

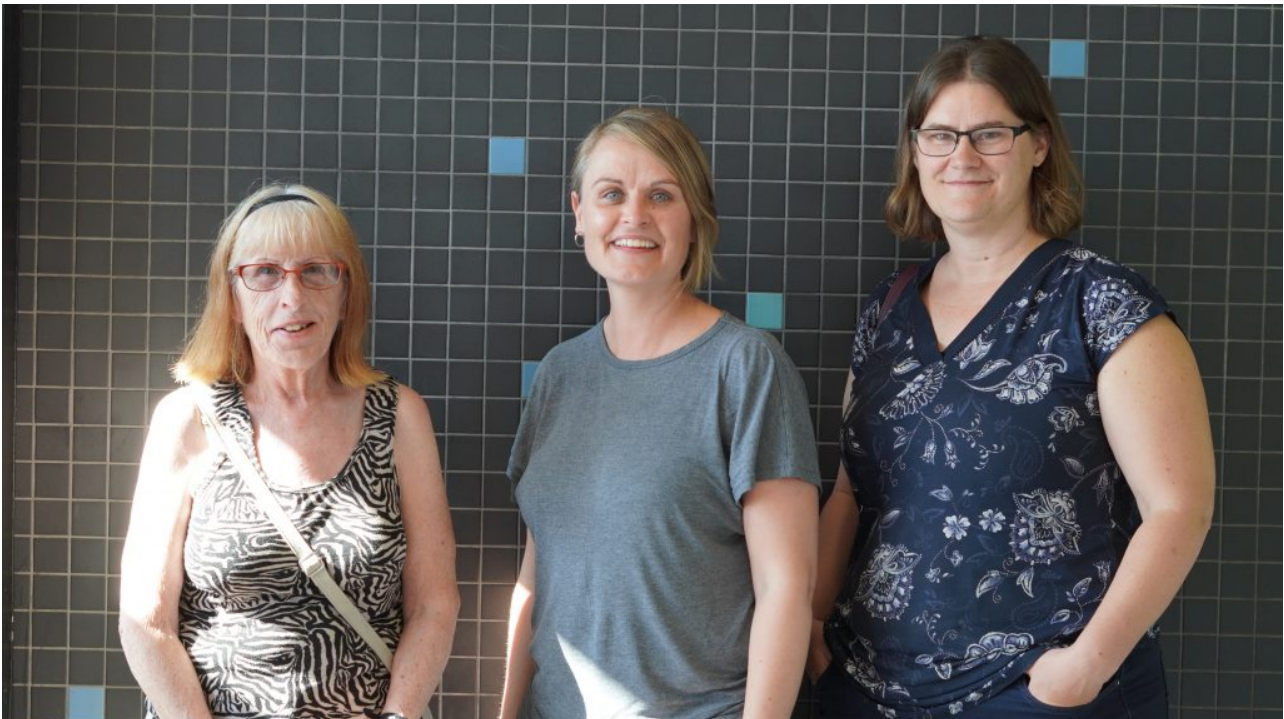
# All 'Unplanned' Edmonton screenings sell out on opening night, despite local protest

One of the most controversial and anticipated films of the year has finally made it to Canadian cinemas, and it's packing the theatres.

After facing censors, protests and backlash, *Unplanned* began its wide theatrical release this weekend – selling out all four of its Edmonton showings on opening day.

The film, playing at Cineplex's South Edmonton Cinemas from July 12-18, tells the real life story of Abby Johnson – a Planned Parenthood executive turned pro-life advocate. It was a two-month battle to get the divisive film a distribution deal.

Melody Dunning was calling Cineplex Entertainment a week before the screening to ensure it was playing.



From left-right, Cari Sheren, Crystal Sheren, and Melody Dunning attend *Unplanned*'s opening night at Cineplex Odeon South Edmonton Cinemas, July 12. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

"I was worried the theatres might back out because of all that was going on,"

she said, referencing the backlash and controversy the movie has received. “So I held my breath until I saw those show times and knew it was playing. It’s awesome that it’s finally here.”

