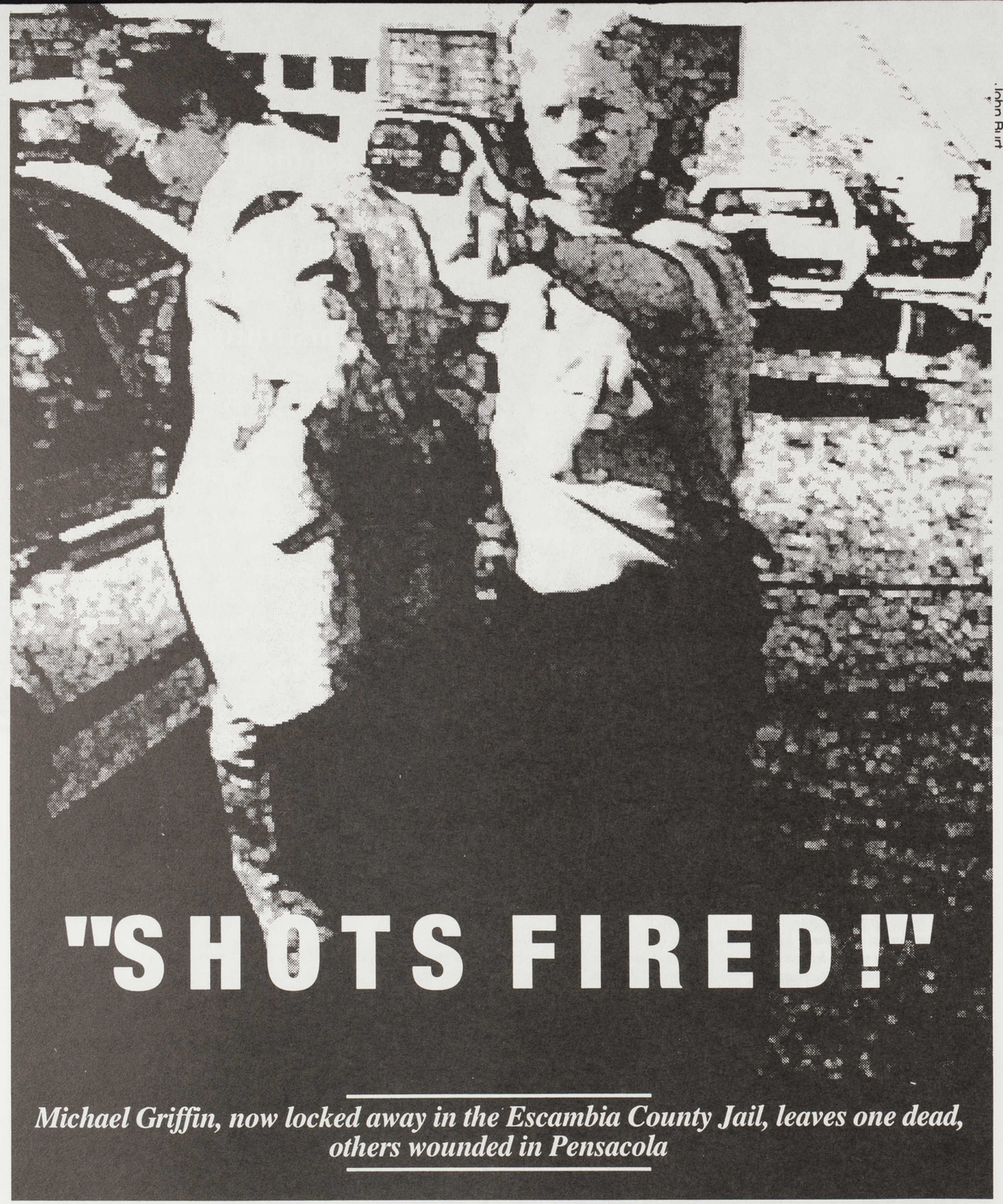


John Burt

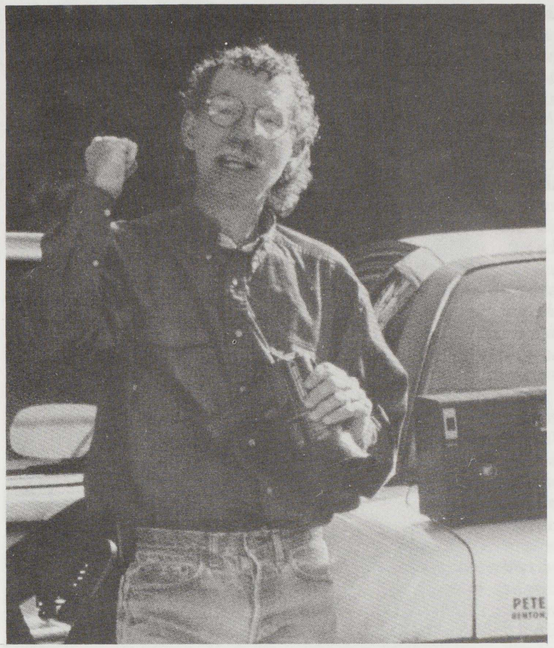
"SHOTS FIRED!"

