

Dr. Sarah Weddington shares her thoughts on *Roe vs. Wade* and the future role of women

by Sarah Walton

Dr. Sarah Weddington was only 26 years old when she successfully argued the landmark abortion-rights case, *Roe vs. Wade*, in the fall of 1972. She is believed to be the youngest person to ever win a case in the Supreme Court. While perhaps best known for this, Dr. Weddington went on to serve from 1973–1977 on the Texas State Legislature before being appointed as General Counsel for the USDA by President Carter. Dr. Weddington then served President Carter as Assistant to the President, the highest White House staff title. Dr. Weddington remains active in women's issues and today is a professor, author and speaker. In 1993, she published *A Question of Choice* about her experience working on *Roe vs. Wade*. Most recently, Dr. Weddington wrote a piece for *Time* magazine's March 31, 2003, issue on "80 Days That Changed the World" about the day, January 22, 1973, that the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling was announced. Out of the 80 days highlighted by *Time*, Dr. Weddington's article on *Roe vs. Wade* was *one of only 10* that had to do with a woman or women's issues.

When Dr. Weddington was in town on April 24th to speak at a Planned Parenthood fundraiser celebrating the 30th anniversary of *Roe vs. Wade*, I had the incredible opportunity to interview her. A little nervous, I took my friend Andrea Yassemedis with me. Andrea will be starting law school this fall at Northwestern in Chicago so we started with a question about advice Dr. Weddington has for women pursuing law.

Sarah Walton: One of the first questions is about advice you have for women who feel passionately about

women's issues going into the law field today.

Weddington: One of the things I believe is that you should always be saying 'what can I do today that will give me more options for tomorrow?' and I do think a law degree gives you a lot of great options. Sometimes I find that younger women think of law as being like "The Practice" on TV and it really isn't. But I think there are so many different ways you can do law, whether it's private practice, government practice, non-profit practice, trial-room or more academic kind of practice or teaching. I think the law degree first gives you a lot of useful skills, but then also gives you a lot of very useful options.

Walton: And what advice do you have for law students interested in pursuing a career with women's issues?

Weddington: I think there are a number of ways of looking at pursuing a career with a focus on women's issues. There are some [organizations] that have full-time positions for lawyers but they are relatively few. So what I see is a lot of women who choose to go into a more traditional law practice, but who then volunteer part of their time. There's lots of work that still needs to be done; the difficulty is finding the ways to get paid to do it. And as you know, I did *Roe v. Wade* as a volunteer case and then have always volunteered a lot of time on women's issues and have loved it, really enjoyed it.

Walton: I was curious to ask you about your thoughts on the public conception of feminism these days. The word itself has been demonized and misrepresented and I'm wondering if you have

any thoughts on changing this.

Weddington: Well, I think what's obviously the most important is the concept itself. And I've called myself a feminist for so long and haven't been able to come up with a new word, so for me, I'm going to be a feminist. But for younger generations, if they can find another word to coalesce around, fine with me. The real concept is what's so critical and working for women to have expanded areas within which to operate. I am really sorry that there have been so many people who say things about it that aren't true or try to apply it to concepts that aren't true.

Andrea: In addition to the word being demonized, it also seems like the category has become so elastic, that a lot of what feminism passes for today is "my right to wear lipstick and be successful." I think that a lot of young women are really confused because there are so many messages about what it means to be a feminist.

Weddington: I think that another prob-

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lem quite frankly is that very few women have actually hit obvious discrimination until they get into the job market. Nobody says to them 'You can't go to law school because you're a woman' or 'if you're pregnant and a school teacher, you have to quit or else you'll be fired' or 'you can only run half-court basketball' or 'you can't get credit without your husband's signature,'— you know, all the things they used to tell us. And so I think part of it is until you really hit it, it's hard to internalize what that means.

Yassemidis: I notice that you teach at the University of Texas at Austin and have taught for quite a while now, I wonder how you feel that academia in general can help reach these women and make it real to them.

Weddington: I think we're all struggling for a number of reasons. One is that all the universities are cutting programs. Most of them, private as well as public, are having

real financial problems. So on the one hand, we at Texas are trying to push for new programs that relate to women and gender studies.

I think the second thing is to have opportunities for those women who are particularly interested in women's issues in the faculty to do lecture series, informal meetings or other kinds of things with women students. But one of the things I really see now, because it is so tough with the job market, [is] that a lot of students who have been really active with women's issues are worried about what to put on their resume for fear that some of it might cost them opportunity...

Walton: That they'll be discriminated against?

Weddington: Yes, exactly.

Yassemidis: I wanted to ask you about your experience debating about women's rights with members of the Concerned Women of America (a conservative public policy women's organization dedicated to bringing Biblical principles into all levels of public policy).

