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Joanne Baldini, like most New England liberals, supports abortion rights. But she's also crazy for Curves, the popular fitness chain whose Texas owner backs antiabortion causes. What happens for Baldini, and the thousands of women like her, when politics get personal?

# Sweating With the Enemy

By Elaine McArdle

**PLUS**

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White Shirt



If getting fit also means  
enriching a millionaire who  
donates to antiabortion groups,  
why is Curves sweeping  
across New England with  
the force of a blizzard?  
Thousands of Massachusetts  
women are facing the question  
of health versus choice.  
How will they reconcile  
the personal with the political?

## Sweating With the Enemy

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oanne Baldini is what you might call a deep-blue liberal: passionate about the environment, a strong supporter of gay rights, a John Kerry voter. Ten miles northwest of Boston, in the affluent and progressive suburb

of Winchester, Baldini lives her politics every day, recycling at home, buying organic foods, even organizing neighbors to keep tax money flowing into the town's excellent schools. So don't even bother asking if she favors abortion rights. "Of course," she tosses off, as if there could be any doubt. ¶ She's also a wife and mom who plans family events and carts her three children to school, lacrosse, and other activities. With her attention on everybody but herself, Baldini, 45, gained weight steadily after she hit 40 and felt increasingly guilty about the health implications of the creeping pounds. But she hated to exercise. Really hated it. ¶ This was Baldini's quandary until three years ago, when a Curves women's fitness center opened in Winchester. Curves, for readers who have managed to miss the one in their neighborhoods, is a wildly successful health-club chain for women, the fastest-growing franchise in 2004, outpacing Subway, UPS, and Dunkin' Donuts, according to *Entrepreneur* magazine. In just 10 years, it has opened 9,300 outlets worldwide; currently, a new Curves opens every five hours. Although the first franchises were sold in the Bible Belt, today the company counts about 4 million members in 50 states and 31 foreign countries. In Massachusetts, where Curves clubs first opened five years ago, the company estimates it has 93,000 members at 231 franchises. ¶ Baldini decided to give Curves a try. In just two months on Curves' workout and diet regimen, she dropped two dress sizes, and over the past three years, she has kept the weight off. She even looks forward to her workouts, especially the five-minute stretching session at the end, a rare opportunity to meditate or plan her day uninterrupted. "For the first time in my life — except when I was pregnant — I was exercising," she says. "And I felt really good about that." ¶ Baldini saw Curves as a place that meshed with her politics, a haven of female empowerment and social consciousness. According to Curves, about 90 percent of the franchises, including the one in Winchester, are owned by women, many in business for themselves for the first time. There were food drives and other opportunities for community service at Baldini's club, and doctors came in to lecture on skin cancer and other health issues. Baldini was especially heartened to see so many senior citizens get-

**By Elaine McArdle**  
**Photographs by Webb Chappell**

**CURVES FRANCHISE** owner Joyce Hartz (right) says she knows of only one defection from her six Boston clubs over the founder's antiabortion donations. She is pictured at her Haymarket club with Joanne Baldini of Winchester, who supports Curves and abortion rights.



ting healthy in a supportive environment.

Then she stumbled on news reports about the Texan who founded the Curves empire; they suggested, she recalls, that he was a "heavy-duty Christian" and a donor to anti-abortion causes. Baldini is so committed to abortion rights that she can see herself someday as a counselor at Planned Parenthood. She won't allow Domino's Pizza or Coors beer in her home, because the respective founder and chairman of those companies have been active in anti-abortion causes. So what was she to do about Curves?

**I**n 1992, when Gary and Diane Heavin opened their first Curves fitness center in Harlingen, Texas, they did something brilliant. They targeted a substantial but ignored demographic — middle-aged, out-of-shape, busy women — and offered them a unique product that they craved. Gary Heavin, whose overweight mother died of a blood clot at the age of 40 (he was 13 at the time), recognized what others missed: Many women want to be healthy but are uncomfortable in traditional gyms, even those for women only. "The conventional gyms — and I've been in that business — really look a lot more like nightclubs than health clubs," he says. "Women weren't comfortable there. Perhaps the aerobic bunnies were, and women looking for a date, but our sisters, mothers, and grandmothers weren't comfortable." Curves gave these women a homey environment with no men, no mirrors, and no one staring at their cellulite. It promised the sedentary that they could get fit in just half an hour, three times a week. The Heavins began selling franchises in 1995. Women flocked to Curves, and the couple became rich. (So rich that a group of former friends and associates is suing for a piece of the fortune, claiming early investments were never repaid. The company's spokeswoman denied the allegations.)

