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On 'Friday Night Lights,' a brave and honest abortion story

By Gloria Feldt

Sunday, July 25, 2010; B02

"I'm pregnant. And I don't know what I'm going to do. And I am. So. Scared."

With those tearful words, Becky Sproles, a 10th-grader in fictional Dillon, Tex., confided her predicament to her friend Tim Riggins in a recent episode of the NBC series "Friday Night Lights."

My visceral memory of the fear and vulnerability of teen pregnancy isn't my only connection with Becky's story. Dillon is based on the dusty West Texas boom-and-bust oil town of Odessa, where, 15 years old and pregnant, I moved with my new husband in 1957.

As chronicled by H.G. "Buzz" Bissinger in his 1990 bestseller "Friday Night Lights," life in Odessa revolves around football at Permian High (go, Mojo!), the school from which my three children graduated. (My husband and I hailed from an even smaller West Texas town, where our football team was truly the only game around; my high school classmates still play the 8-millimeter film of our state championship game at every reunion. Odessa at least had supermarkets and movie theaters.)

Although he is from New Jersey, Bissinger pegged the city's hardscrabble culture, flat landscape and flatlined sense of possibility pretty well. His book has given rise to a 2004 movie and now to NBC's critically acclaimed series, which is in its fourth season.

I watched "Friday Night Lights" out of nostalgia when it debuted, but my attention wandered -- until this season, when Becky's story line brought me back. I feared that the series would treat her pregnancy like a plot point in a soap opera, but I was heartened to find something entirely different. The show has portrayed her options and her choice to have an abortion responsibly, sympathetically, and without histrionics. It has also exposed with unusual honesty and courage the roiling politics of abortion.

My teenage world was very different from Becky's. Since 1957, we've seen technological revolutions from the birth control pill to the Internet, as well as laws expanding women's rights. But for all this progress, the way we talk about women and pregnancy -- in the media and in pop culture -- has moved backward.

Even before *Roe v. Wade* legalized it in 1973, abortion was common. Most everyone knew of someone who had died from a back-alley abortion, or a child who had been orphaned by one. The abortion rights movement was, as a result, intimately connected to the larger women's rights movement.

Media portrayals of unintended pregnancy and abortion reflected this reality, often showing women as victims of injustice. And Hollywood told straightforward stories, such as that of the

brassy feminist title character of the TV show "Maude," played by Bea Arthur. When Maude, the mother of an adult daughter, became pregnant at 47, she went through a difficult process of weighing her options and her values. Like Becky, she decided that she couldn't go through with her pregnancy.

But just when reproductive rights seemed won and settled, antiabortion forces fueled a vicious backlash. And as the emerging political right was turning abortion into a wedge issue, our common reference point was changing. Fewer and fewer people knew about illegal abortion's toll first hand. Making matters worse, abortion all but disappeared from TV, movies and media reports, except as the subject of shouting matches.

As organized opposition to abortion grew more zealous and sometimes violent, stories about sex, childbearing and family formation -- whether reported or fictionalized -- devolved to a point where today, the a-word can't be uttered, let alone considered a real option. Of course, it is still a real option: Although most American women become mothers at some point in their lives, one-third of them also have abortions, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

You certainly wouldn't know that from popular culture. In the 2007 movie "Juno," the title character, a pregnant high schooler, initially plans to have an abortion. But the dismal clinic she visits conforms to antiabortion stereotypes, and Juno predictably bolts. In 2007's "Knocked Up," abortion is jokingly euphemized as "rhymes with smashmortion" -- and the moral of the story is that all a high-achieving woman needs to do to be happy is to stay with the mediocre man who impregnated her and have his baby.

Against this backdrop, the straightforward way "Friday Night Lights" portrays teenage sex, pregnancy and abortion is unusual -- and brave.

Becky's truth-telling episode is titled "I Can't." That's searingly accurate once you know the character's backstory: Her bartender single mother was about her age when she gave birth to Becky, who is struggling to break the pattern of poverty and powerlessness in her world of West Texas hurt.

The real-life version of Dillon was more than just where I raised my family. Odessa was where my growing understanding of the complexity of childbearing decisions came full circle. I loved my children more than anything, but I came to realize that I would have been a much better parent if I'd waited 10 or 20 years to have them. I was capable of tending to their physical needs, but it takes maturity to care for children's emotional needs.

Odessa is also where I started my 30-year career with Planned Parenthood, as executive director of the city's fledgling affiliate in 1974. And it was there that I began to realize that if a woman can't own her body, including whether and when to give it over to childbearing, she has no power to determine anything else about her life. The stories I heard from women there, and in the decades since, about some of the most difficult decisions they'd ever have to make, are all but absent from our culture.

Becky's story doesn't end with her choice to terminate her pregnancy. Before making her decision, she sought advice from a local principal, Tami Taylor (a central character played by the Emmy-nominated Connie Britton). Tami counseled her, according to protocol, about adoption and support services for pregnant teens. When Becky asked about "not having the baby," Tami said, "I can direct you to literature" about that option.

I knew right then she'd have hell to pay, and indeed, she becomes embroiled in controversy over her role in the teenager's decision. Becky's choice turns into a town-wide crusade:

Margaret Cafferty, the preacher's wife whose football star son, Luke, impregnated Becky, tries to persuade the school board to fire Tami. Tami wins that round, but stay tuned for next season: I bet we haven't seen the last of Margaret, or of this story.

Until then, I want to hug the necks of everyone associated with "Friday Night Lights" for being courageous enough to tell it like it is. I hope they win all four of the Emmys they were nominated for this month. By telling Becky's story, they empower women and girls who have struggled and made their best, most moral decisions despite difficult circumstances.

This isn't just a television show. Media portrayals, real or fictional, don't merely inform us -- they form us. And they miss the profound truth of women's lives when they reduce broad issues such as sexual and childbearing choices to one word -- abortion -- and reduce abortion to a polarized, black-and-white debate. In the fictional Dillon, as in the very real Odessa, abortion is most honestly and accurately discussed within the context of an individual story, whether mine, Becky's or yours.

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