Weddington: First, I think the debate format can be a valuable one because I think that anyone who is a really good speaker can present ideas well on both sides. And

so to have a clash of ideas is useful for young people who are trying to inform themselves; it's an essential part of an educational process. And so I think debate is a good format. The hard part about it is that so much of what goes for TV debate is just two people yelling at each other and who can interrupt the other one, who can keep talking the longest, who can be the shrillest, and I just don't personally enjoy doing that. I think women tend to be collaborative, even if I totally disagree with the person, I still want to respect the time limits, I want to respect their right to present their ideas, and I want them to respect mine.

Walton: What are your feelings about the decade or so now that we've experienced this enormous right-wing talk-show media presence? I feel that it's really hurt our society and our culture's ability to have dialogue and appreciate differences.

Weddington: You know, there's been a lot of publicity about the Dixie Chick who basically said, in England, 'I want you to know not all of us are proud of our president who's from Texas' and that's all she said, which to me is a very mild statement. Well, it turns out that Clear Channel Communications, according to the press I read, owns over 1,200 radio stations and they

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Project Safe Annual Report

Vanderbilt's grant-funded initiative, **Project Safe**, enjoyed increased momentum throughout 2002. As part of the special conditions of our Grant to Reduce Violent Crimes Against Women on Campuses, Project Safe is required to submit an annual report to the Department of Justice. That information is then compiled into a report that the Attorney General submits to Congress on the effectiveness of the Grant program. Project Safe reported the following information for the period beginning January 1, 2002 and ending December 31, 2002:

Total Victims Served: **116**
Total Number of Incoming Students Trained: **1430**
Total Number of Police Officers Trained: **80**

submitted by Sandra Harrell, Co-Director of Project Safe

had given something like \$800,000 to the Republican Party and have given even more to Bush. So it's clear, the basic problem is the concentration of media outlets [is] in very few corporate hands. What you get is just their version of the news. And it is quite a concern to me because I think healthy debate is a good thing, not a bad thing.

But what I worry about is that so many of the issues now are political issues, but somehow we are not reaching out to enough young women to say that these are issues that really do affect you and you need to be active with them. And so I see a lot of students who are very bright and who have the same position on issues that I do, but they don't feel an investment or a need to work on the issues. Or maybe it is that so much of their time and effort goes into trying to graduate, trying to have a job, trying to keep life together with all its complex stuff that they just aren't involved. So my real worry is how do we get them involved? I think for me, looking at the choice issue, I've very aware that there is such an attack on the availability of choice and reproductive freedom right now; we need a lot of help there. I think it is hard for people, anyone under 40—although I say no one under 55—remembers before *Roe vs. Wade*, and so you get a generation that has had those rights and it's very hard for them to envision not having them, or to see the role they can play to protect them.

Walton: I'm 28 now but as a teenage girl, I really believed all the obstacles had been overcome and there was no more inequality between men and women. I see it in so many young women, this myth that everything is done with, that the battle has been fought for and won and 'who are you to complain?'

Weddington: And the hard part is figuring out how we change that outlook. And it's hard because the message we've given to young women is 'You can *be* anything', 'You can *do* anything.' It was part of recognizing that they were going to hit so many roadblocks as they go into the

teenage years. Well, I still think that's the right message for pre-teens and teens but as you get a little older, you start to see that it's not quite the reality. So the problem now is how to communicate what the problems are and ask how you solve them.

Walton: In 2000, a case went before the Tennessee Supreme Court regarding mandatory anti-abortion counseling and 2-day waiting period laws. In a 4 to 1 vote, the Supreme Court struck down this ruling that our state constitution provided better protection of privacy than the Federal Constitution. There's been a very concerted effort in our state legislature to have a bill, SJR 127, passed to amend Article 1 of the Tennessee Constitution to say '*Nothing in this constitution secures or protects a right to abortion or the funding thereof.*' It's the strategy of the pro-life camp looking ahead in case *Roe vs. Wade* does get overturned and to block this issue at the state level. What are your thoughts on this issue and how it's being replicated across the nation?

Weddington: There are very few states that have privacy rights and I would think the people of the state wouldn't want to give them up at all. So I think part of the problem is the people even knowing that this is going on and what the impact would be. Especially if the majority of the legislature is anti the right of choice, this would give them an opening to pass all kinds of stuff. Obviously, I hope it's defeated.

Walton: With *Roe vs. Wade* under attack, what's your biggest concern?

