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**U.16 Long Civil Rights Movement:
The Women's Movement in the South**

Interview U-0550
Deborah Walsh
17 May 2011

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ABSTRACT – DEBORAH WALSH

Deborah Walsh grew up in Crossett, Ark., in the 1950s. She owns Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic in Knoxville, Tenn., and Family Reproductive Health in Charlotte, N.C. She began her career as a nurse and counselor at Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic in 1982 and has been a key leader in the Southeast to keep abortion services available to women. She begins the interview by describing her childhood in Arkansas; her family history in Arkansas; growing up on a ranch; her father's work as a cattleman and her mother's community and political involvement. She discusses her education; Hastings Elementary School; race relations in her town, segregation, and school integration. She describes her interactions with black teenagers; the backlash she felt from adults and the Ku Klux Klan; and the politics of dating at her high school. She tells about her father's death; marrying young; moving to Louisiana; emotional abuse she experienced in the marriage; and eventually escaping the marriage. She discusses becoming aware of the social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s: the civil rights, anti-war, black power, and student movements. She describes sex education and girls fashions from when she was in high school. She tells about her first job at an orphanage; becoming aware of child abuse; and beginning to think about abortion as a woman's right. She discusses her decision to have a baby; the father of her daughter getting drafted to the military; her memory of the Roe v. Wade decision; having an unexpected pregnancy and getting an abortion. She then discusses her career at Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic, where she started as a part-time nurse in 1982; traveling around the region to publicize the clinic; the environment of the Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic; and the anti-abortion protests that began in 1984. She describes her work as litigation coordinator for all of the clinics owned by Ernest Harris, who owned Volunteer Medical Clinic. The last third of the interview is devoted to describing the anti-abortion protests, including Operation Rescue, which she has witnessed and experienced from the 1980s to the present, in Knoxville, Tenn. and in Charlotte, N.C. She describes in depth the tactics of protesters; the response of law officers and judges; the trauma that she has experienced; and why she believes protecting women's reproductive choice and access to abortion is important. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – DEBORAH WALSH
(compiled 2 June 2011)

Interviewee: Deborah Walsh

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview Date: 17 May 2011

Location: Deborah Walsh's hotel room in Knoxville, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Deborah Walsh owns Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic in Knoxville, TN, and Family Reproductive Health in Charlotte, NC. She began her career as a nurse and counselor at Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic in 1982 and has been a key leader in the Southeast to keep abortion services available to women.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessica Wilkerson is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently conducting research for her dissertation which will explore social justice activism in southern Appalachia, with special attention to women's activism, in the late 1960s and 1970s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. The interview takes place in Ms. Walsh's hotel room. She has a wonderful memory and tells richly detailed stories about her life; thus the interview is long. Because of a technical glitch in the Zoom recorder, the sound drops out once in the interview. In the transcript, I have filled in the missing parts (as I had a back-up recorder). By the end of the interview, both of us were exhausted, and the interview ends abruptly with the idea that we will continue with another interview session soon. Ms. Walsh let me borrow a binder that includes articles about the Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic and about reproductive rights debates. They have been scanned and will be included in her file at the Southern Historical Collection.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP's Zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT – DEBORAH WALSH

Interviewee: Deborah Walsh

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview date: May 17, 2011

Location: Knoxville, Tennessee

Length: 1 disc, approximately 3 hours and 41 minutes

START OF DISC

JW: This is Jessie Wilkerson and it's May seventeenth, 2011, and I'm here with Deborah Walsh. We're in Knoxville, Tennessee. And Deb, do you want to just say your name?

DW: Yeah. I'm Deborah Walsh and I'm an abortion provider and a nurse and I'm in Knoxville, Tennessee now.

JW: Okay. It sounds good. Okay, Deb, can you start by telling me when and where you were born?

DW: I was born January twenty-fifth, 1953, in Crossett, Arkansas, and that's in Ashley County right on the Arkansas-Louisiana line.

JW: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

DW: Yeah. Generations of my family, really both sides, have been in Ashley County in that area. I have letters from my family, between each other. I think the earliest one I've found is from 1802 and a lot in the 1800s, back and forth and talking about the crops and farming and stock and politics and those kind of things. I grew up in the house that my father grew up in and that my grandfather built. We were at the crossroads of the county and my grandparents had a store, kind of a general store. We also have a family cemetery down the road and the headstones

go back into the 1800s, and I'm sure there are unmarked graves before. But the sense of family history is intense because it's all just right there and I've always--. I grew up that way knowing who everyone was.

JW: What did your parents do?

DW: My dad was an electrician and worked for Georgia Pacific, the paper mill. He worked shift work and that's what our income was. He was a horse man and always kept and trained horses. And he also had mules at times, but even with the horses, he thought it was important that all horses be able to pull, like pull a plow or pull a wagon. So I grew up with my Shetland pony knowing how to plow the garden. At the time I just thought that was very, just that everybody did that, and now I just appreciate it so much that I got to grow up that way.

Even the house I grew up in, by the time I was growing up in it, my dad had been a late in life child for my grandparents and they were business people, entrepreneurs, and they had the store. My grandfather was a logger and a cattleman and all this. So my dad was raised by a housekeeper and nursemaid for him. So he was very much alone and quite an introvert. So the things that he learned how to do, I realized later, was largely because he grew up with the people that worked in the community and worked with and for the family. That's why perhaps he was such a great gardener and why he knew how to do all these amazing things. He was, like I said, very quiet, but a reader and worked with the gardening and the animals.

I was his only daughter and it was just--. I remember riding horses with him. I got my own horse. My grandmother brought it to me as a surprise when I was three. They said, "Look outside." And there was that excitement and they pull up with the horse trailer and they pull the Shetland pony out that I had been riding at my cousins', but it had been handed to me. Then I realized I'd been riding ages before then. My dad had one of those little blue and white striped

cotton pillows, you know that kind of pillow stuff, and he had a little feather pillow and he set it in front of him, between the saddle horn and him. And I rode between him and the saddle horn. We went everywhere and we lived probably seven or eight miles from the town, which probably had five thousand people in it.

And I asked my mother a couple of years before she died when I started riding horses because I don't ever remember not riding—and she was not a horse woman—and she said, “Three weeks old.” And I said, “You're kidding.” I said, “Well, that makes sense because I don't remember.” She said, “Yeah.” She said, “I nearly had a heart attack. I looked out and your dad had you wrapped in your receiving blanket from the hospital in front of him on the horse riding around the barn lot.” And so horses were a big thing.