Heavin is an evangelical Christian whose story of religious redemption — he lost his first business, went bankrupt, and wound up in jail before he was born again — is as important to his success as his entrepreneurial skills, says Alice Julier, a sociologist at Smith College who studies evangelical entrepreneurship and diet culture. And in the early years, she says, the Curves program and its promotional literature had a stronger Christian tone, which helped

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it grow. Current TV ads use the gospel song "This Little Light of Mine," but Heavin insists it's just a catchy tune. "We've never marketed to Christians," he says. But his company, he says, does reflect his values: "Mine come from thousands of years of Jesus Christ, and I took those into the culture of Curves. I taught people to love each other and accept each other." A Muslim franchise owner in New York says that while Heavin peppers his speech with "Amen" and is open about his Christianity, he never proselytizes. Many franchise owners in and around Boston agree.

"The evangelical piece had nothing to do with the success of Curves," says Perry Lowe, who teaches marketing at Bentley College. Curves spread, he says, because it offers an effective product to a receptive market and because the entry costs are low for franchise owners and members. "It's an amazing business model."

For any woman trying to balance family, work, and her own health, discovering a Curves gym at the local strip mall seems like a miracle. Fast, convenient, and affordable, the clubs offer a supportive environment where there's no shame about body shape. Curvers, as they call themselves, seem to run the gamut: low-income and affluent, highly educated and not, working-class and professional, lesbian and straight. They gush about the weight they've lost and friends they've made, and they're not the program's only fans: In Massachusetts, healthcare plans, including Tufts and Harvard Pilgrim, offer discounted Curves memberships to their clients, and some Curves franchises offer discounted memberships to employees of participating companies.

Critics have called the program too easy to be effective; three 30-minute exercise sessions a week is much less than the 60 to 90 minutes a day the US Department of Agriculture recommends for people who want to lose weight. Some local physicians, desperate for solutions to the obesity crisis, have referred patients including adolescent girls. Two studies released this year supported the notion that Curves deserved praise for getting women moving. One was paid for by Heavin (it was conducted at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where Curves International is headquartered), but an independent study at the University of Wisconsin suggested that Curves helps women who previously led a sedentary lifestyle. Although the researchers there found that an average Curves workout burns only 184 calories (equivalent to a brisk half-hour walk), it increases cardiovascular fitness and builds strength, a key to fighting osteoporosis.

Even before that news, the company was on a holy roll. Until April 2004, that is, when two columnists at the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote that Heavin supported "radical" anti-abortion groups, including affiliates of Operation Save America, formerly Operation

Rescue, a group known for its aggressive demonstrations outside abortion clinics. Heavin denied supporting the group or any radical anti-abortion organizations, and the newspaper printed an extensive retraction. Still, Heavin has put his wealth to work for some anti-abortion causes. According to Curves International spokeswoman Becky Frusher, in 2003, Heavin and his wife pledged \$5 million over five years to be divided among four Waco-area health-services organizations. One is the Care Net Pregnancy Center of Central Texas, which receives \$133,000 a year from the Heavins and is part of a national network of evangelical Christian-run clinics that offer free health services to pregnant women and urge them not to choose abortion. The fund also supports a Christian adoption agency and an abstinence-education project aimed at youth. But the bulk of the money, \$750,000 a year, goes to a health clinic for uninsured and low-income people in Waco; most of its work has nothing to do with pregnancy, though, and the clinic has a referral relationship with Planned Parenthood.

In addition, Frusher says, the Heavins personally match up to \$1,000 of any donation made by a Curves franchise to any group approved by the couple. Out of \$1 million in matching grants since 2001, \$10,000 has gone to anti-abortion "pregnancy centers" like the one in Waco. The vast majority of clubs raise money for breast cancer research and other causes unrelated to abortion. On the other hand, if a franchise raises money for Planned Parenthood, Heavin says, he will not make a matching grant, because of the way he says it portrays abortion. "Planned Parenthood doesn't present the whole story," he says. "I want women to make a fully informed decision."

Unlike Domino's founder Thomas Monaghan, the Heavins don't make expressly political donations aimed at changing abortion law, according to Frusher. "It's the law of the land," Heavin says, even though he's not happy when women exercise that right. He even compares himself to Hillary Clinton, saying they both believe "abortion is tragic for millions of women, and there ought to be informed dialogue about it."

But the false allegations of a connection to militant anti-abortion groups exploded across the Internet. Bloggers called Heavin a dead-beat dad. (Heavin served a brief jail sentence in 1990 for nonsupport before winning custody of his children, whom he raised with Diane, his second wife.) Activists at the March for Women's Lives, an April 2004 rally in Washington, D.C., in support of abortion rights, handed out fliers calling for a national boycott of Curves. That summer at Curves gyms in Berkeley, California, signs and banners were knocked over or stolen, and in Seattle, anti-Curves fliers were posted on telephone poles. Then, last Thanksgiving weekend, fliers decrying Heavin were glued to the front doors

at the Curves franchises at Central Square in Cambridge and Haymarket in Boston, and vandals spray-painted the sidewalk outside the Back Bay Curves. The paint still has not faded completely.