Michael Griffin, now locked away in the Escambia County Jail, leaves one dead, others wounded in Pensacola

by Cathy Ramey

Within hours of the event news wire services around the world began humming with the story. An abortionist, arriving at one of the facilities on his killing circuit, was dead. The alleged perpetrator was in custody, media representatives from around the country were headed toward Pensacola, and the war against child-killing was forcibly being propelled toward what many fear is a new frontier.

The "shots heard round the world" came from a gun carried by 31-year-old Michael Griffin, a chemist and newcomer to the pro-life conflict. While a small group paced the sidewalk to picket the Pensacola Women's Services mill, Griffin, dressed in a Sunday suit and wearing dark glasses, fired four shots from a .38 caliber pistol. Three of them landed in the back of David Gunn, himself a contract killer for as many as seven different mills in three states.



Gunn taunts pro-lifers outside an Alabama clinic in January.

John Burt, well-known anti-abortion activist and founder of Our Father's House ministry, remembers that only the night before the picket Griffin called his home and asked what time the group would be meeting. After assuring John that he was planning to attend, Michael hung up. For Burt the contact was not unlike many calls that might come in before a public protest. The man that John Burt and others describe as "just quiet, a family man" gave no indication that anything other than a desire to join in a protest occupied his mind.

The March 10 picket was the result of tracking Gunn's baby-killing activities at the Pensacola Women's Services mill over a two month period. Burt's plan was to expose the relatively new tenants hiding out in suite #46 at a village-type mall of legitimate businesses; tanning salon, hair styling, gift shops, and food establishments. The rumor was that another baby-killing business had tried to set up shop in the same Cordova Square Shopping Center, but had been pressured to leave by merchants unwilling to share business space with an abortionist. A hand-printed note indicating that "patients" were to check-in upstairs was the only notice that a business had leased the corner space, and every indication was that the a.m. protest would send mild shock waves throughout the outdoor mall.

The group gathered at about 9:00 in the morning, prayed, and by 9:30 — banners and picket signs in hand — fewer than 20 pro-lifers marched in front of Gunn's killing center, to the rounded curb jutting out 25 feet from the end of the building, and back to an imaginary line just short of the next business suite over. Several of the regular activists anticipated that police would be ordering the group off of the sidewalk and away from the shopping center sometime within the first hour.

In a climate of confusion over first amendment legal rights and concern that pro-life activities were unprotected in practice, the strategy included avoiding any conflict with police during the protest. If asked to leave, picketers were prepared to march out of the area and protest on more familiar territory until the right-of-access issue was clarified.

Seventeen-year-old Colleen Shirley of Milton Florida watched Gunn's car make its way through the square. She remembers, "We had been picketing for about 10...15...maybe 20 minutes, I don't remember, when Dr. Gunn pulled up. And he looked at me and I looked at him, and he just shook his head and he kept [driving] on back...." Holding onto a sign that displayed the head of a baby — dismembered by abortion — Colleen kept up the pace of picketing, just a little bit saddened by the obvious disdain that David Gunn felt over her protest.

Floyd Murray, who runs a support ministry for men who have suffered the loss of a child through abortion, was the acknowledged leader for that day. He knew David Gunn, often traded comments with the man while "sharing Jesus," and was one of those who saw the abortionist arrive shortly after 9:30. But, on March 10, Murray states "the Lord told me 'No'" as he considered calling out another repentance and salvation message to David Gunn. His car had just turned the corner toward a back parking area beyond the grassy corner. Murray repeats, "I was in a position where it would have been easy to still be seen by the protesters but be heard by him" as he walked toward the back entrance to the building. "But the Lord said, 'Not today.'"

Leading the others in almost single-file fashion, Murray made one more loop past the killing center, up toward the next suite, and back to the grassy corner, just in time to hear what he clearly recognized as gunfire. Under other circumstances it might have given him more cause for concern, but on that day there was every reason to believe that the situation was already under control. The mill had reacted to the picket as expected, calling for a patrol car, and if there was a problem, the officer who had responded would give some indication.

Several of those who were marching behind Murray thought that something had gone on in a building down the street from the picket site. Moments earlier, police, fire department personnel and an ambulance crew had arrived in response to an emergency call concerning what turned out to be a non-emergent injury at one of the other businesses. But at the time that shots were fired no one knew just what had brought them all out into Cordova Square. When the echo of gunfire caught their attention, it was natural to turn toward the area where emergency vehicles lined the street and away from the area where

Picketers march in front of the mill just moments before the shooting.