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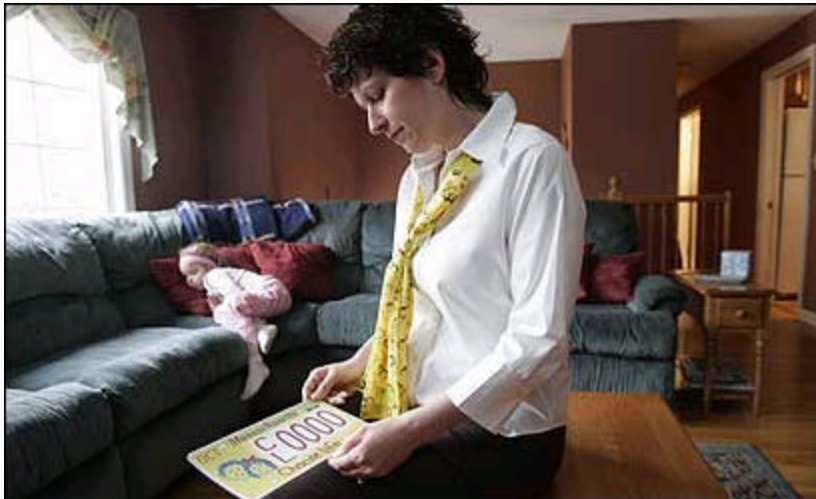
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Driving force

The Boston Globe

A Wakefield woman gathers support for a state license plate urging adoption over abortion, but critics decry the effort as politically charged



Merry Nordeen held a mockup of a Choose Life license plate at her home in Wakefield. (Globe Staff Photo / John Bohn)

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff | May 5, 2006

The images on the 12 specialty license plates issued in Massachusetts are innocuous. One features a Cape Cod lighthouse, another a sunny drawing of stick-figure children, another a brook trout leaping from the water.

But a Wakefield woman is hoping to create a state license plate that sends a far more controversial message: encouraging pregnant women to choose adoption over abortion.

Merry Nordeen is gathering support for a "Choose Life" license plate, part of a nationwide effort by abortion opponents to raise money for groups that support adoption. In some of the 12 other states with Choose Life license plates, critics who contend that the plates are political statements have filed lawsuits, and one case from Tennessee may end up going to the US Supreme

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Court.

Three years ago, Nordeen, who opposes abortion, contacted the Florida-based group, Choose Life Inc., that promotes the special plates, sunny yellow with "Choose Life" written in a child's handwriting above a crayon drawing of two children. If she is successful in bringing them to Massachusetts, she said, she hopes the Registry of Motor Vehicles will allow the same design.

"I thought, 'Gee, I'd really like to have a plate like that on my car,' " she said. "Unfortunately, it was not available in Massachusetts."

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Last weekend, Nordeen took her campaign to the Internet, asking supporters by e-mail to back her effort to collect 3,000 registrations by summer. If she gathers \$40 registration checks from 3,000 people who agree to buy the license plates, the state will issue them, said Amie O'Hearn, a spokeswoman for the Registry.

But a leader of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts argued that the Registry should not allow Choose Life plates.

"Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts believes that state government should not be sanctioning political messages on license plates," Dianne Luby, the group's president and chief executive, said in a written statement. "Specialty plates are an important source of revenue for causes like cancer research and environmental protection. They shouldn't be used for political slogans."

Massachusetts has 12 special license plates that support causes from environmental protection to curing cancer to the families of those killed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. None supports political or religious groups.

If the Choose Life plates are approved, \$12 of the \$40 fee would go to the state. The other \$28 would go to the groups supported by the Massachusetts Choose Life chapter, headed by Nordeen and her husband, Kenneth, who are the parents of six children. Nordeen said the group would award the money to antiabortion organizations that submitted grant applications, from pregnancy counseling groups to agencies that place children for adoption.

States in the midst of legal battles over the Choose Life plates are looking to see whether the US Supreme Court weighs in. Lower federal courts have differed on whether the plates should be allowed. In some states, including Illinois and Arizona, groups have sued state officials for refusing to allow the plates.

In the Tennessee case, the ACLU is arguing that the state is violating the free speech rights of some residents by allowing some political messages on license plates such as "Choose Life," but banning others that support abortion rights. On Monday, the ACLU asked the US Supreme Court to rule that Choose Life plates should not be allowed in Tennessee, where legislators have approved the plates but rejected a similar license plate promoting abortion rights. Groups

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Choose Life license plates available.

"With all of these cases cropping up around the country, it seems the Supreme Court needs to provide some framework for how these cases should be resolved," said Brigitte Amiri, a staff attorney in the ACLU's reproductive freedom project. "There's clearly confusion among the federal courts about what the proper results should be."

The state chapter of the ACLU has not received any complaints about the Choose Life license plate, said staff attorney Sarah Wunsch. Planned Parenthood is not pursuing a Massachusetts plate supporting abortion rights, spokesman Angus McQuilken said.

The plates have been lucrative for the nonprofit groups they fund. Nationally, the plates have raised \$5 million for pregnancy resource centers, maternity homes, and nonprofit adoption agencies. About \$4 million came from Florida residents who have chosen the license plate, the country's first, since it became available in 2000, said Russ Amerling, national coordinator of Choose Life Inc.

In Massachusetts, however, the Legislature does not need to approve the special license plate. Any nonprofit group can receive a special plate, as long as it submits 3,000 registrations.

"If you meet the criteria under the law, then you can have a plate," O'Hearn said.

If a nonprofit group supporting abortion rights met the same criteria and applied for special license plates, she said, the Registry would approve its application. No abortion rights groups have yet applied.

Kathleen Burge can be reached at kburge@globe.com. ■

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