

# PRO-LIFE Magazine

Fall 2019

## THE THRIVE NATION PHENOMENON

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## WOMEN'S HEALTHCARE



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## THRIVE NATION PHENOMENON

An interview with Bridget VanMeans

**Brett Attebery:** I am very honored to welcome today, Bridget VanMeans. Bridget is the President and Vision Leader of the Thrive Nation Phenomenon. Thrive is a non-profit organization that empowers people to make life-affirming and healthy decisions about sex, pregnancy and relationships.

Bridget has led the charge for an abortion-free Missouri and is recognized as a key player in the near elimination of abortion in that state. She is widely considered one of the key thought and innovation leaders in the life-affirming movement. Bridget is a frequent radio and TV news contributor and promises to deliver an exciting “Now” message for God’s faithful, spiked with humor and tons of passion. Bridget, welcome!

**Bridget VanMeans:** Thank you for having me!

**Brett:** Bridget, could you please give us a quick overview about the history of Thrive?

**Bridget:** In 1983, our founder, Mary Nelson, attended a private viewing of “Whatever Happened to the Human Race?” by Dr. Francis Schaeffer, who is one of the great pioneers of the pro-life movement. Mary was struck by two things. First, she couldn’t believe that this was happening, and that the church was essentially silent. Second, she said out loud, “God, I don’t know what You would ever have me do about this, but I am available.”

And from that one prayer, God began to move. Just around that time, Billy Graham, along with some other Christian leaders, was presenting the idea of a “Good Samaritan model” regarding abortion, versus a political model. And that would be about coming alongside a pregnant woman, providing her with resources and care that would equip her to choose life for her child.

So that was 1983. Mary approached that organization, which at the time was called Christian Action Council. It’s now called CareNet, one of the largest affiliate organizations for pregnancy help centers.

And Mary opened up her first help center within months! She got a lot of support from local churches. She ended up being one of the pioneers who traveled all over the country and Canada, teaching other women to start these centers. And she also ended up being one of the first to have multiple locations, as many as five centers. And she was one of the first to use ultrasound machines, once those were invented!

So we are very proud of our founder, Mary Nelson. We still have her with us. She’s in her 80s, and is a strikingly beautiful, magnificent woman. We are honored to be carrying on the legacy of her vision.

**Brett:** What a beautiful story! Share with us a little bit about your professional background. What brought you to Thrive, and how have you used your professional experience to transform Thrive’s strategy?

**Bridget:** I’m happy to do that. It really just points to God’s mastermind. I was raised by atheist parents. I had no exposure to God from the time I was young. I professionally modeled throughout all of my childhood years and my teen years. I think I did my first AT&T commercial when I was about four.

As I was modeling, I was interacting with some quite successful businessmen in the fashion industry. They thought I had business acumen, and one of them gave me an opportunity. And so it turned out that I had a natural gift for leadership, and I ended up making a transition from modeling into sales, and that opened some pretty incredible doors for me.

The most notable portion of my career, before I met the Lord, was that I became the Senior Regional Manager for Nutrisystem in Chicago. I was very young at that time, only 24 years old. My peers were all in their 40s. That opportunity led to my running about 25 centers in the Greater Chicago area. About 350 employees, \$35 million in revenue.

But even more importantly, I got to see the company grow from about a \$50 million company to a \$1.3 billion company, and we did that over a period of only four years.

That is a very rare, meteoric type of growth. It was a situation where we could solve all of our



Bridget VanMeans

problems with money. There was ample money. They were buying the best talent that you could buy in terms of retail services, medical services, rapid growth, and all of these exciting business components that most people would never have the opportunity to be part of.

So that meant my mentors were some of the best operators out there. Nutrisystem would recruit from Texaco, IBM, those kinds of companies, and GE. The President I reported to had been one of the top Texaco executives. Nutrisystem would hire these people called “Turnaround Kings.” These are guys who are able to walk into a failing business, and within about a year, turn it around. And so I received this priceless education in terms of leadership and mentoring teams.

Nutrisystem is different now, but when we had our brick and mortar, it was a medical model. So I was managing physicians, nurses, behavior modification specialists who were psychologists, and a sales force. The other thing that was very unique about it was that Nutrisystem was a female-oriented business model. 95 percent of our patients were women.

Only God could plant me in something like that, where I could gain experience that would prepare me to replicate a powerful business model in the women’s pregnancy care movement. The skills and experiences that I acquired married perfectly to what God had intended for ThriVe.

Now, I wouldn’t know that for another 10 years! But looking back on it, it’s just amazing.

