



NARAL Pro-Choice America President Marks Major Milestone for Reproductive Rights with Speech at the University of Texas

Austin, Texas – *The following is a copy of remarks, as prepared for delivery, by Nancy Keenan, president of NARAL Pro-Choice America, at an event scheduled for Thursday, January 17 at 6:30 p.m. at the Thompson Conference Center on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin.*

Keenan's speech marks the 35th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark decision Roe v. Wade, a case that originated in Texas. Keenan paid tribute to Sarah Weddington, the graduate of the University of Texas Law School, who successfully argued the case before the Court in 1973. Weddington was an honored guest at the speech, which was sponsored by the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, the Lilith Fund, and the university's chapter of Law Students for Reproductive Justice. Keenan also recognized NARAL Pro-Choice Texas, another host of the event, as that state affiliate celebrates its 30th year as the leading political pro-choice organization in Texas.

If you have questions regarding this speech, please contact Ted Miller or Kathryn Prael at 202-973-3032. The remarks begin below:

I. INTRODUCTION: WHY WE ARE HERE

This is my third trip to Texas since I became president of NARAL Pro-Choice America three years ago. At every stop—whether in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Waco—I've made a point of saying that in this job, I stand on the shoulders of a Texas giant: Sarah Weddington.

I had the opportunity to tell Sarah herself that just a few weeks ago. But I have never felt it more than I do on this day, on this campus. *This* is where it all started. This is a place where women found the courage to take a stand.

It was the fall of 1969 when a group of UT graduate students approached Sarah with a question. She had graduated from the UT Law School just two years earlier. She was one of only five women in her class. Despite her qualifications, no law firm would hire her, so she became an assistant to one of her professors and started a women's discussion group on campus.

Those grad students knew that she was the right person to ask an urgent and sensitive question: "If we give women information about where they can get safe abortions, will we go to jail?"

Those UT grad students wanted to pass along the names of trustworthy doctors to women who needed help. Sarah didn't know the answer. So, she headed over to the Tarlton Law Library to get an answer.

And that's how she and her UT classmate . . . Linda Coffee . . . and other committed law students started the research and the thinking that led them to the Supreme Court . . . where they argued and won the case of *Roe v. Wade*—35 years ago this month.

Those of us who were there will never forget it.

I was 20 years old at the time. Before *Roe v. Wade*, abortion was something that never came up in our house. I grew up in Anaconda, Montana as Catholic as Catholic can be. We were a family that had fish on Fridays, confession on Saturdays, and mass on Sundays. On Mondays, I reported to the nuns at St. Peter's for school, while my parents went to 8:00 mass across the street. I grew up hearing sermons on morality and saying the rosary as a family every time we got in the car to go on a trip.

Like every girl at Catholic school, I knew girls who "went away." They'd come back months later with blank stares. Nobody would ever talk about it.

I attended Montana State University in Billings, where I studied to be a teacher. It was a pretty conservative place—there were more streakers than bra burners. The only reason women burned their bras was to stay warm. I had a few friends who became pregnant. We gave them money, so they traveled to Mexico.

Then, *Roe* was decided. And the debate over choice changed overnight - which was relevant to me in a way, because my father was a state senator. I remember going home that weekend, coming into the kitchen, where my parents were having a heated discussion.

I imagine many households were having those same conversations.

In the years since, I have been a teacher, a legislator, the Montana state superintendent of schools, and now president of NARAL. In Montana, I spoke at pro-choice rallies and my views on this issue even became front-page news. I also proudly ran for Congress in 2000 as a candidate endorsed by NARAL Pro-Choice America.

Through all these experiences—as difficult as this issue sometimes gets—I am proud to be part of this movement.

But I have a grave concern that in the 35 years between that day and this day, many Americans take what Sarah and her colleagues achieved for granted.

Why has this happened? In part, people must worry about so many other pressing problems. It is also natural for folks to lose interest when they're busy raising families, and working hard. So, yes, apathy has played a role. But there's something else:

As positions *on both sides* of this debate have hardened the past three decades, they have also grown more distant from the lives of everyday people. The slogans and bumper stickers that paint this issue in black and white no longer touch the profound complexity most people feel on the issue of abortion.