I wanted to be Annie Oakley, that was my, or a librarian. But it was like trick rider or librarian, trick rider or librarian. But I would practice and had Fanner 50s, which were those guns that were popular for children in the 50s that had the big, where you can cock it with your hand and, like this, shoot. So I wore those and hung off the side of my horse and tried to pretend I was Annie.

JW: What did your mother do?

DW: My mother was just intense, an intense person, and she was very community involved and so she, like if someone's house burned down, she would go and we would wake up and there would be twelve people in line walking into the house in the middle of the night to sleep. We lived on Highway 133 that went all the way north in the county down to the state line, to Louisiana, and it was a dirt gravel road. In south Arkansas, that's really bad with mud, but in the summer, the dust is so bad that inside your house even with the windows closed, there's this thick dust like you would see in a movie about Australia. And she was determined to get the road

paved, so she organized the community and went to the Arkansas Highway Commission. This took years, but she got Highway 133 paved. It was just a huge, huge, huge benefit and change for the community.

She also worked in political campaigns. When I was in junior high school, I remember she would take me and a couple of friends with her to rodeos. When David Pryor was running probably for Congress at that time—he was later, I believe, on the House Ways and Means Committee in Washington, but I think it was an Arkansas post or position that he was running for—we went to the rodeo and stand in the parking lot and hand out bumper stickers. Also, Dale Bumpers, it was Dale Bumpers who was on the House Ways and Means. But all those people as they ran for whatever, state offices, governor, and then Congress, she always worked on those campaigns. Bill Clinton first ran for lieutenant governor, and we campaigned for him and then, of course, when he was governor and he and Hillary Rodham were in the governor's position in Arkansas. It was incredible. And Hillary was amazing. She just did so much and was so connected with the real people, and Bill also.

And my mom, we came from old families, but we didn't have any money and we weren't like a powerful family or anything like that. But Mom understood how the political system worked, and once she went out and talked to everybody and got everybody to vote for these people and got them in office, things would happen. Just an example is some woman's utilities were turned off because her check had not come. And I don't know if it was disability, Social Security, veterans' benefits, but Mom would call and this was in the Clinton era, would call Little Rock and say, "This is Lorraine Walsh from Podunk Junction, Crossett, Arkansas, and we are your constituents. We got you SOB's," except she did not shorten it, "elected and Ms. Bessie whoever has gotten her power turned off, it's a hundred and five damn degrees down here,

because her check hasn't come and I want it taken care of today. Not tomorrow, today. She could die." So after it became kind of a joke. When she'd called, she'd go, "This is Lorraine Walsh again" about whatever situation. And by the way, when Bill and Hillary were there, those things got done that day for the little people who had nothing but their vote and their personal life and history. They had no connection with them. It just made a huge impact on me as far as how the system is supposed to work and how it can work.

So she was Mrs. Ashley County one time just because of all her civic work. She was, I can't remember what the position was called, but like chair or president of the county fair commission board. I know she got a big trophy for being Mrs. Ashley County and I remember before school--. I was mostly interested in the woods and horses and rodeo and that sort of thing. And I remember sneaking her trophy out while the bigger kids were at school and crossing the fields to the neighbor's house and telling the neighbor kids, who I was pretty sure could not read, that I had won that trophy bull riding at age five, which is really one of the most embarrassing things I've ever done in my life now. But she was very community minded.

JW: How many siblings do you have?

DW: I had three brothers: a brother, Danny, two years older than me and a brother, Bruce, five years younger, and a brother, John, six years younger.

JW: Can you describe your school to me?

DW: Yeah. I went to Hastings Elementary School in Crossett. We rode a bus. We caught the bus out at the edge of our land and rode in. The school system was amazingly good considering it was in south Arkansas in that size town. I think because of—the paper mill and all the lumber business there was originally owned by the Crossett Company and then later bought by Georgia Pacific—and I think that even with the Crossett Company, some of those buildings,

like the Civic Auditorium and things, are on the Historical Register because--. And I think they're there because the Crossett Company wanted to be able to attract people from other parts of the country, and they had to have some cultural things to offer as well as a good education.

So the school, like I said, was amazingly good. I didn't have any way to judge it at the time, but in retrospect and seeing my own kids in public school for times, it was a good public school. I felt like I got a good education. I was a good student.

JW: Did integration occur while you were in school?

DW: It did. In our town, there was a street called the "truck route" and you were not supposed to cross. Like if you were white, you only went across the truck route if you had to pick up someone to work for you, and if you were black, you only came across if you were going to work for someone. I don't even know, I don't really remember black people being in the grocery stores early. I do remember when I was smaller going to the county courthouse and also the hospital in Crossett and the water fountains being marked "white" and "colored."

And I talked to my great-uncle a few years ago and while we were driving to Louisiana to eat, he was telling stories of his father, my great-grandfather, John Brooks. We were asking about the racial changes in the community in his lifetime and he said that he and my other great-uncle, John T. Brooks, the son of John Brooks, that they were downtown in Crossett back when they were young men and a black man was about to be hanged on Main Street in Crossett. And so my great-grandfather was a constable, and they knew he had a gun and so they went tearing off trying to find him to stop him and they didn't get him in time. So they remember the last black man that was hung in town. Those men, my great-uncles, Charles Brooks has just died in the last year. So if you think of just somebody that's alive now remembers that happening in a main street, it's--.

I saw crosses burn. I don't remember what age I was, but I remember just being terrified and my mother saying, "Just don't look either way. Look straight ahead. We'll keep going. It's night." We were going along the highway and there were crosses burning. She was going, "Stay, sit down. Don't lean out. Just get by."

So when I went into seventh grade, which would be 1965, the fall of '65, they integrated the junior high school, which was then seventh, eighth, and ninth grade, with one little black girl whose name was Stephanie Piggy. We had heard about those things and, as a matter of fact, when the Civil Rights Act was passed, which our schools weren't integrated until after that, but I remember my dad sitting my older brother and I down at the kitchen table, which was our dining room table, and talking about everything that had been going on and the Civil Rights Act passing and saying, talking about what that would mean as far as the schools and everything and asking us how we felt about it. And my brother looked at each other and we went, because we were just thinking of kids in school, period, we essentially said, "Well, if they're nice kids, we will play with them and if they're mean, we'll beat them up, just like everybody else." And so again, in retrospect, I thought how wonderful it was that he did sit us down and just said, "How do you feel?" He didn't tell us what to do. He just asked us how we felt.

