News

Joe Scheidler, the founder of the Pro-Life Action League, is seen in this 2016 file photo outside

Joe Scheidler, the founder of the Pro-Life Action League, is seen in this 2016 file photo outside a new Planned Parenthood building in Washington. (CNS/Lisa Johnston, St. Louis Review)



by Catholic News Service

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Chicago — January 19, 2021

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Joe Scheidler, founder of the Pro-Life Action League in Chicago and one of the towering figures of the pro-life movement for decades, died of pneumonia Jan. 18 surrounded by his family at his home on Chicago's Northwest Side. He was 93.

Funeral arrangements were pending.

Widely known as the "godfather of pro-life activism," Scheidler began his life's work fighting abortion in 1973, shortly after the Supreme Court's *Roe* v. *Wade* decision legalizing it. He founded the league in 1980 to recruit and equip pro-life Americans to be a voice for unborn children in their own communities.

"My father's proudest accomplishment was the pro-life work of those he inspired to take an active role in the fight against abortion, the greatest injustice of our time," Eric Scheidler said in a statement.

"For years, people have been telling me about the talk or protest where they met my father, and how his words and example prompted them to do more than just talk,

but to take responsibility for addressing the injustice," he said.

Joseph Scheidler was born Sept. 7, 1927, in Hartford City, Indiana. After serving in the U.S. Navy as a military policeman at the end of World War II, he earned a bachelor's degree in communications at the University of Notre Dame and a master's degree at Marquette University.

He spent eight years in religious life, studying for the Catholic priesthood at St. Meinrad Seminary in Indiana.

After discerning that God was not calling him to the priesthood, he served as a teacher at Mundelein College, during which time he chaperoned a group of students on a pilgrimage to march with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965.

"It's fitting that my father died on the day when Americans remember the legacy of Martin Luther King," said Eric Scheidler. "Seeing the impact that regular Americans could have by taking action against racial injustice inspired my father to mobilize Americans in the same way in the fight against the injustice of abortion."

That story and many others from his five decades of pro-life activism are recounted his 2016 memoir *Racketeer for Life: Fighting the Culture of Death From the Sidewalk to the Supreme Court*.

Scheidler's career as a pro-life activist took him to every state in U.S. and countries on four continents, as well as through countless court battles, including the *NOW* v. *Scheidler RICO* case.

The longest case in U.S. federal court history, it made three trips to the U.S. Supreme Court, including 8-1 and 8-0 rulings in 2003 and 2006 "that fully vindicated him," the Pro-Life Action League said in a news release.

"His 1985 book *Closed: 99 Ways to Stop Abortion*, a centerpiece of the *NOW* v. *Scheidler* trial, became the manual for pro-life activists throughout the world," the release said.

The suit was filed under the claim that Scheidler and other defendants had violated the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, or RICO, "through a conspiracy to prevent women from accessing abortion services through the threat of violence or the implied threat of violence."

Ultimately the Supreme Court rejected attempts to use racketeering laws against abortion clinic protesters.

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With his ultimate victory in the landmark case, Scheidler "secured the rights of pro-life advocates across the United States to witness for life and protest outside of abortion clinics," said the Thomas More Society, a Chicago-based not-for-profit law firm "actively involved in preserving the sanctity of human life and protecting the rights of life advocates."

The firm said in a statement it credits its existence to "Scheidler's iconic involvement with life advocacy."

"Joe represents the kind of commitment that inspires pro-life Americans working to address the human rights issue of our day," Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life of America, said in a Jan. 18 statement. "When *Roe* tragically legalized abortion, Joe left his career to dedicate his life to saving babies and their mothers from the predators of abortion. He will be missed."

"In our early years, he was one of the people who taught us how to be pro-life activists," said Janet Morana, executive director of Priests for Life. "He was an inspiration to us and gave us practical advice drawn from his many years as a passionate and fearless champion of the unborn."

Morana and Fr. Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, both recalled their long partnership with the Scheidlers and the Pro-Life Action League.

"I have countless memories of Joe, whether we were together fishing on Lake Michigan, praying to the Lord inside the Supreme Court as they were hearing his case, or saving babies in front of abortion mills. Every conversation with him was an inspiration to double my pro-life efforts," Pavone said.

Scheidler is survived by his wife, Ann; son Eric and six other children; and 26 grandchildren and one great-granddaughter.