roles at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and at Planned Parenthood affiliates in Ohio and California."

This seasoned and savvy executive grew up on a farm and early on aspired to a career in "radio or TV" wanting to be on the air, wanting to be in the news industry. Now with PP 15 years, most recently, at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Stephanie brings solid marketing chops. While she doesn't have the medical background of her predecessor (who was an RN) she is astute in areas of branding and messaging—vital to reaching the predominantly young people who come into PP. For example, Stephanie refined Planned Parenthood's brand nationwide and launched the Federation's first sex education text messaging program.

A vital role Planned Parenthood plays is with young people. Some come in on their own, but many bring a parent. Kight feels sex should be discussed at home, but adds that PP can be what she calls a "technical guide." And even if parents are comfortable talking about sex as well as birth control, "Parents might not have the information on all the latest options." PP also talks to parents about how to talk to their kids. PP, she says, is comfortable being a "guide that helped parent and child" and adds that, "we have no intention of supplanting that role."

Past is not prologue to today, sadly. But Planned Parenthood—marking its 102nd anniversary—is, according to Kight, one of the "most trusted organizations" in the country. An interesting fact illustrates that. She points out that her PP serves some 500 trans clients in its centers. Why? "Because they feel safe here...and know they won't be judged."

But back to Sarasota and first impressions. She must know how we do like to do a good gala or two (PP is exceptionally good at splashy, meaningful fundraisers that happen to raise lots of money). Stephanie sees the galas as "social responsibility," explaining that, "This is a town where people are cared for" and something like a gala shows they care. She adds, though, "young people are not coming to galas but, they are passionate and they are here, they're organizing and we need to make space for them."

She's also observed that people here are "proud of their community" and while she's rather humble, she'll admit that they've added, "we're excited for you."

PPSWCF serves over 51,000 patients at its 11 Health Care Centers in 22 counties across Florida. In 1966 they saw their first patients in the basement of Sarasota Memorial Hospital, offering reproductive health care, sexually transmitted disease diagnosis and treatment, and contraception options.

Their beautiful downtown office and clinic sit in a decidedly mixed-use area where their neighbors are the Salvation Army, the Sarasota School of Arts and Science and an up-market furniture store. A man was sleeping outside the PP building as we stood outside and Stephanie noticed, but wasn't alarmed. "We kind of just let him sleep there."

For now, Stephanie is renting and when her husband, Steve, joins her (he's still working in Ohio) they'll consider buying a home. Her predecessor dealt admirably with the attacks and threats that PP receives. Stephanie will not be spared that challenge either. Stephanie knows the CEO spot comes with that but is well-trained to stand firm. "For every person who belittles Planned Parenthood there are ten who support us. I stay focused on that. And then I walk the beach." Sounds like she already knows a lot about Sarasota. ♻️

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