But seventh grade starting, the cafeteria was always really filled. There wasn't enough seating. And my best friend and I walked into the cafeteria. Her name was Jocelyn White and she later, she was the first woman meteorologist in Arkansas and later became an anchor with NBC News in Dallas, but at the time was very geeky and beautiful and smart and my best friend. I was a cheerleader. So we walk in the cafeteria and with the seating problems like there were, there was one table totally empty except for this one little black girl sitting there with her tray. And we never said a word to each other. We just looked at each other and we got our trays and sat on

each side of her. And it just kind of set the course of things to come. We were not—number one, I think that for whatever reason these things have, I think that it made all but the most insane, virulent families and people feel safe to act normal. Somebody just needed to act normal. Then I think it was in 1969, we were in tenth grade, they integrated the schools with more teenagers from, it was called T. W. Daniels, it was the black school, and they maybe even closed Daniels and totally did it then. But it still seems like there weren't, if it was completely, there weren't enough black kids.

So sports changed because we had these, again, sports then was all guys. There weren't any women's sports. But these guys were just incredible, and my brother was an incredible athlete and there were some others that were white. But these guys were, I guess it was their senior year, they were just outstanding and just very not trying to be big dogs. So my friend Jocelyn and I became friends with more of the girls and of course, ended up meeting the sister of the cuter guy who's a senior and just very normal teenage stuff. Then we each had a tremendous crush on one of these guys, different, thank goodness. So the sisters were whispering back and forth and telling.

It was all just very innocent kid-like stuff and then I remember getting called to the office over the intercom: "Jocelyn White and Debbie Walsh, come to the office." And we went down and the principal said that some men from the paper mill, is the way he put it, but my mother after my father died always dated police officers, so I knew that the men from the paper mill, not all men at the paper mill, but that phrase meant "the Klu Klux Klan." And I knew which cafe that they met at. They had told the principal that he needed to stop this or they would. So from that point, like tenth grade on, Jocelyn and I were kind of ostracized. There were a few people that

had courage and would speak to us in the hall, like maybe three out of three hundred. But you know how loud it is in a high school hall. When we walked in the hall, it was just silence.

It really affected us. We had to be picked up from school. We couldn't walk home from school anymore because our parents were afraid we would be killed. I think that the boys involved had a much worse thing happen. I hope that it turned out okay, but I think their families sent them, at least one of them, to Berkeley. I think they would have definitely gotten sports scholarships, no question, but they had to get out of there.

And the irony is that's the same year that in literature we were reading Thoreau and Wordsworth and William Blake, and we also discovered Langston Hughes's poetry. And Langston Hughes's poetry, I think, saved our lives and probably those guys' lives because there's one of his poems that's like, "Southern gentle lady, be good, be good. Young black man hanging from the crossroads tree." With my generational family growing up on the crossroads, it was beautiful and horrendous and sickening and somehow, though, uplifting, not in the moment, but somehow you felt connected. I think those are kind of ways that we feel less insane when we realize that we aren't the first people this happened to. We were both readers, so I think that really literature and poetry, and we were both were writers also, and so we wrote a lot, read a lot, and kind of survived.

JW: And this all came out of you and Jocelyn having crushes or had you started dating?

DW: Oh we couldn't date. We were pretty, I was pretty bold. Like my mother said that if I got in trouble, that it was because Jocelyn got me to, and her mother said it was because Deb got her to do whatever, even though our parents liked each other. But we would drive down the truck route, which you absolutely weren't supposed to do, like on Friday night because even though the schools were integrated, there was still a black youth center and a white youth center.

And so we would drive down in my mother's car looking, trying to find these guys. We also, as dumb as it sounds now, we were really innocent. We didn't care really if nobody had done that before openly or whatever. We were just like we didn't care about losing popularity or losing anything. We didn't have any idea that it was about life and death by 1969. We just didn't think that that was it. But it definitely made a huge, huge, huge, huge impact.

JW: Did your mother ever talk to you about what was going on?

DB: She did in a roundabout way. She told me because she was dating a police officer, she said, which was the ultimate passive aggressive, I realize now, but she said her boyfriend told her that there were two girls that the police department and the school system and everything thought were dating these two black boys and that there was going to be serious, serious trouble because the—and then they called them the Klan. It wasn't like something somebody whispered about. And it seems like they even, they just referred to them as the Ku Klux Klan. Period, straight out. And we called them the "country kitchen club" because that's where they met and it was KKK, sort of. That's what Jocelyn and I called them, the country kitchen club. So she told me that and so I just told Jocelyn, I said, "We've got to be cool because they're on to something."

And so we thought we were being really on the down-low and being very cool and we were driving down the truck route one night and the police pulled me over. I stopped and he said, "You need to follow me to City Hall." And I said, "Okay." And so we followed them down there, and I can't remember if that officer or another one, but now I'm sure that my mother set this up, they called us into the courtroom, which was dark, turned the lights on, closed the doors, set us down on the bench, and just: "You don't realize what you're messing with." Just all this very threatening. It didn't really intimidate us, but it certainly was meant to, and it was certainly

a lot to handle: big, tall police officers in uniform at night when there's nobody else present. Not that they did anything inappropriate other than that act itself, but it was just wrong. So that's really, that's really all. Now I realize that my mother probably told them to keep any eye on us and they probably cooked that up.

JW: When had your father died?

DW: Daddy died in February of 1966. So I started seventh grade in fall '65 and I had just turned thirteen in January and then he died just a couple of weeks later. He was thirty-nine and he had a heart attack while he was sleeping. He was very fit, but he smoked and he was an alcoholic. He always made it to work and did all that, but on his long weekends or at other times, he drank and he was the kind of alcoholic that he was off with his friends. He didn't drink in the house. He was never verbally or emotionally or physically abuse with my mother or any of us. I think it was really a pain, his inner pain drinking. But he just died in his sleep on a Sunday night. It was just so sudden, just like then what do you do?