Weddington: The opposition is doing what I call a "pincher move" so, on the one hand, they're trying to undermine access to abortion and they are also trying to set the stage for overturning *Roe vs. Wade*. One strategy is trying to make abortion and reproductive services less available. Part of that was when Bush cut out the \$34 million of family planning funds through the UN. Part of it is Tommy Thompson, Secretary of Health & Human Services, saying that the fetus is entitled to care, but the woman, as far as his view goes, is obviously invisible. And secondly, they

are trying to appoint people to the lower federal courts who are very opposed to abortion, people who would be in a place to move up to the Supreme Court in time. I do think there are going to be some vacancies. Rehnquist is the one I think would go first.

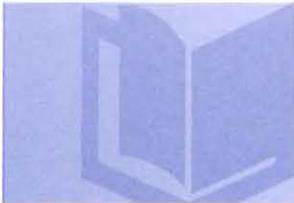
Walton: So you do feel that this is a very real risk.

Weddington: Yes I do. Now with Rehnquist, you can't get someone who is more opposed to abortion than he is. But if O'Connor were to leave or if Stevens were to leave, that would surely switch the balance of the court. I feel the people around Bush are trying to really do whatever the far right wants them to do but without upsetting people. What you're really seeing is a concerted effort in a lot of different ways to undermine the progress for women's reproductive rights, but at the same time to do it in a hidden way so that the majority of people don't understand what's happening.

For more information on Sarah Weddington, visit The Weddington Center's web page, www.weddingtoncenter.com. If you are interested in learning more about "Cocktail for a Cause," the local Planned Parenthood's fundraising event, visit www.ppmet.org. Many thanks to Toby Abrams, President of the Board of Directors for Planned Parenthood of Middle and East Tennessee, for bringing this interview opportunity about!

Sarah Walton is completing her Master's in Counseling from Peabody.





IN THE LIBRARY

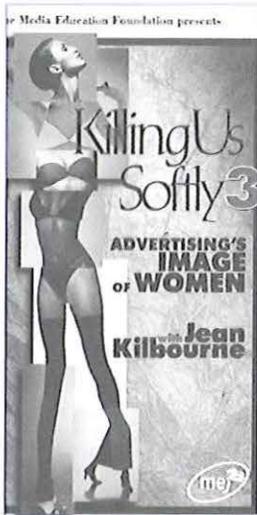
BARBARA CLARKE
Women's Center librarian



WOMEN'S CENTER HOUSES AN IMPRESSIVE COLLECTION OF VIDEOS

The library has a collection of over 100 videotapes, about one-fifth of which are listed online in ACORN. Students, staff and faculty may check out our tapes for three weeks.

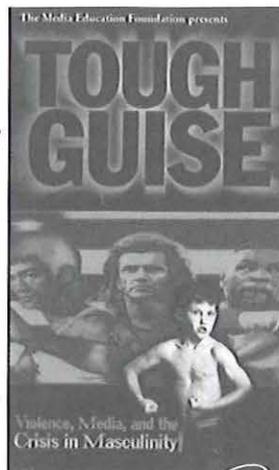
Gloria Steinem: Ms. America and **Alice Paul: "We Were Arrested of Course!"** are among the videos chronicling the lives and accomplishments of notable women. Other biographies feature Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Tapes such as **Out For a Change: Addressing Homophobia in Women's Sports** and **Playing Unfair: The Media Image of the Female Athlete** depict different aspects of women and sports.



Still Killing Us Softly and **Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women** illustrate how images of women are presented by advertisers in printed materials and in television commercials. Well-known researcher Jean Kilbourne discusses the objectification of women's bodies in advertising, the sexualization of young girls, beauty and weight, and images of male violence toward women. In efforts to sell products

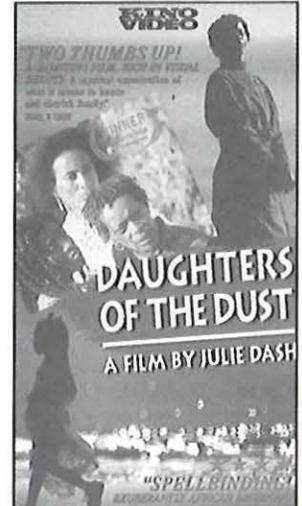
advertisers are contributing to women's and girls' distorted images of themselves.

Tough Guise: Violence, Media & the Crisis in Masculinity, which is aimed mainly at college and high school students, examines the harmful effects of the exaggerated stereotypes of masculinity that are prevalent in the mass media. Former football player, Jackson Katz,



discusses the connection between popular culture and masculine identities, and illustrates how images of violent masculinity may be dangerous for women, for the tough guys themselves, and for other men.

We also have tapes on domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, higher education, beauty, the Taliban, women in Afghanistan, history, abortion, and other topics. Other videotapes feature lectures presented at Vanderbilt, including those by Naomi Wolf, Carol Gilligan, Lucia A. Gilbert and Joan Jacobs Brumberg. Notable movies in our collection include **Thelma and Louise**, **Girls Town** and **Daughters of the Dust**.