At that time, I was very far from the Lord. I didn’t really know much about Him at all, and yet, there He was, in the center of my story, preparing me to lead the fastest growing, faith-based, life-affirming women’s healthcare model in the world!

I don’t think the Lord wanted me to think about this challenge like a religious person. In order to fully engage me, He didn’t want me to think like the other pregnancy help centers think.

**Brett:** It’s an amazing story! When I met with you earlier this year, you were talking about competition and market share. Those aren’t terms one hears often in the pregnancy help center movement. Could you share how your business philosophy drives what you do at ThriVe every day?

**Bridget:** I want to tell you something funny. When I became a believer, I gave up everything to follow Christ. It was basically like a Saul of Tarsus, very radical, dramatic salvation. I said to Him, “Lord, I’ll give up everything for You.” And He really did have me give up pretty much everything. That included giving up a very large profit sharing account that I had to live off of for a couple of years in order to follow Him, draining things down to zero.

But the one prayer I said was, “Lord, I will do anything for You. I just won’t do pro-life work!” That was my only limit. I would see these pro-life workers, and I just thought, “I could never do that.”

**Brett:** Proving once again that God does have a sense of humor!

**Bridget:** Right! He’s like, “Alright, Bridget. We’ll see about that.” But what He did with me was kind of really cool. When I decided to join ThriVe, they were spiraling down, less than 30 days away from bankruptcy. So when I drove into St. Louis with my daughter (I’m a single mom) and my two dogs, ThriVe had 21 days left. The organization was living off of a line of credit on a credit card. There was no money in the bank.

They had laid people off, and the donors were staying away by the thousands. So when I hit the ground, we had 21 days to turn things around, or everybody went home.

Because ThriVe was rapidly spiraling down, I

acted. If the organization had been doing well, I would have been tempted to adopt their existing ways of doing things. But because it was less than 30 days away from bankruptcy, I couldn’t afford to adopt their existing ways.

I don’t think the Lord wanted me to think about this challenge like a religious person. In order to fully engage me, He didn’t want me to think like the other pregnancy help centers think. What that did was engage in me that turnaround methodology I already knew so well. It activated all of my experience. All of that mentoring.

In fact, I went back to those mentors. I sent them the spreadsheets. I shared with them exactly what I was getting into. And some of my mentors, who’d blueprinted that turnaround method I had learned, were great Catholic men. They said that these principles will work, whether faith-based or not faith-based. These are principles that God will honor. These are basic business principles, in any situation.

Therefore, I came into ThriVe like a business person. And we really broke almost every paradigm. We tried to hold onto the sacred nature of the movement, but we were probably breaking most of the day-to-day operational perspectives and paradigms.

I had acquired “Kingdom etiquette,” so my motivations were different. My drives were different. My behavior was different. But then it turned out that the core business muscle that God had taught me had a worthy place in this work. And in fact, it ended up rocking the organization!

That strong, almost military-like discipline, in very aggressive, demanding environments, made me quite confident and fearless. I felt like I could do



it. I wasn’t afraid. I believed in the principles. I believed in myself. And I believed in God. I think that was an important ingredient.

The Lord dropped me into St. Louis, and we started hitting some home runs. And that started bringing some life back to the organization. And then success builds upon success. And so, you’re now seeing 10 years of work. We’ve built ThriVe to about 12 brick-and-mortar locations, six mobile units, and growing. We have centers in St. Louis, Dallas, Orlando, Savannah, Charlottesville, Virginia, and we’re looking right now at San Francisco. And we have our eyes on Atlanta, and also New York City, in the next three to five years.

**Brett:** That’s fantastic, Bridget! Thank you for your “Yes!” to God’s call! The movement is so blessed to have you, and I sense that the Lord is calling, into our movement, more people who have business backgrounds, people who know how to compete and win.

“Compete” is not a term you often hear from those who run pregnancy help centers. I’d like you to share with us why that word “compete” is so important in terms of being successful when you’re out there on the front lines like you are.



**Bridget:** I think like a competitor. When I was at Nutrisystem, we had a competitor. Her name was Jenny Craig. Nutrisystem made a couple of critical strategic mistakes, and Jenny Craig was poised and ready to take advantage of those mistakes. So I learned that just as quickly as an organization could grow, it could also fall.

That experience taught me that we could compete against – **and beat – Planned Parenthood**. Nutrisystem, at our peak, did \$1.3 billion revenue. When I took over ThriVe, Planned Parenthood was at about \$1.1 billion revenue. So I didn't want to hear anybody say, "They're too big," because I **knew** they could be beaten.