My mother then got me, I still had the pony that I had gotten when I was three, but he was sort of out to pasture just on our land. We lived in town by that town, but we still had our family place, which I still have, and the horses were out there. She got me a registered quarter horse because I really liked horses and rodeo and horse shows and that sort of thing. That was in February when he died. When it got warm, probably a month or so, she got the horse. And then in June, we got a phone call saying that someone had shot my horses and I remember going out there and when we pulled up, it was a neighbor that lived up the road and apparently the horses had gotten out and gotten into his roses or something and they were pulling my Shetland pony down the road with chains, he was dead, behind a tractor to take him off into the woods. And then my quarter horse was standing there. He had been shot in the flank with a hollow .22 rifle. I

remember those were the kind of shells. And so we put him in the trailer and took him to town and then he died just within the hour after that.

I was just so distraught because that was the thing that “this will help you be healthy and be okay.” They knew who did it. Everybody knew who did it. And so of course, Mom called the sheriff, who was B. A. Corsin and so later on I kept saying, “Is he in jail? Is he in jail?” And then Mom came into my room and she goes, “Honey, he’s not going to jail. He paid off B. A.” And B. A. later ended up in the federal penitentiary for other stuff. But it just had a huge impact on me, I realized later in life, about who’s the authority, like who could keep you safe, who could do anything other than you. And so I think that that event—it took me a long time to figure that out— but I think that event really affected the course of my life.

JW: So when you graduated high school, what did you decide to do after that?

DW: After the year of all that turmoil with the Klan and all that stuff, I decided that I was going to—and of course we’d just been through 1968, we’re in 1969, and one of the black girls that was in our schools, her name was Cookie Tucker. I really liked her and she had a sister that lived in Chicago, and so I decided with Jocelyn’s input that I was going to run away from home and live with Cookie Tucker’s sister in Chicago and join the SDS, the Students for a Democratic Society. Or I was dating a guy that I had been dating since I was twelve and he was eighteen. We couldn’t really date then, but he was mostly off at college during my high school years. Or I would marry him and raise cattle, and that was when I was sixteen I decided that.

So I sat my mother down at the kitchen table and I said, “Mom, I’ve made some decisions about my life. I’m either going to move to Chicago and join the SDS and live with Cookie Tucker’s sister or I’m going to marry Reagan and raise cattle.” And she hesitated maybe three seconds and she said, “Well, I guess we’d better call Neil Rhodes,” who was the only

photographer in town to get my engagement pictures taken. And I until much later didn't even think about that, and I'm not criticizing her, she did the best she could, but I took that as guidance. Then I later realized, huh, if you have a sixteen-year-old who says they're about to move to Chicago or get married, you might ask them what's going on.

But I did get married and it was very traditional wedding in the Methodist Church on Main Street, and Jocelyn was my only attendant. We had her read Elizabeth Barrett Browning poetry. We did everything we could to make it us and I remember standing. I had this big white dress on and she had some beautiful green velvet dress and we're in the foyer of the church and they start to play the bridal march, and I said, "Let's just pick up these dresses and run." We got tickled. We started laughing so hard that we had to really get it together to [get] composure to go.

So I got married and moved to north Louisiana. My husband was a bull rider and a drummer in a country band. And so we lived behind the bar, the night club, called the Red Coach Inn in West Monroe. I had kind of grown up there because I couldn't really date, but I could go places as long as, when my dad was alive, he knew or my mom or they were with us. So I'd grown up really in this bar, at times at least a few nights a week because he commuted. It was an hour away. He commuted, so I would go with him and I didn't drink or anything, but just watching people, watching the bouncers and watching when someone comes in the door and they stop and they look and then they zero in on the person they're looking for and go for them because it's their wife/girlfriend/husband/boyfriend with somebody else and so how the bouncers handled all that.

There were some organized crime aspects as far as the Dixie mafia that, like I said, I was just an innocent, sixteen-, seventeen-year-old kid at the time, but I realized later as I look back over the names and I read the history of that time: "Oh that's where we went that night and that

who owned such and such night club that we went to after we closed and that's why the owner of the bar's name was Warren Antly." And he had been a professional, now it's called a PRCA, but then RCA, Rodeo Cowboys Association. He was a clown, a bull fighter, and his name that he always went by was Pinball. He was really a magnificent man. He was incredible. But I realized later why when we left the club at night that he pulled out a gun and said, "Stay back," and then somebody else looked and then we all got into the Cadillac and went over to whatever it was. I just didn't put all that together until later, but I realized that.

JW: How had you met Reagan?

DW: I danced from the time I was three, dance lessons, just tap, jazz, ballet, and his mother was my dance teacher and he was much older. I didn't know him really through her, but just I was at a baseball game the summer after sixth grade and I was five eight and looked like I was eighteen and was walking along and he and some guys were in a car and said hello. We decided that we were going to be boyfriend and girlfriend and of course, everybody freaked out. But my parents were real straightforward about it. Of course, I couldn't date. I was twelve. And so he could come to my house and sit when my dad was there and my mom was there, and I could go to their house where his mom was. So there was this huge scandal that I was pregnant every month and all of this and the thing was that we knew that while I was in the football game in the stadium with my dad and my boyfriend, who was six years older, I knew because of being at school what other people were doing out in cars. So there was some irony again to that.

So Daddy had died and really my boyfriend kind of took over the rules part of my life, how short you can wear your skirts, how do you wear your hair, which fortunately he went off to college every Sunday evening. So I did whatever I wanted to and if he was home, I would have my skirts down and then after if he took me to school, then I would roll them back up with a

sweater over so that I could wear because mini-skirts had just come in. But really he and his mother, they were good people and kind of took care of me.

And then we moved. My junior year, I was in Monroe, Louisiana, and then in my senior year, we had moved back to Crossett to his family's land out in the country to raise cattle and we also built an arena because he was a bull rider with a bucking shoot. We wintered rodeo stock. We kept the bucking bulls for stock contractors during the winter and had horses. He took me to school every day. It was during that time that he started doing things like putting a white glove on and running his finger under the back of the couch to see if I had the house clean enough, and I was very sensitive about that. I was very neat and orderly, but my mother had been a hoarder like you see on television, like really, really a hoarder. And so I was very self-conscious and sensitive about it. I didn't even know that that was a bad thing for him to be doing, but I knew it was hugely painful to me because that was my nightmare that I would not have a presentable home.

