

The Choose Life Story

Choose Life....A simple statement with an important message. But it took 4 years to become a reality. Florida was the first state to approve a Choose Life license plate. And the bill was challenged every step of the way by those who did not favor the pro-life position.

For many years Florida has made Specialty license plates available in support of many varied interest groups including universities, sports teams, and environmental and social causes.

Today, for a donation of \$22 you are able to use this same method to "**Take a Stand for Life**," thanks to Marion County Commissioner Randy Harris. In 1996, Commissioner Harris had an idea to create a license plate to raise funds, and awareness, in support of women in crisis pregnancies who would commit to carrying their unplanned pregnancies to term and making an adoption plan for these babies, instead of aborting them. He began a grass roots campaign to raise \$30,000 for the application fee that was required by the state to initiate the program. The Florida statute also required 10,000 signatures of people who commit to buying the plate if it becomes available. A non-profit corporation, **Choose Life, Inc.**, was formed to raise the funds and secure the necessary signatures.

On February 4, 1997 the effort was launched and by March 1, 1997 the \$30,000 application fee was delivered along with 14,500 signatures to the Florida Department of Motor Vehicles. A completely volunteer effort, this was a remarkable accomplishment and is testimony to the grassroots support the **Choose Life** license plate had and to what people can achieve when they believe what they are doing is right. **Choose Life, Inc.** was headed by Randy Harris, Jim Steel and Russ Amerling, ably assisted by a small army of faithful helpers from Pensacola to Key West who brought the needs of women in crisis pregnancy situations to the attention of the Florida Legislature. Their goal was to provide funds to front line "life affirming" agencies to help them educate abortion vulnerable women about the benefits of adoption over abortion and assist those making this difficult, but mature and unselfish decision.

Disappointingly, the legislation did not make it through the Senate Transportation Committee the first year application was made; however, the application was resubmitted for the 1998 Legislative Session and this time it did. The House and the Senate both passed the bill with an overwhelming majority, and then it was sent to Governor Chiles for his approval. Despite thousands of Floridians having expressed their support of the bill and urging the Governor to sign it, he chose instead to veto it.

The **Choose Life** team was extremely disappointed... but the veto made the news, NATIONWIDE! Soon, wire services and the Internet were running stories all over the country and the **Choose Life** office was contacted by groups and individuals in 35 other states, all asking how to get a **Choose Life** plate approved in their state. It was obvious this had become a national movement.

With renewed enthusiasm, **Choose Life, Inc.** asked Senator Jim Sebesta and Representative Beverly Kilmer to resubmit the bill. Representative Kilmer did a wonderful job shepherding the bill through and again, it passed with a wide margin in the House on a bi-partisan vote. However, unlike the previous year in the Senate, where it passed by a wide margin, that year the vote was extremely close and Senator Sebesta had to work hard to get it passed. The language of the bill was carefully crafted to accomplish the goal of the Choose Life, Inc., which was to assist pregnant women who do not want to parent to make an adoption plan. The bill had to primarily deal with adoption or it would have been impossible to pass, since this was the first such specialty plate of its kind in the nation. It had to be acceptable to as many Senators as possible and even then, it was passed in the last 15 minutes of the legislative session by only one vote. Finally on June 10, 1999, our new Governor, Jeb Bush signed it into law. Florida became the first state in the country to offer an official license plate that supports adoption as a better choice than abortion.

In November 1999, before the plate could go on sale, the National Organization for Women filed a lawsuit against the State of Florida to try to prevent them from distributing the **Choose Life** license plate. The suit languished in Palm Beach County for eight months, but was finally ordered sent to Tallahassee where the tags were finally released to the public on August 11, 2000. The court in Tallahassee eventually ruled in favor of the plate in November 2003. However, because of the national publicity caused by the lawsuit, **Choose Life, Inc.** helped create **Choose Life** license plate initiatives in 46 states.

In 2007, the **Choose Life** license plate was the 8th best selling specialty tag out of the 104 such plates released in Florida. As of February 29, 2008 it had sold or renewed over 280,847 plates and raised \$5,616,946.96. These funds are in addition to the incredible publicity value of Choose Life license plates on 40,000 vehicles driving all over Florida every day."