But even in Berkeley and Boston, the outcry was limited and short-lived. Frusher says the company worried about losing members during what she calls "the controversy" and watched the situation carefully with franchise owners — until it became clear that there wasn't much of a situation at all. A few clubs on the West Coast and in New York lost members but not many. Although she doesn't have an exact count, Frusher says, "It was not a significant number."

The same is true in Massachusetts. Among 1,600 women who belong to the six Curves clubs in Boston owned by Joyce Harty, only one is known to have quit in protest. (Another woman left but rejoined, Harty says.) Of the 400 members at the Brookline Curves, about 20 women left, says owner Katy Delaney. Lincoln's club lost no one, nor did the Somerville Avenue Curves in Somerville, according to the owners. Owners who took over the Central Square Curves in Cambridge a few months ago know of no one who left.

A query on the local craigslist, a community website, seeking former Curvers (the web list gets more than 700,000 readers a month) turned up no one who had quit, although one woman said she had decided not to join Curves because of Heavin's politics. The exchanges quickly veered to a topic of more apparent urgency: how much weight Curvers had lost.

THE WOMAN HARTY SAYS IS THE LONE member to drop out in protest misses both her workout and her friends. "I'm the perfect demographic for Curves: women who hate exercising," she says. This woman asked not to reveal her identity because she's uncomfortable with her neighbors knowing her views on abortion. Thirty-three and single, she works for a nonprofit organization in the financial district



**KATY DELANEY**, who owns the Brookline Curves, says she doesn't agree with founder Gary Heavin's politics, "but I certainly respect them."

she says, "I felt comfortable."

Everything about Curves, she says, is different. Many of the women are overweight, some significantly, and there is no culture of preening or parading. Women face each other and talk as they work out because the equipment — strength-building hydraulic machines plus "recovery stations" for dancing or marching in place — is set

it. It's definitely Curves' secret weapon."

About seven months into her membership, the supporter of abortion rights heard rumblings about a Curves connection to antiabortion causes. She did some research and learned about Heavin's donation to Care Net. Only \$1 of her monthly fee went to Curves headquarters while the rest went to her local club owner.

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and says she's a few pounds overweight. To her, coed gyms feel like pick-up bars, full of men staring at slender women in skimpy outfits. "Even some gyms with only women," she says, "you feel a level of competition." When she moved near the East Boston Curves, she was skeptical but lured by the promise of easy fitness. What she didn't expect was the sense of belonging. "From the first time I walked in,"

up in a circle. Upbeat music plays while each woman performs a particular type of workout for 30 seconds. Then a taped voice tells everyone to change stations. The former member, who was also dieting, quickly lost 15 pounds.

Yet, she says, it was the community that kept her coming back. "The support was tremendous," she says, "and I think it's a huge factor in why a lot of women go and stick with

But for her, it came down to one issue.

"I don't have a problem with the fact he's Christian," she says, "but that my money is being channeled to causes I don't believe in."

THE ISSUE OF ABORTION IS, OF COURSE, one of the most incendiary in American politics. Along with pay equity and economic equality, the right /// CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

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to choose has been a cornerstone of the modern women's-rights movement. Fifteen years ago, the National Organization for Women called for protests against Domino's Pizza because the founder, Monaghan, supported efforts to restrict abortion. So why hasn't Heavin encountered the same outcry?

Some who have studied the issue contend that the majority of Curves members haven't even heard of the controversy. "You and I know Gary Heavin is prolife, but three-quarters of people I talk to have no idea that's the case," says Alice Julier, the Smith sociologist. She suggests that because its fees are so low (they range from \$29 to \$59 a month), Curves attracts women who are less affluent and thus less politicized, who "don't have the time or energy or social networks saying, 'Hey, Curves is anti-choice.'"

But the members and franchise owners around Boston say there are many affluent and educated women at the gyms, including doctors, businesswomen, and professors. While some women left the Brookline gym in protest, about 20 others debated the issue and decided to stay, according to Delaney. One evening at the Haymarket Curves, a beautiful club with floor-to-ceiling windows on three sides, two articulate women say they know nothing of

Heavin's politics. When they find out, they shrug.

A number of the Curves franchise owners both defend the right to an abortion and fiercely support Heavin. They insist the reasons for their loyalty go beyond their pocketbooks and stem from Heavin's giving them a shot at owning a business otherwise beyond reach. (The cost to buy a franchise is low, \$39,900, including equipment.) "I don't agree with Gary's politics," says Delaney, "but I certainly respect them. And I think he's done two tremendous things for women: He's given them a place to work out and made it affordable, and, number two, he's allowed women to be business owners." She adds, "I think that outweighs his politics."