I was a serious reader and I brought home Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto*, reading it and it wasn't anything about, I couldn't even have told you really what communism was, but I knew that I needed to know about that, that it was important in our world history. And he said, "You can't read this. This is communist." And I said, "Yeah, I can and anything that seems potentially harmful, shouldn't we read about it if that's what you think? I don't know if I would think that or not." And he just, he said I had to take the book back. And then the evening news, Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, you know they had the evening news, and I turned on the news to watch and he said, "You don't need to watch any news. You don't need to watch the news." That seemed really not a good sign and then, though it wasn't in our day to day conversation, he said that when we had children that our children would call black people the "n" word and that

any black people who had any reason to come on our property would come to the back door as they had to our grandparents' houses. And I said, "No, no."

So at that point, it was before the end of my senior year. I was eighteen. I left and I'd been married thirteen months. I left and my mother had already moved from that town with my brothers. So I didn't have anywhere to stay and a family, a girl at school, had just noticed me and talked to her parents and a family took me in, the Olivers. They were just incredible people. Another family, the Rays, they had a barbeque place in Crossett, and now have Rays Barbeque in Monticello, Arkansas. They gave me a job making ice cream cones and hamburgers and stuff so that I had a job so that I could kind of pay my way.

JW: So those episodes with you and Jocelyn going down the truck route and going into the black community, where was that happening in relation to you getting married? Was that before?

DW: Oh yeah because that was, until then, like I said, we were cheerleaders. She was the president of the National Honors Society. And then we were ostracized and so it kind of broke up the rhythm of our school. It broke up kind of the network around us. We were by that time on the drill team and we started just going, dressing off by ourselves in a shower because nobody would speak to us. I think survival kicked in for both of us. She definitely, she ended up getting the GP scholarship and going to, I think, the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. I decided that I had to get out of my house. Our living conditions were really bad. Sometimes we didn't have utilities. My brothers were wonderful and brilliant and hellions. So my mom kind of had her hands full, and I'd never caused any trouble. Even with all that I'm telling you, I was never in trouble ever. So I was just kind of taking my life in my own hands. I'm sure that my boyfriend had heard about these things, but he never really talked about it. It was never an issue and he was

away at college. It never really was. So for me, it was like get married, get out on my own. I just didn't know that it was going to be prison.

JW: And your high school didn't have a rule that you couldn't go to school once you were married? You were still able to go to school?

DW: You could go to school. You couldn't wear pants, interestingly. I was telling some young women that I work with the other day. I graduated in 1971 and it was the year that I graduated that, so either fall '70 or spring '71, where they made all these rules that girls could wear pants, but you had to wear a pant suit and the top had to be—it was all very specifically prescribed—the top had to be of a tunic type that was below your hips. In other words, you could not tuck your shirttail in and the boys could not wear their shirttail out. And we were just so happy that we got to wear pants, period, but if you think, like we're sitting here now, I still skate and ride bicycles and somebody that that happened, that's just a short time ago as far as you would think that would be something that would be way back in history.

JW: So how had you learned about the SDS?

DW: Television, and my older brother, Danny, was really into music and he always knew the music that was going to be popular before it came out on the radio, which, how, I do not really know. And my youngest brother, John, was a child prodigy. He just naturally started playing piano when he was three and my mom bought instruments so that whichever of us could play and he started playing guitar and drums and he was in bands with teenage and young adults and grown men by the time he was six. My mom and I were taking him to gigs at the National Armory and here and there. So there was music and American Bandstand and the news, which I did watch. We were hearing about what was happening all over the country. Joan Baez was a huge force. Huey Newton, Angela Davis, all these people, we were like, "Yeah."

Also the Vietnam War was a huge part of this whole thing because my boyfriend, being of the age he was, he was in college because he was expected to go, but also as a draft deferment, and then at some point, I remember he got an induction notice. Like you wanted to be 4F, which meant you were either in school, I can't remember all the things that would put you there, you were deferred. He had ridden a bull sometime in there and got his leg smashed against the shoot and so he had phlebitis when he went in for his physical and so that deferred him again. But it was just a continual horror that people that you loved were going to go. And then later on, the people who had gone we were starting to see on television saying, "Don't go. Don't go." If you've seen that film, *Sir, No, Sir*—

JW: Yeah, that's a great film.

DW: Those people, I met actually met some of them a few years ago at a Vietnam Veterans' reunion and it was a reunion for the resisters, draft dodgers, and for the enlisted people, the people that fought in the war, and to kind of heal that "well, you're a killer, you're a chicken," all that thing, which was very powerful. But those guys were coming back that had gone over there with the greatest intentions saying, "Don't go." So here were the soldiers and the Marines saying, "Don't do it. Don't do it." And that's what really had a bigger impact on us was just the whole thing. So I think the Vietnam War and the background of all of that, that's where you saw that it wasn't just the Boston Tea Party where people stood up and said no. It's now people are saying, "This isn't right."

JW: And were there any protests, antiwar protests in town or that you were aware of or that you got involved in?

DW: No, because, no, I think you have some level of innate intelligence about that you would just get killed. I say that laughing, but yeah. What I started doing was wearing bell bottom

jeans—instead of pant suit—that were unhemmed to school, which sounds really lame, but I would get sent home and have to change. I would pick up trash at lunchtime, like pick up litter, and maybe a couple other people. And people would laugh and make fun and ridicule you and throw more trash down and everything, and just picking up trash was a huge statement of connection with the bigger world and the environment and all that then. That was enough to get you, like in a civics class after I had done that one day, one boy said, “I think the world would be a better place if Debbie Walsh and all of them like her were killed.” That’s just kind of an example of how, if you just did anything outside the accepted.

JW: What was your sex education in school or that you were getting from your mom?

DW: Really nothing from my mother. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, who I call Bobbie, was an incredible woman, a horse woman. She had been very, very, very critical in my whole life, teaching me how to set the table, how to polish silver, how to go through a buffet line correctly, which all was very boring to me, but later I was so glad that she taught me those things. And she talked to me realistically about more social impact of things, not really sex education. I had the definite impression from my mother, and she didn’t say this, but I just felt like I would be killed if I got pregnant. I think most girls, that was kind of what the deal is. And they didn’t. Any girl that got pregnant had to disappear, and I learned that they were really still in town and their parents walked them at night. So that was happening. We knew of a doctor in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, who I later met as a professional, who would do abortions and we didn’t know of anyone really had been, but that was always kind of in the back pocket of there’s a doctor that you could go to, which was an hour or so away. So there really absolutely was no sex education.

JW: So what about when you got married?