The 180-seat theatre at South Edmonton Common was packed to front-row seating for each of its Friday showings. While people made their way last minute to the 3:30 p.m. showing and were struggling to find seating, a small protest against the film gathered outside – 100 metres away from the cinema’s entrance.

The protesters displayed signs that read “Honk for pro-choice”, “GSAs save lives” and “Canada has vasectomy laws”, while others dressed as characters from the TV series and dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a symbol of female oppression. The protesters declined comment to Grandin Media.

Due to their distance from the theatre, there was little contact between the protesters and the film goers. There was also security presence outside South Edmonton Cineplex and near the theatre showing *Unplanned*.

“This U.S. religious propaganda portrays doctors as sinister, profit driven and unethical,” a statement from the protest group’s Facebook page read. “It is offensive that movie theatres are choosing to provide a platform for hatred and division in our communities.”

The fear of protests led Salmar Theatres in Salmon Arm, B.C. to cancel its showings of the film, due to the management’s concerns of personal safety.



Protesters gathered 100 metres outside of Cineplex Odeon South Edmonton Cinemas for the opening night of *Unplanned*. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

Crystal Sheren had seen the film at its premiere public Canadian screening at Edmonton's Expo Centre on May 14. She decided to see it again not only to further support the film, but to bring her mother Cari along. As Crystal and her mother left the cinema they kept a watchful eye in case of any clash with protesters, but their exit was without confrontation.

Crystal believes *Unplanned* could have an effect even on its most adamant protesters, but it will take a willingness to actually see the film first. The film's intense opening, where a distraught Johnson witnesses an abortion through an ultrasound, particularly stands out to Crystal as one of its most powerful moments.

"I would love to see people who are opposing this film come watch it, because you can't have an honest opinion on this film without having seen it," she said. "Like Abby Johnson, it wasn't until she witnessed the actual abortion procedure that her entire perspective on this issue was changed. I can imagine how that would have affected me – seeing the baby move during the procedure, I'd be thinking 'Wait, this is a living thing.'"

What she suspects would surprise many of the protesters as well is the scenes that show the emotional distress and difficulties women who are tempted to have abortions go through. A variety of scenes in the film show the influences from boyfriends or parents that encourage women to have abortions, as well as the fear and isolation women who have abortions sometimes go through.

"I think it was a good balance. It was important to not taunt people that have these experiences," said Crystal, who felt the film was even more meaningful on her second viewing. "It seems to me the hope of this movie is not to push any agenda in people's face, but to show what's going on in an industry like Planned Parenthood and get people to start asking questions."

As a mother, Cari Sheren was deeply impacted by the film's portrayal of the abortion industry. For Cari, support for abortion is hinged on people's lack of knowledge of what happens in an abortion and the harm it causes to the unborn, the expectant mothers, and their families. Because of that, she felt the film could have gone into further detail in its depiction of abortion procedures to fully stress its message.

In one scene, a young woman comes to have an abortion while outside the Planned Parenthood clinic her own mother tearfully pleads with her not to abort her future grandchild. Cari says the difficult realities of abortion shown in scenes like this is what makes this film so effective and why its detractors are focused on discouraging people from seeing *Unplanned*.

"It was really well done. So many people believe the lie of abortion because they haven't been shown the reality of what's really happening," she said.

Ian McKerracher travelled from St. Albert to the South Edmonton theatre to view the film. He felt the film's more spiritual aspects, showing how prayer and God

played a role in Abby Johnson's journey out of the abortion industry, was its most powerful message.



Ian McKerracher Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

"The prayers and the love the pro-life people showed to Abby when she came to them really moved me," he said.

From cancelled showings, organized protests and upset from the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, McKerracher has followed the film's arduous journey to a wide release in Canada. While he is glad to finally see *Unplanned*, he says a movie alone cannot bring about a serious change to Canada's abortion laws.

"I wish I wouldn't have had to see this movie," he said. "I wish this issue would resolve itself but I don't see it happening barring divine revelation.

"The fundamental issue here is whether or not you see that what's inside the womb is a baby, and for many people a movie alone will not change their minds on that."

A list of *Unplanned* screenings happening across Alberta and Saskatchewan are listed here.