Anna Quindlen said it best when she wrote, “Maybe you know somebody who watches the little stick turn blue and sits down on the toilet to think about a culture of life or the right to privacy. I don’t. Lots of women have decided to end a pregnancy wondering why the so-called debate seems to have no connection to what they’re thinking, feeling, and doing.”

Sound familiar?

Our reluctance to address the moral complexity of this debate is no longer serving our cause or our country well. In our silence, we have ceded moral ground to the other side that they never had to begin with.

It is time we re-assert a simple belief: *women’s lives matter*.

It is time we re-assert our fundamental respect for women:

As my friend the Reverend Katherine Ragsdale likes to say—

“Women work hard to be faithful stewards of the gifts and talents God has given them;

Women work hard to be responsible parents to their children;

Women work hard to be responsible and productive members of society;

Women live with complex decisions about if or when to bear children . . . if or when to carry a pregnancy to term . . . if or when the termination of a pregnancy is necessary for their sake or their family’s sake;

And women deserve our respect and our support for their moral decision making— and not an attempt by the church or politicians to insert themselves into these most personal, intimate, private decisions.”

Being pro-choice is a moral position. It is time for us to re-claim that ground. We can no longer fight this fight without talking about our faith, our values, and our morality.

So, I wanted to come here tonight to do something those of us in the pro-choice community rarely have a chance to do anymore: and that is, talk about our values . . . about moral complexity, religious tolerance, and common ground.

II. LEADING WITH OUR FAITH AND MORALS

I've got to say: there are many people who believe the president of NARAL Pro-Choice America has no business talking about the moral complexity of abortion. I get that.

We were established in the days before *Roe* for one purpose: to defend a woman's right to choose.

Let me reassure you: NARAL Pro-Choice America will forever defend a woman's right to safe, legal abortion.

In fact, we want to go beyond defending it. We want to codify it. We don't want the fate of *Roe* to remain in the hands of the nine justices of the Supreme Court. We want Congress to protect *Roe* as the law of the land.

We will keep fighting until Congress does just that.

But we don't need to shout louder and louder to do it. We don't need to disrespect those on the other side who feel just as strongly about their positions. We don't have to resort to name calling.

I'll be completely honest with you: the American people aren't the only ones who are tired of the track we've locked ourselves into. I am tired of it, too.

For 35 years, we have successfully defended *Roe v. Wade*. But I am tired of being defensive about it.

I am tired of changing the subject every time the issue of religion comes up—as if the God I hear with my ears doesn't inform my beliefs, too.

Let us remember: this movement was begun by a group of ministers who were tired of seeing women maimed and killed by unsafe procedures.

In 1967, the Reverend Howard Moody founded what he called “a faith-based organization.” His Clergy Consultation Service on abortion eventually included 1,200 clergy members nationwide in the years leading to *Roe*, referring thousands of women to doctors who helped women safely terminate their pregnancies in the United States and abroad.

As Reverend Moody said, “freedom of choice is what makes us human and responsible.”

We are the heirs today of those ministers. I respect that there are many good people in this world who oppose a woman's right to choose based on their interpretation of scripture.

About a year ago, I met with a governor, who is Catholic and conflicted on abortion. He asked me, “Nancy, how do you reconcile your Catholic faith and your position on abortion?”

I said, “Governor, when I served as an elected official, I knew that I represented women of all faiths.” Then, I remember very specifically leaning into him and saying, “Governor, women hear their God with their own two ears. So, why do you think they should listen to your God?” He listened and he understood...

The truth is - my faith is the root of my pro-choice values and my pro-choice beliefs. I refuse to turn my back on faith every time the subject comes up.

I also reject the presumption that we must cede the moral high ground every time the issue of abortion comes up—as if it is moral to force motherhood on women who are unable, unwilling, or unprepared to have children, in a society that does little to support that choice after a child is born.

