

skyline

■ A Burning Question

Worried you'll forget to blow out a candle in your home? Heloise has the solution. **Page 16.**



News-Record Photo by Patrick Horst

Sarah Weddington, who argued in front of the United States Supreme Court during *Roe v. Wade*, reflected on her experiences recently at James Madison University. During an interview before the speech, Weddington expressed satisfaction at a life of breaking barriers for women in leadership.

'A Question Of Choice'

Sarah Weddington, The Lawyer Who Argued The Winning Side In Roe v. Wade, Has Never Turned Back

By **SUSAN FRANCES SMYTH**
News-Record Correspondent

Barbara Jordan once said, "To be a leader, you must be comfortable feeling different."

Sarah Weddington can relate.

"I think part of why I felt different, just like Barbara Jordan, was that we were both the children of ministers," says Weddington, who at 26 argued the winning side of *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortions.

"My father never said 'you can't do that because you're the preacher's kid,' but still, the preacher's kid is always treated differently," she adds as she stirs cream into her coffee.

Instead of hindering Weddington's ambitions, being treated differently fueled her sense of responsibility and leadership.

Twenty-eight years after arguing *Roe v. Wade* before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973, Weddington sits comfortably at a James Madison University eatery and shares experiences that prepared her for the event that changed the lives of American women, including her own.

Complemented by a royal blue blazer, Weddington's blue eyes shine with enthusiasm. Her hair is swept from her face, loosely but neatly pinned, and she wears little make-up. Carrying a sense of grace and natural beauty, she smiles warmly at thoughts of the past.

Family Influences

Weddington remembers her family as her earliest influence.

Roe v. Wade at a glance

The Vote
7-2

The Decision

The Supreme Court **legalizes abortions** using the constitutional **right to privacy** as its reason. The ruling **overturns a Texas law** banning abortions that had been enacted in 1857.

The Details

The ruling gives women a right to abortion during the **first three months of pregnancy**.

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"My father . . . talked about the gospel of Christian social concern, and that part of what we are to do is care about others. . . . Part of my concern about the world around me came from that foundation," says Weddington, who recently spoke to a group of students at JMU.

Weddington's mother was a basketball coach and business teacher, but for many years didn't work outside the home because it was considered inappropriate. Weddington now believes this upset her mother, who encouraged her daughter to create better opportunities for herself.

"She always said to me, 'you've got to get an education so that you will have choices, and you can decide what you're going to do instead of *having* to do them.'"

Breaking Limits

Fostered by her parents' support, Weddington soon began serving in leadership positions. She was president of both the Methodist Youth Fellowship in her church and of the Future Homemakers of America in her high school. In college she was the secretary of the student body, and in law school the secretary of her class.

"[It was] a time when women never were the president," she says, "so I was as high as women got [then]."

Weddington didn't accept those societal limits, though. She recalls people saying, "women don't," "women can't," "women shouldn't."

She particularly remembers her college dean reacting to her desire to attend law school.

"He said, 'you can't.' And I said, 'well, why not? I have very good grades.' And he said, 'but no woman

from this college has ever gone to law school, it would be too tough.' *You know* that was the moment I decided I was going to law school."

In law school, Weddington met other intelligent, hard-working women with similar ambitions. She joined organizations supporting women's rights at the University of Texas, and finally felt at home.

"At that point, I felt different from a lot of society, but very much involved with the people who believed as I did," she says.

Taking On Roe v. Wade

Weddington's activism at UT founded the roots of her involvement with Roe v. Wade. When fellow activists approached her to file the case, she immediately recommended someone with more experience.

She laughs while recalling their reactions.

"[Later], I said to them, 'why didn't you get someone who knew what she was doing, or a trial lawyer!' And they said, 'Sarah, we just needed someone who would do it for free.'"

Weddington was motivated by more than money; she had her memory.

In 1967, as a graduate student, she escaped Texas anti-abortion laws by traveling to a Mexican Border town. Weddington often thought of that treacherous experience during the Supreme Court trial.