DW: I got on birth control pills, which was a nightmare. Birth control pills back then were very, very strong. It was horrendous, but I didn't ever get pregnant. So that was good. Right before I was supposed to graduate, I had left my husband and had been living with the Olivers. After we had been separated for maybe two or three months, I started dating a guy that lived in Louisiana just on the weekends. My friend that I lived with and I would go down because you could drink and get into clubs in Louisiana and go out and dance.

So my husband found out that I started seeing someone and that they were from Monroe, where we had previously lived. And so he essentially had let me know that he had hired someone to take care of him and later when I confronted him about it, I said, "Well, but you got somebody, some thug. There was a contract out on me." He said, "Well, I was just going to have him just hurt you, just mess your face up." Or I forget exactly how he said it, like that was not so bad. But we ended up literally on the run where cars and jumping out of cars and hiding, hiding at friends' parents' lake houses. The woman of the family I was living with had made prom dresses for my friend and I, and I remember I didn't get to go to my senior prom because I was running from someone who I don't know that, whoever he hired, was Dixie mafia, but that was certainly, that's how he met them, which sounds like those National Enquirer papers at the checkout stand: "I missed my senior prom because I was running from the Dixie mafia." But it was sad. I really wanted to wear that dress, and so I didn't get to go.

And I ended up back in Little Rock and just staying up there until school, until graduation, and he came up and talked to my mom and told her that I had been taking drugs and smoking marijuana and that I was really insane. They locked [me] in my brother's bedroom with a little hook on the outside of the door and took me to the Arkansas State Psychiatric Hospital to have me committed. When I got in there, the psychiatrist wanted to talk to me directly and I told

him just simply what was going on and he said, "Young lady, I don't think you have any problem other than your family. Good luck." Which was awesome.

So I didn't have to get locked up, but then either at that same time or within a day or so, my husband came back and said, "I've got to talk to you. I talked to Don," who was our family doctor and who, I had taken care of his kids and exercised his horses. So it wasn't, especially back then, out of line that the doctor might have told him this. He said, "When you went in for your exam, you have cancer and you've got to come back." And I went, "Oh my God." I was in Little Rock, and so I get in his truck and we're going along and I did notice that the handle was off and the lock thing was off. It was kind of a new truck. And he said after a few miles, he said, "We're not going there." He said, "I just told you that to get you out here." So he essentially kidnapped me. He told me that if I called anybody that, it was just—I understand that when people say, "Why don't you just walk out? Why don't you run?"

He took me to Galveston, Texas. I had never seen the ocean. It's the gulf, I now know. There was a camper on the back of the truck and we stayed in the camper and he would sleep next to the door. And we stayed in a motel sometimes, but he would make sure he had the phone. I remember waking up and seeing the ocean for the first time from the back of that camper and being somehow expanded by that experience and also feeling so imprisoned. Then when we headed back, I decided to call my mother, which was pretty risky, and I told her what he had done and she said, "Where are you?" She said, "I'll have every state police in--." I said, "Mom, the police are connected with organized crime," especially down where we were. So I said, "Just I'll get to you. Just be heads up." So I did literally get away by running, like "can I go to the bathroom" and then got some friends to pick me up and ran out of a bar and I got away.

And my mom took me back to Little Rock and then she wanted me to graduate, like be in the cap and gown part, and we went down there and I remember being really sick, throwing up, and I wasn't pregnant, but I was throwing up every three minutes. And I said, "I don't think I can do it." And she goes, "You couldn't let me down like this." I went, "I can't stop throwing up." So I went and I threw up during the whole thing. Like while we were on the field, I would lean and throw up. I walked and then as soon as I walked out, Mom had the car pulled up to the gate of the football field and then we had to get in because I was still on the run from my husband. So we had to get in and out. And driving back up through those Arkansas roads, "Pull over," throwing up. So I did graduate.

JW: Did you finally get a divorce too?

DW: Yeah, I did. I went to the attorney and said I wanted a divorce. That was when I was leaving him before the end of school and before I got back to the house. He was out on the tractor in the field and I walked out there to help him do something and he said, "So you thought you needed to go talk to," the name of the attorney. And they had told him already. They had already contacted him and told him everything that I said. When I went to the courthouse in Hamburg, the county seat for the divorce itself that summer, I remember them saying, "So did he make your life so unbearable?" All these things. Our family really did not believe in airing personal things, your laundry in public. I said, "No, we could not exist and live together." And they're going (sigh), like exasperated, trying to get me to say the right thing and I just wouldn't do it. I just kept saying, "No, we cannot live together. We cannot get along." And then they finally said, "Okay, granted," bam, and did it. Everybody was saying, "Half of this is yours and half of that is yours," and whatever, and I didn't want any of that. I left, I think, with like thirteen cents and some jeans, but at least I was free. So I moved to Little Rock after that.

JW: So during these years, were you becoming aware of the women's movement?
Can you explain that process?

DW: Yeah. The summer of '71 when I went to Little Rock, I got my first job actually waiting tables instead of just behind the counter at a drive-in. Then I also, I wanted to volunteer at an orphanage and I didn't really know anything about babies because I was only five when my little brothers were born and we didn't have a lot of family. So there were no babies whatsoever and I really liked kids. So I volunteered at St. Joseph's Orphanage in north Little Rock, and what they had was a position to teach adolescent boys who had been in foster care and kind of gotten jacked around through the school systems and hadn't learned how to read. I loved that. I just so loved it. Then the boys I was helping got placed or something and so I think they suggested, or my mother did, the Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock and so I went and tried to volunteer there. And they said, "Well, we need nurses' aides. Why don't you just take a job?" And I went, "Great."

So I started working in the burn units. That's where all the burns for the state come and also all the child abuse cases come there, and the intensive care nursery was on that floor also. And so I was eighteen and I would go into a room and the RNs who were teaching me would say, "This is so and so. Tell Debbie how your arm got broken." And this little three- or four-year-old kid would go, "My mama hit it over the edge of the bathtub." "And how did you get burned?" "My mama threw this at me."

One day in particular, I had my own patients. So in the morning when you check in, they give a report and say, "This patient has this and he needs this, this, this. She needs this." And they gave me a little girl whose name was Renee, who was about three months old, and she was in a crib. They said, "She has second- and third-degree burns down her right leg from groin to

toes.” They start telling the treatment and whatever and I said, “What happened?” And they said, “Well, her mother said that she reached up and turned the hot water on while she was giving her a bath and it splattered on her.” And I didn’t know a lot about babies, but that sounded kind of not, didn’t make sense to me. But when I went in the room, here in those stainless steel cribs like they have in hospitals, was this little baby girl, beautiful, and she was white and from her groin, just like if you had on underwear, like from that line solidly all the way down to her toes was burned, I mean, perfectly like a line, not like a splatter. And I realized just in that moment that her mother had dipped her in hot water, had dipped her leg in hot water.