I will not turn the other cheek when people use their personal views as justification for refusing to provide care to those who need it. As my friend Reverend Ragsdale has said before: there is a world of difference between people like freedom riders who took a stand on conscience and paid the price and pharmacists who put their personal views first and make others pay the price.

She went on to say: It’s not that hard. If you don’t eat meat, don’t raise cattle. If you don’t believe in guns, don’t join the Army. And if you can’t fill a legal prescription, don’t become a pharmacist. *Choose another field!*

I will never stand idly by while women who take responsibility for their own lives, and those who depend on them, have to contend with guilt and shame, with judgment and scorn heaped upon them—rather than the support and respect they deserve.

In our failure to address the moral complexity of that choice, we have left a vacuum that those who oppose choice have been all too eager to fill.

What has it gotten us?

Let’s be honest: *Roe* today is a shell of its former self. Yes, we won 35 years ago—but women have been losing ground, losing rights, losing options, losing access, losing availability, and just plain losing nearly every day since.

The numbers don’t lie. Since 1995, American politicians have passed more than 550 laws limiting women’s reproductive freedom. In nearly 90 percent of the counties across America, there is no access to abortion because there *is* no abortion provider.

The good news is that the vast majority of Americans still support a woman’s right to make this personal, private decision, even if they feel conflicted, even if they don’t see a place for themselves in this conversation.

III. ACKNOWLEDGING MORAL COMPLEXITY

We need to acknowledge what we all know to be true today: a woman's right to choose is a morally complex issue, and a lot less black and white than it's been made out to be.

When we don't acknowledge this complexity, it looks like we don't get it and don't have a moral compass of our own. The pro-choice community needs to own that reality. We can't ignore it any longer.

We have allowed our opponents to mischaracterize abortion as a decision that a woman makes callously or unthinkingly. It's not. It's one of the most difficult decisions a woman will ever make.

For the women I know who have made the decision to end a pregnancy, this is *not* a political decision, this is a personal decision -- and this is *not* an immoral decision.

There are a lot of misperceptions about who these women really are.

They are women who are rich and women who are poor. They are from all racial backgrounds. They live in small towns and big cities. They are religious—43 percent of women who choose abortion are Protestant, 27 percent are Catholic, and 13 percent are born-again Christians. And the majority of women who choose abortion are already mothers.

Nearly every woman I have met who has ever had to deal with an unintended pregnancy is conflicted.

She wrestles with the morality of this issue.

She wrestles with her own conscience.

She feels either frustration with herself that she got pregnant when she didn't intend to; desperation when her decision must be based on her economic status; anger when she meets a doctor who won't help her; and a roller coaster of emotions about the choice she is making.

Our community tends to run away every time somebody talks about the many emotions that come with this choice. There are multiple emotions that come with abortion. Sometimes, a pregnancy produces happiness, and then heartbreak. Sometimes it produces denial, and then panic, and then relief.

But we also know that the decision to terminate a pregnancy is more than matched by the heartache and hardship a woman feels when she is forced to have a child against her will.

This couldn't be more complex.

Study after study tells us what we know to be true: by and large, America is a pro-choice nation. But many of our fellow citizens are what I would describe as “pro-choice but struggling.”

They wrestle with the morality of this issue. They wrestle with their own consciences. They may conclude that abortion is not an option for them, but they also believe that it would be terrible to live in a country where politicians decide for them.

There is no black and white here—there are many places in between. We have not done enough to make people who are “pro-choice but struggling” feel like they are part of this community. They don’t see this as an issue that involves them, that is relevant to their lives. That has to change.

The hard and fast judgments we have too often applied to this issue—which make many people feel more excluded than included—must come to an end.

We need to acknowledge this moral complexity: that you don’t need to think abortion is the appropriate decision to believe that government shouldn’t be the one making the decision.

If that is how you feel, we want to make very clear: you are welcome in this community.

In many ways, this is not just about being pro-choice.