"[I kept] remembering that afternoon, going through an alley . . . wanting to try to do anything I could to make sure women would never have to do that again."

During the trial, many male lawyers attacked her credibility, saying they were better qualified to argue the case. But with the support of other female lawyers, as well as her conviction

that it was a woman's case, the opposition was silenced.

"It is something that's coveted to be able to argue a case in the Supreme Court because so few people have ever done that," she says.

But there were other, more indirect forms of opposition. Only minutes before her argument, Weddington went to the lawyers' lounge to discover there was no ladies' room.

"I had to go to the basement, which was where the ladies' room was," she remembers. "Now, [as of] about three or four years ago, they do have a woman's room in the lawyers' lounge."

A Challenging Case

The case itself presented a considerable challenge. Weddington remembers the night before as the shortest night of her life; there seemed to be not enough hours to review her notes. She walked the floors, checking and rechecking information, making sure the key issues were covered.

"You don't know what the judges are going to ask . . . so it's kind of like in basketball, where they teach you to bounce on your legs so you're ready to move in any direction," Weddington says.

Despite her tireless efforts, Judge William Rehnquist threw Weddington off with one question that she didn't know: When was Texas reinstated into the Union?

"It had never occurred to me that I needed to know that," says Weddington, now a professor at the University of Texas. "Some people said it was because I was a young lawyer and he was trying to throw me."

Her opponent, the assistant attorney general of Texas, opted for a flippancy approach to the trial, which Weddington remembers as his first and

most outstanding mistake.

"He started out by saying, 'when you're in court facing two beautiful women who will have the last word, it's a difficult position.' He was used to Texas, where people would have kind of twittered . . . but those judges didn't even crack a smile. I think it threw him," she says, smiling.

During the argument, Weddington recalls trying to be as calm, as collected, and as involved in the moment as possible. She became so involved that she now remembers few details of the argument itself.

"I walked out and asked people what I had said, what they had asked me," she says in slight disbelief.

Leaving the court without knowing whether she had won or lost, Weddington waited months before knowing the final decision.

Three months after the arguments, on Jan. 22, 1973, The New York Times called her office in Texas asking if she had a comment about Roe v. Wade. Confused, her assistant asked why Weddington would have a comment. The reporter told the assistant the case had been decided, and that she had won 7 to 2.

"A minute later I got a telegram telling me I'd won, and it was collect. I don't remember what I paid for that telegram, but I was happy to do it," Weddington says.

Beyond Roe v. Wade

Following her victory in the Supreme Court, Weddington took several jobs in state and federal government.

In 1972 she became the first woman elected from Austin to serve as a member of the Texas House of Representatives, where she stayed three terms.

From 1978 to 1981, she worked as

an assistant to President Jimmy Carter.

"[When] I got the call from Washington . . . I said, 'no, I'm going to stay in Texas,'" she remembers. "And they said, 'well at least talk to your friends.'"

Her friends discouraged her, saying, "Washington is a place with no country and western music, no barbecue, no Mexican food — it's not civilized."

She went anyway, and now fondly looks back on her years at the White House.

"I had one of the best jobs anyone could ever have working at the White House. I loved working for President Carter . . . and it was my job to find women for the top positions in government."

New Challenges

Weddington is now a writer, lecturer and teacher. She is the author of the best-selling book, "A Question of Choice," which details her Roe v. Wade experiences.

She's working on a book, tentatively titled "The Power of One," which will focus on the development of women and leadership in America.

While teaching a leadership class at UT and still practicing law, she continues to travel and speak as an advocate for women, especially regarding abortion rights.

And she hopes her advocacy will inspire other young people.

"What all professors want is not for you to walk in our steps, but for you to walk beyond us, to go places we have never gone, to do things we've never been able to do," she says. "What we want is to share with you the best of what we know and what we've experienced. And then we want to clap for you as you make a better world."