I remember standing there, and I had thought about abortion. This was in ’71. So there had been discussion. And I had thought when I initially thought about it, I thought, “Abortion, hmm, on the universal big scale of right and wrong, yes-no, I think it would be no for me. Whatever anybody else thought, I think it would be no. It seems kind of rough, kind of brutal or something.” And I was standing there looking at her and this had been probably a year or so before and I’m standing there looking at her and I went, “On the big universal scale of right and wrong, not that this woman should have had to have an abortion, but if she had known that she didn’t have whatever emotional, nerve stability, whatever, to take care of this child, would it be better if she had known and had had availability for her to have been able to have an abortion early in her pregnancy or this, what I was seeing in front of me?” And it was like, “Oh, universal scale of right and wrong, um, definitely an abortion is like, that’s nothing compared to this.” Not that an abortion is nothing. There are a lot of emotional and spiritual components with it, but compared to this, and it was just like that (snaps fingers). So I think really in that moment in the Children’s Hospital is where I became pro-choice. I hate all the labels, but that was definitely the moment.

It also made me, working with the kids--. I believe—according to feedback of being there and with the nurses—that I had an ability, a special ability with the kids and particularly with premature babies. They would be like two or three pounds. They'd fit in your hand. And getting them to feed because they don't have a suck reflex and so they can easily die because they can't get enough nutrition, and I could get them to eat. And the cleft palate babies pre-surgery that needed to eat. I really did. I just had some kind of instinctive, could do it, and I really loved it.

And I was single. So at night, some of the kids, especially burned, I would say, "Why does no one visit them?" And the nurses would say, "Well, don't judge their mothers. His mother has eight other kids and she lives in Brinkley or Clarendon or way out in Arkansas in the Delta with all those kids and she has no way to come here." And so that opened my eyes too about a child alone doesn't mean that the mother doesn't love it, which was this whole other [thing] about being a woman and kids and all that. So I would come back at night, ride my bicycle back to the hospital, and sit with some of these kids, especially the worst ones, because I had time and their mother didn't.

And I also decided that I wanted to have a baby then. I never intended to get married. So I started trying to get pregnant, and it took a year to get pregnant. Anyone that I was dating, because that was in the era before AIDS, herpes, those weren't there, and you could get gonorrhea or syphilis, but both of those were treatable with antibiotics. So it wasn't like if you think about having unprotected sex now or I think about that for my daughters, yikes, but it wasn't like that. Anyone that I dated, I told them that I wanted to be pregnant and that don't be sexually involved with me if that is not okay. You don't need to do anything. You don't need to be--. So I did get pregnant after a year, still working at Children's Hospital and the director of nursing came to me after I started showing, called me in her office, and said, "We really like you.

You do an excellent job, but I have to fire you because we can't have unmarried pregnant girls here."

So this was in '72. So I said, "Okay," and then that weekend we were going to Illinois to visit the [son of my daughter's father] and I just had the bright idea, I don't remember if we went into a pawn shop or if we had a ring my brother's had gotten from a pawn shop, but somewhere it came from a pawn shop, this gold band, and I said, "What if I just walk in to work Monday morning and say we got married and change my name?" He said, "Sounds like a good idea to me." So I walked in and I went, "I'm Debbie Roberts now." Because I really needed my job, I needed it, and I was pregnant and poor. They gave me a shower, and I just kept working.

When I was pregnant in that spring, the father of my daughter got drafted and they had the lottery. I don't know if you remember that, hearing of that, but it was toward the end of the Vietnam War and they were going to do a lottery on national television where they would draw out a birth date and everybody with that birth date--. And I forget how many there were they were going to draw, but everybody with that birth date was going to go. So I'm pregnant and we're sitting there watching the television and the third number they drew out was his birthday. Deferments for conscientious objector or anything like that was long gone and so we thought about going to Canada and we thought about going to Mexico, but I was pregnant and I really wanted her to be able to know her family.

So we went to a Methodist minister in Little Rock in the basement of a church because we had heard that he did draft counseling. And I remember he had a little book and a little manual paperback, a government print, and we were looking through it for different things and we eventually got to the part of physical deferments, anything physically wrong with you. So my later-to-be husband looked through it and he was asking about toes, if you lost a toe, and then

he said, "Well, I think I could give up a finger." And so we started reading and the minister was reading with us. [The manual] said it had to be the middle and distal joint, meaning distal, the very end one, and this one of any finger with the exception of the little finger, that didn't count if you didn't have that, or the thumb. So from the outside in, the end one and the next one or the thumb you had to have gone.

So as we left, he asked me if I would cut his finger off. He had already gotten his induction notice and we had lived through the whole Vietnam War and the whole thing and so I said, "Yeah, I will." And we talked about it and went back to my little sixty-dollar-a-month rent house that I rode my bicycle from there to the hospital. He had a machete. I think being in Arkansas, everybody has a machete and I'm sure he had one too, but he had a machete and we figured out that he would put his finger on the kitchen cabinet and that I would cut it off.

This next part, I can't imagine how it happened, but I know it happened. Because I was still working at the Children's Hospital, two nurses as I was walking down the hall called aside. They just kind of said, "Step in here," into a treatment room and they started handing me Lidocaine, needles, a tourniquet. And I went, "Tourniquet, shit, I didn't even think of that." And how to scrub it and everything. And I can't imagine that I told them, but I had to have told them or they wouldn't be giving me this stuff and they did it all very (makes sound). They had it all together and had obviously talked about it between themselves, in there, gave me the stuff, and then they were gone, which is an amazing part of the whole thing if you think of it.

So I injected the Lidocaine into his finger, didn't know really how to do it, and he said, "Just do it. Just do it." I scrubbed it with Betadine and everything and we didn't have any insurance and there was a free clinic where we did pap smears and health care. I said, "Well, if you go from the free clinic to the ER, it will be paid for. If you go directly to a hospital, they'll

either send you somewhere else or won't take care, whatever, because we don't have any money." So he said, "I guess I could say I got it cut off in the car fan when I was working on the car." And I said, "I don't even know if that would cut. I don't know."