In addition, I was confident that Planned Parenthood had far less inspired leadership than Nutrisystem did, and I also knew that **God was opposed to them**. So let that inspire us to work harder! Let that passion drive us, but let it drive us to use ruthless business methodology! Let us remember that these young women are consumers, and that Planned Parenthood is a **business**. And like any business, they can be beaten. No business is too big to fail. I have experienced that, and it can actually happen quickly.

We began to think about the young woman as a consumer. What is she buying? People think she's

buying an abortion, but she's not. She's buying a **future**. She sees her unexpected pregnancy as the end of hope, and the end of a future. She's also feeling like she's buying a medical solution, because Planned Parenthood and the abortion movement brainwashed her into thinking that this was a medical choice – not an ethical choice, not even a parenting choice, but a medical choice that simply requires a medical solution.

The pregnancy help center movement, for the most part, markets themselves as a moral solution, or as a care solution. They are not marketing themselves as a medical solution, and they are not marketing themselves as a solution that provides hope and a future for the woman.

The other thing that we thought would be important was branding, because these kids are all addicted to branding. They only buy branded clothes. They only drink branded drinks. If you don't have a brand, you are not relevant to them. We thought it would be pretty easy to come up with a magnificent aesthetic look for the ThriVe centers.

We decided to develop a highly stylized aesthetic, and a very strong brand, so that young women could start identifying with us as being kind of the hip, in-fashion, on-trend brand.

We decided that we must shake off the care and moral brand that so many pregnancy resource, or pregnancy help centers, put forward. The fact is that the girls want to be un-pregnant. If that's the case, then why would you put "pregnant" in your center's name? 80% of the pregnancy help centers out there have the word "Pregnancy" in the title. Your target consumer, the young woman, is trying to be un-pregnant. So we dropped that typical branding approach, and we became ThriVe Women's Express Medical Centers.

Why? Because everybody wants "fast now." And then we made the centers aesthetically dynamic. We call it a "neurologically triggering environment." I want her walking in and going, "Oh, my gosh!" And I want her taking out her phone and taking pictures of the center. And that's what happens, because that's how cool the centers are, how gorgeous they are, how "blinged-out" they are!

So what does that do? First of all, it gives ThriVe credibility. It shouldn't, but it does, because that's just how these young women are. How did Steve Jobs sell computers? He took the hardware and stuffed it into a really slick-looking computer. It was all about the colors and the shape of that module. That's how he took the market, with aesthetics. He had a great platform that didn't break down as much, but he knew that if he was going to sell it successfully to these young people, he had to put it in a hip little capsule. Then what does he do? He drags it into an iPod, because he knows if he brands it with entertainment, he owns the kids. Then what does he do? He opens up iTunes. Now he's got the iPhone. He's got it all condensed down now, and he owns every child in the United States. They will not have anything but an iPhone. So... we copied Steve Jobs!

So we focus on the young woman as a consumer. She's buying a product that's different than what most pregnancy help centers think she's buying.

We observed these brilliant people who spent millions of dollars figuring out how to market to young people. We went to New York City and spent four days encompassing Thanksgiving and Black Friday so we could see how the top retailers in the world sell something to our 19-to-29-year-olds.

We had a scientific way of evaluating the various retail stores. We took young people with us to see how they acted, where they had to go, where they had to stay, where they had to buy something, where were they willing to stand in line because they had to buy something. We took thousands of pictures.

By the end of that four days, we had a really solid model that we knew would trigger those kids from 19 to 29. And so everything is branded: our signage, our center, our social media. You know, we're impressed with the Kardashians. No, they're not teaching us how to live life, but you know what they are teaching us how to do? How to have more followers than any other individual in human history. I want to know, what's Kim doing?

Oh, she uses this color a lot or she's talking about this subject. Now we're not going to do anything that's irreligious or offensive, but we're going to get wise about the things they're doing that we can replicate.

You'll see in our social media, we have health days where we look like a health desk. We have fitness days where models are talking about fitness and health. We have some days where the outreach is all fashion-oriented. You would think it came out of *Vogue* magazine. And you know what that's done? **Tripled** our social media following!

So we focus on the young woman as a consumer. She's buying a product that's different than what most pregnancy help centers think she's buying. We sell her that product. And then when she

comes in, you add the presence of God by having lovely people there. That young woman is going to feel something different when she walks in, and she's going to engage with wonderful people who also understand cultural relevance. We know how to wear our hair, our scrubs, the gear that we have on in the center. We outfit ourselves in a way where we have the greatest opportunity to position great medical services.