Among the many journals we receive are: **European Journal of Women's Studies**; **Signs**; **Ms.**; **Gender & Society**; **Race, Gender & Class**; **Women's Studies Quarterly**; **Women in Higher Education**; **Women's Studies International Forum**; **Gender Issues**; **Feminist Studies**; **Media Report to Women**; **NWSA Journal**; **Women's Review of Books**; and **Feminism & Psychology**. We index by subject the articles in most of our journals and a printed copy of the index is available in the library. While the journals do not circulate, photocopies may be made for five cents per page.

During the summer months the library is open during our regular hours of 8.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays.





**Margaret
Cuninggim
Women's Center**
*Calendar
of Events
June 2003*

PLEASE SAVE AND POST.

Unless otherwise stated, all programs are held at the Cuninggim Center, Franklin Building, 316 West Side Row and are open to newcomers at any time. For more information on the events listed, call 322-4843.

LIVING WITH LOSS

When: Thursday, June 5 @ 12:00 noon-1:00pm

Who: Open to all students, faculty and staff of the Vanderbilt community and the community-at-large. Dr. Linda Manning, Director of the Women's Center will facilitate this discussion.

What: This is a monthly lunch group for those who have lost loved ones. Lunch is provided. For more information, contact Jennifer.Hackett@vanderbilt.edu, or 322-6518.

CREATIVE LIFE PLANNING GROUP

When: Tuesday June 3, 10, 17, 24 @12:00 noon – 1:00 pm (Meets every Tuesday).

Who: A group for all dedicated to living life intentionally and creatively. Open to everyone in the community and is usually attended by women between 40 and 90 years of age.

What: June 3: Discussion of *Journal to the Self* by Kathleen Adams, led by Elisa Negroni

June 10: Issues

June 17: "Things I'd like to do"– discussion

June 24: Issues

Call 322-4843 for more details!

BOOK GROUP

When: Monday June 9 @ 5:15-6:15 pm (Meets the 2nd Monday).

Who: This is a group for anyone of any age who loves to read.

What: This month the group will be reading *Getting a Life* by Helen Simpson and the group will be facilitated by Janet Colbran.

For more information, contact jubose@bellsouth.net. Look on our web site for upcoming books under the book group at www.vanderbilt.edu/WomensCenter/book-club.html

VANDY WORKING MOMS

When: Thursday, June 12 and 26 @ 11:30-12:30pm (Meets the second and fourth Thursdays)

Who: Working Moms of any age! Women who juggle! Superheroes! Open to all working mothers of the Vanderbilt campus, partnered or single.

What: A support network that provides advocacy for working moms in the Vanderbilt community, as well as programming to inform, empower and enrich. To RSVP, contact misa.culley@vanderbilt.edu or call 343-4367.

WOMEN, SPIRIT AND POETRY

Will reconvene during the fall term to discuss the future of the group.

WOMEN'S CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING GROUP

Will reconvene during the fall term to discuss the future of the group.

*****Unless otherwise indicated, all groups are open to all people and are held at the Margaret Cuninggim Women's Center at 316 West Side Row on Vanderbilt University's Campus.



A N N O U N C E M E N T S

The Institute for Women's Policy Research is hosting its Seventh International Women's Policy Research Conference in Washington, DC, June 22-24, 2003. IWPR specializes in policy research that examines the reality of women's lives. This year's theme, Women Working to Make a Difference, will feature speakers who are leading policymakers, advocates, researchers from academia, corporate, labor, government, non-profit and media fields who will share ideas, data and opinions on the latest in women's policy research. For more information about IWPR, call 202-785-5100 or visit their website, www.iwpr.org.

We have a new free program and we need YOUR HELP to get started! *"In-Home Education and Training Program"* is for people caring for a loved one who is 60 or older and has Alzheimer's or another dementia. It includes: an overview of the disease; local, regional and national resources; coping skills for the caregiver. Immediate openings available, no income restrictions, available

in the 13 counties in middle TN. One-on-one in-home consultation providing information, resources and support to caregivers. Call Bonnie or Nancy at the Mental Health Association to set up an appointment or get more info: 615-269-5355. This is a FREE program offered in these counties: Cheatham, Davidson, Dickson, Houston, Humphreys, Montgomery, Robertson, Rutherford, Stewart, Sumner, Trousdale, Williamson and Wilson. We need at least 50 people to participate by July 1, 2003.

Making a Difference can be just a few (mouse) clicks away!

Help those less fortunate by visiting www.thebreastcancersite.com and clicking on the free mammogram icon. Your mouse clicks adds up! The site tallies the number of visits and funds free mamograms to women in need. The site also has several links to other worthy causes. Cast your support!

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- Please correct my name on your mailing list.
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