

A Working Woman's Network Into Motherhood

BOISE, Idaho—Mary Cunningham Agee insists she is doing today what she was trying to accomplish at the former Bendix Corp. a decade ago: help women gain options in their lives. That wasn't understood then, she says, because her relationship to the CEO—now her husband—was the stuff of business gossip. She wants it clear now, in relation to her four-year-old Nurturing Network.

A feminist basis for the group might seem odd because its mission is to provide alternatives to abortion, access to which is

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a litmus issue for many female careerists. But Mrs. Agee sees herself providing a truer "choice" for working women than merely the desperate ending of a pregnancy to salvage a personal future.

Before she gained notoriety in the early 1980s as the personification of Ms. Fast Track—Harvard Business School to the corporate suite while still in her 20s—Mary Cunningham had been a logic major at Wellesley. That trained her to realize, she says, that "the life vs. choice debate will go on forever, because they are not opposites."

A miscarriage six years ago engaged her emotionally, she says, in the tender trials of maternal loss. Her informal surveys convinced her that most abortions are forced by job demands, associates at school, family or mate. She is outraged by this "ultimate violence to women," she says, and the Nurturing Network is her response.

Mrs. Agee pulls from her desk a "data base" of employers and colleges that will arrange quickly to maintain the career or schooling of a pregnant woman while she escapes an unaccepting or pressurized environment. If the woman wishes to change addresses as well, a "nurturing family" resembling the home in which she was raised can be found for her, rent free, nearly anywhere in the country.

Building the network began with Mrs. Agee calling 15 contacts from her corporate days. William Agee, now the CEO of Morrison Knudsen Corp., has provided names. The attraction of more than 1,000 clients was largely by word of mouth.

For now, all calls come through a small suite of offices on Main Street in Boise (208 344-7200). The Agees and their two young children moved here in 1988.

It's not life in the big city but Mrs.

Agee, 39, still thinks of herself as a strategic planner. Before starting Nurturing Network, she says, she did an "industry analysis" to determine that most abortion-alternative programs were for teen-agers, while 80% of those facing a "crisis pregnancy" were older. Referrals to homes for unwed mothers were what these women were offered. "Tell me that a 24-year-old graduate of a good state university is going to think that's viable," she says. "She's not. She's going to say, 'Well, I guess it doesn't happen to women like me. I have one choice.'"

Mrs. Agee's counselors tell these women they are many, and that they have other choices. Sometimes handholding is enough: The woman has medical benefits through work and a sufficiently supportive family, and chooses to stick it out. When that won't do, the network is activated. Mrs. Agee cites a recent client with a background not unlike her own. The 28-year-old Ivy Leaguer worked at a Wall Street investment bank—for the father of her baby-to-be. "And as far as he was concerned, the baby went or she went—and he could make it happen," she recounts. "You go, 'That's illegal, they can't do that.' They do it. It happens all the time. Suddenly your work history looks a little different. Your assignment wasn't handled properly. We all know that you can be made to fail. I know that better than anybody."

Nurturing Network seeks to empower its clients. In this case, "We moved her 3,000 miles away to another investment-banking house—not as big, not as prominent, but a good assignment working for a senior partner, where she is going to work corporate finance, she's going to have some interesting deals." The woman plans to have and keep the child and stay on the West Coast.

Although most of the clients aren't in "glamorous" jobs, Mrs. Agee says, and may only need secretarial work, the stars stand out because those women are assumed to plan their pregnancies as carefully as they would a sales presentation.

Mrs. Agee recalls helping a Fortune 500 riser relocate to New Mexico, where she took one of the "assistant to the boss" positions that is typically arranged. She gave her baby up for adoption and returned to her old

job. "Her current employer has no idea what happened during those five months," Mrs. Agee says.

A parent's supposed illness might be a pretext for such a personal leave. In such a situation, the woman "won't make a financial killing but she won't need to," Mrs. Agee says. "She wants to keep her resume intact. That's what's motivating her."

Not all fast-trackers will avoid slipping a step or two. "I can't guarantee that about anyone, much less someone with a crisis on their hands," Mrs. Agee says. But she maintains that, by influencing employment practices on the margin, she's helping to overcome a "signal I saw being sent in society, that women could either be mothers or working women. The signal for me is so dangerous because it separates a lot of women from an integral part of themselves. It was something I almost made the mistake of doing. . . . It's a very easy pattern to get into, because it reinforces itself—you surround yourself with other women making that 'choice.'"

Mrs. Agee says she hopes soon to be able to reveal at least four employers that have been working with her quietly while watching to make sure she stays clear of the politics of abortion. She counts on greater support as "more and more corporations that are running scared from organizations like Planned Parenthood are looking at Nurturing Network and saying this is great, because you're not in the middle of the debate." Because she envisions "not steady growth, but major growth," Mrs. Agee wants to franchise her concept around the country.

Mrs. Agee portrays her husband as exemplary of enlightened management and says that was what attracted her to him and Bendix. "I was very idealistic," she says. "I thought that you could accomplish wonderful societal reforms through [corporate] organizations, not only by how you handle your employees but by supporting a CEO who had those policies." But her "iconoclastic" ways weren't understood. Now, she says, she has adopted a more traditional service-group approach.

Although Mrs. Agee is Catholic and arms of the church have been among the most active promoters of her network, she doesn't mention religion until prodded, and then says only, "Catholicism is utterly consistent with what I'm doing but it is not the motivation for what I'm doing."

Readers of her 1984 book, "Powerplay," found Mary Cunningham driven by many things. It seems the searing experiences in a male-dominated world linger, bubbling up amid the passion of Mary Agee that powers the Nurturing Network.



Mary C. Agee