IV. NOT JUST PRO-CHOICE, BUT PRO-CHOICES

The truth is, we are not just pro-choice, we are *pro-choices*.

As a community, we believe women should have *all* the means and opportunities available to make the decision that is right for them.

We support and defend a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy safely, with dignity.

We also believe that if we could prevent unintended pregnancy, then we could therefore reduce the need for abortion.

So we stand for the teaching of honest, realistic sex education.

We stand for the right to choose contraception, including the “morning-after” pill.

And we stand with women who choose to continue their pregnancies, hoping that a compassionate society will support them in the responsibilities of raising a child.

We also stand for a woman’s right to choose adoption.

We ache for those women who want a child but don't feel they have the resources to support one.

We ache for those women who long for children but can't have them.

And we ache for women who have already named the baby and decorated the nursery in anticipation of a much-loved addition, only to learn something has gone terribly wrong with their pregnancy—they are faced with a decision and we hope they are able to try again.

Women are strong, and find a way to cope with these challenges. They make the best decisions they can for themselves and their families.

And there is *nothing immoral about that*.

Indeed, it is the essence of our morality that all women are able to make the choice that is right for them.

It is the essence of our morality that women are allowed to make these decisions based on their own conscience and moral compass, since they are the ones who have to live with the consequences of that decision.

It is the essence of our morality that no government should have the power to force a woman to have a child.

Our support of choice is the fullest expression of our moral view of the world—and we will not concede that morality to the anti-choice politicians who substitute their judgments and preconceptions for the difficult, personal, private, and moral choices facing pregnant women.

For those politicians who decry *Roe v. Wade* and wake up every day vowing to overturn it, we need to ask: what is it about *Roe* that is preventing you from improving children's health care, improving child nutrition, improving our schools, improving our child care, improving our social safety net?

Why is it that those who are most vocal in their opposition to *Roe* always seem to have the worst possible records when it comes to supporting children after they are born?

It is time that Americans ask:

How is it moral for a government or any politician to have the power to make such a profoundly personal decision for any woman?

How is it moral for the National Right to Life Committee to preach about respecting life while opposing the extension of the Children's Health Insurance Program?

How is it moral to make a media circus for partisan gain out of a private tragedy suffered by Terri Schiavo and her family?

How is it moral to force teachers to censor life-saving information from our teens in the classroom, as they must do under the federal government's abstinence-only policy?

As a former teacher, the issue of abstinence-only—as opposed to abstinence-based education—sends me over the top.

In a perfect world, no teenager would be having sex. We all know there isn't a 15 year-old alive who is ready emotionally, physically, spiritually, or financially to live with the consequences. We absolutely need to teach our children that they should abstain from having sex too early, because we want them to be healthy.

But you cannot put your head in the sand. The problem with an abstinence-only policy is that it just doesn't work. It is no accident that, last year, the teen birth rate in America increased for the first time since 1991.

It is because eight years of abstinence-only classes in America have left too many young people uneducated -- and still fertile.

Abstinence-*based* education? Yes. Comprehensive sex education? Yes. But abstinence-*only*? No. Just because you tell a child not to drink doesn't mean you also don't teach her not to drink and drive.

I am under no illusion that people on both sides of this debate will ever see eye to eye on the issue of ending unintended pregnancy.

But can't we agree that we want every child born in this country to be wanted, cherished, and loved?

Can't we agree to do all we can to ensure that every child is fed . . . every child can see a doctor . . . every child receives an education . . . and every child has the opportunity to succeed in life?

In this complex debate, that should be the one thing we can all agree on.

VIII. CONCLUSION: WE ARE ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

As we mark the 35th anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, I am an optimist. Even though the other side has made gains in recent years, we are on the right side of history.

As I travel this country, people ask: who is the pro-choice majority?

I see three groups. We come to this issue from different generations.

The first encompasses many of you here today: the millennials, who come to this issue from the perspective of access to birth control because it is part of your lives. When you see pharmacists refusing to fill prescriptions . . . or wonder why the price of birth control has gone through the roof on college campuses . . . the connection between the personal and the political is very clear.