Perry Lowe, of Bentley College, says that when consumers really enjoy a product they don't care very much about its creator. "If you're a Curves member, I contend you don't even know who [Heavin] is, and it doesn't matter," Lowe says. And any dedicated Curver who cares deeply about abortion rights is likely to research the matter and find the initial allegations about Heavin were retracted. Moreover, Lowe says, Heavin stood by his personal beliefs while denying the false accusations, so even women who disagree with him regard him as honest. "He came clean, so he's been forgiven" is how Lowe describes the typical reaction of American consumers, even on

a topic as divisive as abortion.

The nonreaction reaction is a far cry from the protests against Domino's. But in that case, consumers had options: find another restaurant that delivers. With Curves, it's not so simple. While there are now a number of copycat chains, none poses a serious threat to Curves, where members rave as much about atmosphere as weight loss or fitness. Also, unlike pizza, exercise is as close to a magic bullet for health as anything in medicine, notes Dr. JoAnn Manson, chief of preventive medicine at Brigham & Women's Hospital and professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School. Even a moderate program of regular exercise lowers the risk of heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, and some kinds of diabetes by 40 to 50 percent. "Any exercise that will get people off the couch has to be seen as something positive," she says, "so I think it would be very unfortunate if someone who had become more active and enjoyed doing the Curves program now stopped and became inactive."

**JOANNE BALDINI - THE WINCHESTER CURVE** who recycles, does neighborhood organizing and won't allow Coors beer in her house - didn't blink at the Curves antiabortion connection. She didn't even bother doing any research. "I finally found a program that was working," she explains

"I wasn't going to give that up." When she was in her 20s, she says, she was much more strident. "You have different priorities at different points in your life. Right now, the priority for me is taking care of my body."

For women like Baldini, Curves is irreplaceable, a point that critics continue to miss. Last September, in his ethics column in *The New York Times*, Randy Cohen advised a conflicted Curver who supports abortion rights to clean out her locker. But out-of-shape Curvers aren't about to take up jogging.

Belonging to Curves doesn't mean you agree with its founder, insists Denise Oberdan, a member of the Brookline Curves who supports abortion rights and works as a staff assistant in the women's studies department at Simmons College. She could use the Simmons gym for free but prefers Curves, where, she says, there is "a very strong consciousness" and women discuss political topics, including abortion, while they work out. She admits to feeling conflicted, but she won't give up her membership. "No," she says firmly.

A member of the Winchester Curves, a mental-health professional in her 50s who asked not to be identified, says she won't leave because there is no substitute. "I decided to clear my conscience by contributing more than I [used to] to NARAL and NOW." That's an alterna-

tive that other women around the country are embracing, too. One Curves member started a website, [curversforchoice.com](http://curversforchoice.com), that sells T-shirts. According to Planned Parenthood of Central Texas, the one in Heavin's backyard, individual Curvers have sent \$7,300 in donations in the last several years. A spokeswoman for the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts isn't aware of any donations received as a result of the Curves issue. But, Heavin says wryly, "almost every day, a Planned Parenthood from somewhere sends me a thank-you note."

Some wish that women's rights groups would take a more active leadership role on the issue. When individuals boycott, they don't make much of a splash, says Shulamit Reinharz, a professor of sociology and director of the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University. "If someone is standing at the door of every Curves handing out leaflets, educating women, that would be effective."

Turns out that NOW considered doing exactly that but, unlike its call to action against Domino's, decided not to wage a national campaign against Curves. "What we found was that it didn't do anything but hurt the franchise owners for women to drop out," says NOW president Kim Gandy. "And most of the franchise owners were women and had no idea when they

got into it what this guy was about." Curves corporate fees, she explains, are for the most part unrelated to membership, so Curves International and the Heavens take a cut no matter how many women quit. (Eighty percent of franchise owners pay a set monthly fee of \$395, according to the company. The rules changed last year for new owners, who must pay Curves International 5 percent of membership fees, up to \$795 a month.) NOW investigated other ways of staunching the flow of money to Heavin but found no solution that wouldn't hurt women who own franchises. NOW is trying to ensure that potential franchise owners know what they're getting into.

Baldini, for her part, says that even a major campaign from a group like NOW is unlikely to have changed her mind. "Probably not," she admits. She's just not going to give up something that is doing her so much good. "Do you run your whole life around your politics every single second of the day? You just couldn't do it."

It's a dilemma that consumers of everything from pizza to beer to sweatshop-manufactured clothes have faced for years. But the difference with Curves is that many of its members, even dedicated feminists, see no equally satisfying alternative and are willing to set aside their politics—at least for 30 minutes, three times a week. **EG**