But then here's the other thing: We led 100 girls to Christ last year! That number would rival every church, including the mega churches, in the Greater St. Louis area. We are leading more girls to Christ than probably 99% of the churches. So in other words, we're not backing off our spiritual stance toward choosing life.

However, we've lost the moral argument. If we could win the moral argument, the young woman wouldn't already be scheduled for Planned Parenthood. 70% of our girls already have an appointment at Planned Parenthood when they come to us.

Whatever she wanted to hear about morally, she already knows. She's justified it. We have girls

who'll look at us and say, "Well, we already know God forgives. So He's going to forgive me." Or, "I believe in Heaven, and Heaven's better than here." (Better for the baby).

What we have to do is **show her an image** of that baby, show her that heartbeat, and do it in a professional, non-manipulative way. We have her in an environment that screams of abundance, so when we tell her that we're going to help her, she sees people of means, and she feels, "Oh yeah, I guess these people really could help me. This place is awesome. It looks like a million-dollar place!" It's not a million-dollar place, but it looks like one.

Prayer is key. She's already been prayed for, before she even walks in. The ultrasound tech is probably mentally praying for her as she's performing her ultrasound. You use the Scripture about Psalm 139, because that girl was made in God's image. It's written in women's spirits to be mothers! Every little girl plays with baby dolls. When my baby dolls would have little problems – like one time, my dog chewed on it – I cried and wailed like the baby was real! We all have motherhood written on our spirits. We need to speak to that in a way that clears away the fear– which allows that true hidden desire to come through!

God talks about the dimly burning wick. We believe that motherhood is a dimly burning wick in every woman, because she's made in God's image. So can we neutralize the fear that almost always involves material things and a future? Can we speak to her of a **bright future** with confidence and love? Can we affirm her vision for college and career and all the things that she thinks have been *derailed*? Can we show her that **none of those things have to be derailed**, and that we want those things for her as well? Do that, and also show her the picture of that baby, and you end up with about a 90% success rate. We saved 1,642 babies last year. We lost 88. So the math is actually better than 90%.

**Brett:** Excellent! You took a business approach and brought it over into the pregnancy help center movement. Let me, for a second, though, put on my hard-nosed investor hat and ask, "What evidence do you have that your strategy has worked?"

**Bridget:** First of all, we're very evidence-based, because all good businesses are. At Nutrisystem, we turned our numbers in every four hours. So I had 25 centers reporting-in every four hours.

That gives you an idea of the metric disciplines that I came out of. At ThriVe, we're very outcomes-oriented. We are proud to say that we **know** we have reduced Planned Parenthood's numbers. And this is something that I've never heard another pregnancy help center be able to articulate.

When we started the ThriVe model, our Planned Parenthood competitor clinic was doing about 8,000 abortions a year. Last year, they did 2,400. So we've helped drop their business by close to 70%.

But here's what's more exciting, and it shows up on our spreadsheet: We have a bar graph that shows Planned Parenthood's number of abortions against our number of women who chose life. And you can see a beautiful, exact marriage between the descent of Planned Parenthood's numbers and then the ascent of our numbers. So we have hard numbers that show that.

There is one other thing I want to mention. Someone might say, "Well, doing all of that sounds expensive." However, ThriVe is in the Top 1% in cost efficiencies per baby saved. It costs us about \$1,200 per saved baby. The average pregnancy help center is somewhere between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per saved baby!

So what does that do in my conversation with a prospective donor, when I can say, "If you give me \$12,000, I'll show you 12 saved babies"? Where does that put me in the conversation against other pro-life organizations? Not that we're openly competing with other organizations, but I'm about stewardship. And a lot of people have given a whole lot of money in good faith. Don't get me wrong about this. I know that everybody who's in this movement is in it for the right reasons. But the bottom line is that there has been a lot of

money given that has not produced outcome.

For instance, I spoke at a pregnancy help center in San Francisco. That city is seeing around 17,000 abortions every year, and that pregnancy help center is perfectly happy with saving only 30 babies.

And honestly speaking, most of those 30 are not actually rescues. Most of the women were there to get diapers.

And that's not uncommon. It's not uncommon for a market to have 5,000 to 20,000 abortions annually, and the total number of babies rescued is under 100. And yet, you'll see that a lot of money is being invested by pro-life people in those markets. Nothing against the pregnancy help centers, because I know that their hearts are in the right spot. But the donors deserve good outcomes for what they invest in.