Next are the middle-school moms and dads who come to this issue because they are now dealing with young people of that generation possibly becoming sexually active. They wonder what is being taught in middle school to keep their teens from having to face an unintended pregnancy before they graduate high school.

And then, there is my generation, the menopausal militia—who remembers the world before *Roe*, and the desperate and unsafe measures women used to take to terminate pregnancy. We want to continue to make sure *Roe* is protected, that our daughters and granddaughters can make private decisions without putting themselves at risk.

We all come to this issue with a different experience.

But we are united in our belief that women have the moral right to make their own choices, and we want the full range of those choices to be part of our conversation.

We all have experienced the generation gap. Sarah Weddington talks about a time she boarded a plane wearing a lapel pin that had a coat hanger with a stripe through it. The young flight attendant kept going by and looking at it. Finally, she stopped and said, “Can I ask you a question?” Sarah said, “Yeah, sure.” The flight attendant said, “What do you have against dry cleaners?”

But all three generations came together for me during a trip I took to South Dakota in 2006.

Our affiliate in Sioux Falls invited me out to talk about the battle to repeal that state’s abortion ban. After I spoke, I noticed an older woman off to the side, who was standing with another adult and two younger ones, about 19 and 20 years old.

I introduced myself. It turns out that she’s a grandmother and a rancher. She lives in a small town of about 200 people. The older woman with her was her daughter. The younger man and woman were her grandchildren. And they had driven 100 miles to the meeting.

She told me she came because she respects the work of NARAL. She wanted to pick up some petitions. But she also wanted to show her daughter and grandchildren what it means to stand up for what you believe—especially in the face of adversity.

Here is a woman—probably 70 years old—willing to take these petitions to a very conservative small town hostile to choice. She was willing to go door to door . . . to share her values and beliefs and faith and morality with people she has known all her life . . . to put it

all out there . . . trying to convince them that the abortion ban was wrong and should be repealed.

I was struck by her courage and the determination in her eyes.

She taught me we should not be afraid to talk about our faith and values, to talk about moral complexity, and to claim the high moral ground.

As we saw two years ago in South Dakota, when the shouting stops and the conversation begins...when neighbors are forced to finally talk to neighbors...the interests of America's women, children, and families are well-served.

We hear a lot of inspiring talk these days from candidates about bringing America together. As one writer put it, after eight difficult years, there is a strong desire among Americans to feel American again.

But while elected officials are able to set a tone, the truth is, whether it happens or not depends on the citizens of this country, on all of us—who care deeply, sometimes desperately, often vocally, about the issues that divide us.

There is no single issue in America today where we can do more to change the tone of our public discourse than the issue of abortion. All of us—all of you—have the power to help determine the course of that debate.

Thirty-five years ago, it was Sarah Weddington who began that dialogue. And it was young women who sat in the very seats you are sitting in today who started a revolution that changed this country.

Each of you has that same power.

Today, the question is asked of us: what history will we write?

Will it be a future where women will still have to contend with guilt and shame when they take responsibility for their own lives and those who depend on them?

Or will it be a future where America does everything in its power to help women take on the awesome responsibility of becoming a parent and to parent with dignity?

Will it be a future where we are still fighting every day to protect a woman's right to choose?

Or will it be a future where the rights and decisions of all women are supported and respected?

The one thing I know for sure is that 35 years from now, your children and grandchildren will want to know what we did when we had the chance to change the tone of

this debate . . . to stand up for women's fundamental rights . . . to re-claim the moral high ground.

They will want to know what we did when we had the chance to articulate our values and our morality and our faith . . . to a nation and a people that finds its natural home in our community.

They will want to know what we did, in the words of Justice Harry Blackmun, to make sure that America is a nation where no woman has to be isolated in her pregnancy.

I hope they can say: during a difficult time, we made a difference for women, for families, and for communities. We helped this nation live up to its highest ideals. We helped make America become a better place.

I look forward to writing that future together.

Thank you.