We give everybody an opportunity to come and be part of what we're doing. Most of them say, "It just sounds too hard." And we don't think there's anything too hard! We try to take care of ourselves, and we're aware of self-care and things like that. If you want to talk about "hard," then be the baby in the mom's uterus. And that baby's listening to their mom set up an appointment for an abortion! And be that baby being driven over there and aborted. That's hard. There's nothing God has asked us to do that's harder than that.

70% of our girls already have an appointment at Planned Parenthood when they come to us.



**Brett:** Amen!

**Bridget:** So, it's worth it. And it's a lot more fun to be successful. Yes, it's hard work. But when you're a winner, that feels good! And as human beings, we're made to be in that space of leaving everything on the table, and then having a great outcome. We don't go to adventure movies to see a bunch of lazy losers. We go because there's a superhero inside all of us who responds, "Yes, Yes, Yes! That's awesome! I want to do that! I want to be that!"

**Brett:** I agree with you! I love how you include your benefactors as part of that team that's winning, because that is pretty rare, in general, in the non-profit space.

**Bridget:** Yes! We actually call them stakeholders. And twice a year, we sit in front of them. If they've given more than \$5,000, and a lot of them have, we present an investment portfolio where we report the return on their investment (ROI). It shows every dollar they've invested, and how many babies they've rescued.

And also, we take advantage of our stakeholders for their intellectual assets. Of course, we can't let the tail wag the dog. Our stakeholders don't know more than we do, but God's people are pretty bright. And so, we glean ideas, and we get their buy-in on things.

So I cannot tell you how much our stakeholder partners understand that they are what made this happen. They believed in us, and they supported it. If I go to them and say, "I want to put a mobile unit in front of this new mega abortion facility" – well, I've got the results, they trust me, and they'll

write that check. We've earned that trust, God has earned that trust, and it's the right thing to do. So they trust us and they really do become vested stakeholders in what we're doing.

**Brett:** You've been at this for 10 years now. What are your long-term plans for ThriVe Nation? What is your ultimate objective?

**Bridget:** Half of the abortions in the United States are being performed in five states. 70% of abortions are being performed in 12 states. So that makes it really easy for us to understand where we want to be. So our plan is to start

knocking out that list. We are very strategically focused on eliminating abortion state by state.

One of the things I didn't mention is that our business model has been painstakingly developed to be easily replicated. If it's something that's unique to the St. Louis market, or something only I could do, those "special sauce" things have been stripped from the model. It doesn't necessarily mean we won't do them, but we have a model that we've tested in Orlando and Savannah with stunning results.

That's proof the model can be replicated.

Our mandate is clear. **God does not support even one abortion.** It is not in God's design for one child to die from abortion. He's not picking the 1,642 that ThriVe in St. Louis saved and saying, "These are the ones I care about, and the 2,400 who died at Planned Parenthood, not so much." He has a **plan** for every child conceived, and that plan does not include abortion. So it is our **mandate** to continue to engage with the Father,

be brave, be bold, be full of faith, learn more and more about competing because that's a big part of it, and continue to plead with Him to give us that blueprint so that we can eliminate abortion.

And of course, from a spiritual standpoint, we're constantly hammering on *Roe v. Wade*. We believe that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is imminent. I say in the next five to 10 years it is our expectation that *Roe v. Wade* will be overturned. Then there will need to be even more centers like ours, because the girls will be even more frightened and feeling more threatened, and of course, God wants a solution for them.

So we have our eye on those top 12 states because we can wipe out 70% of abortions. At that point, you've crushed Planned Parenthood's business model. They can't stay open, so we don't necessarily have to shut down every Planned Parenthood clinic to shut the entire thing down. Nutrisystem is still selling stuff online, but it's now a \$50 million company, no longer a \$1.3 billion company. So Jenny Craig rang their bell, and ThriVe is going to ring Planned Parenthood's bell. We already are!

**Brett:** Thank you so much, Bridget, for what you do, for your dedication to this work. Thank you for ThriVe, thank you for your team, thank you for your benefactors. It's exciting to hear about the results you're currently achieving, but also to learn about your strategic plan and where you want to take this. Our team at Heroic Media will continue to pray for the success of ThriVe Nation!

**Bridget:** Thank you! We appreciate it! I love talking about what God's doing with ThriVe. Please spread the word and help pregnancy help centers understand that this is not about pride. This is not about arrogance. It's not about ThriVe wanting to take over the world. But God has entrusted to us something that's precious and effective, and we just hope that more people would be willing to engage with it.

We go because there's a superhero inside all of us who responds, "Yes, Yes, Yes! That's awesome! I want to do that! I want to be that!"