So he puts his finger out there, he's left-handed, his right forefinger, and I get the machete and go (makes sound). And instead of hitting in that little area where I thought it would hit, it hit right here on his hand and I was like, "Ew, yikes." And he just looked at me and he said, "Just keep going, keep going." He just was totally stoic and so then I hadn't realized I had to aim a lot more. In our imagination, we would go "clunk" and the finger would just fall off and I hope no one else ever needs to do that, but that's not how it works. So anyway, I cut his finger off, put the tourniquet on, and took him to the free clinic. They took us to the hospital and thank God, the best orthopedic surgeon in town was on call and so he got that fixed. So he didn't have to go to the war.

So this is '72 and I had my baby New Year's Eve, 1972, December thirty-first, '72. *Roe vs. Wade* happened January twenty-second, '73. And so I had a less than one-month-old baby and was in Little Rock at the time, and I remember on our big box black-and-white TV seeing Ellie Smeal being interviewed. Of course, I didn't know her then and I remember her saying something like, "Of course, women should be able to without shame and safely get this done. This is part of women's health care. They shouldn't have to be going to back alleys." She was just very matter of fact. And my jaw just dropped that here was a woman who would be on national television saying just common sense, of course, what I knew was common sense, but she was saying it. So she's the first person that I ever remember talking particularly about reproductive justice, abortion, or anything like that publicly.

JW: And then when did you start to get more invested in it?

DW: When my daughter was about nine months old that same year, I got pregnant using birth control. It was not good news, but it was like, "Well, we could probably make it." And I had a job at the Easter Seal Rehab Center. It was kids that were about eighteen and under, and two of the girls that I was taking care of were, like one of them, I know, didn't have arms because I remember she crocheted with her feet, and the other one had some missing limbs and they were just beautiful and great to be around. They would always listen to John Denver on the radio and sing with it and everything.

So one of the things that I had to do was to go with them to Children's Hospital for their immunizations or their annual exam or something. So I went with this vanload of Easter Seal rehab kids and sat in the outpatient clinic at Children's all day because it takes forever. Then when I got back either later that day or the next, one of the nurses from Children's, because they all knew me because I'd worked there years before, they said, "Deb, you've had measles, right?" And I said, "Actually, no." And they said, "Because every kid in the whole clinical area except your kids, Easter Seal kids, had rubella." And we started not to even call because everybody's had rubella and I said, "No, I haven't." And I was in, I don't remember exactly how far, but I was starting to show, so early second trimester. At least one of these girls and I think both, their history was that their mothers had had rubella, the girls I was taking care of that had no limbs. And so it's one thing to hear, "Oh such and such can cause such and such," and whatever, but when you see an eighteen-year-old person living with that and plus I had a nine-, ten-month-old baby, that was just completely overwhelming.

And so I decided that I would try to get an abortion. At that time, I went to the same University of Arkansas Medical Center where they tried to put me in the psychiatric lockup and you had to actually go to the psychiatric part of the hospital and have a psychiatrist declare you,

I'm not sure what the medical categorization was, but insane or going to be insane. People, you tell this story now, they go, "Oh my God, how horrible." We were so glad. We were like, "Thank you, thank you so much." We were like, "Whatever. What do I need to say?" Because indeed, I have no idea what would have happened if I would have had to go ahead with the pregnancy, but they put me in labor and delivery and did a saline induction where they put a needle above the pubic bone and withdraw amniotic fluid and then replace it with that amount of saline. And it causes the fetus to die and for you to go into labor and so you actually give birth.

I remember taking the book, *Be Here Now*, by Ram Doss, with me because, to me, there was no disconnection from my spiritual life, but there weren't any things like counseling or anything like that. And I remember thinking, "What will they do with it? Will they put it in the garbage?" And I thought, "Well, then it'll be buried like in a landfill." "Well, what if they just put it in the garbage disposal?" "Well, then it'll go into water treatment and it'll be back in the earth." I thought, "Well, what would I do if I just miscarried? What would I do with it?" And instantly, I thought, "Well, I would just find some soft ground under cedar trees and dig and bury it and put it there." As soon as I thought that, I just had this image of a star going back in the sky and so that was my own self-counseling, but I was very clear. I wasn't kidding myself about anything. I wasn't hiding anything. But it was hard to be in labor with women all around me having babies and babies crying when your baby isn't going to be alive and cry.

They mostly, they were just like automatons, robots, everybody that took care of me, and then after I delivered, they took it and I said, "Can I see?" And they looked at me like I was insane, sick, crazy, and whatever. But then they took me into a surgery room and gave me some IV drug, who knows, and then after it took effect, the two nurses in there got over my stretcher and said, "How could you do a thing like this? How could you do this?" I mean, just horrible,

plus I'm under the influence of whatever, Demerol or whatever drug they give you. I said, "I was exposed to rubella and I didn't ever have rubella and I don't have any money. I don't even know how to tell if everything was going to be okay or not." And they did back off a little bit after that. I later thought, I never thought I'd be working in clinics, but I thought, "People shouldn't have to go through that when they're having an abortion." I wasn't unsure of my choice. I was definite about my choice, but that doesn't mean that it's easy or that you don't have any other parts of yourself impacted by it.

And so when you fast forward down to really after my third daughter had been born, and I had been through a hospital nursing program and graduated, but still was staying home with my kids and I had moved here actually to Tennessee and was living out on Watts Bar Lake, I saw an ad in the paper that said: "Part-time recovery nurse for privately-owned women's clinic." And the job was Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, and my husband would be home to take care of the kids because we didn't really use daycare. So I thought, "I'll try it," because I didn't even have to work at that point, but I thought, "I'll try it," because women should be around good people and if it's depressing, which I thought it would be, or horrible or something, I'll just give notice and quit.

So I started at this clinic here that I now own as a part-time recovery room nurse February fourth, 1982, and when I walked in, it was the most positive environment I have about ever walked into it. It was nothing like what I expected. The staff was incredible. The patients were so appreciative and genuine. It could not have been a more different environment, and I was prepared for worst-case scenario. I still remember my first patient. I remember her name, everything that she needed. So that, even just from the very first day, seeing how it wasn't what you thought, that's where things changed as far as what kind of care could be given to women

and should be, that we could really do it. And so that's really where I was at the first part was about taking care of them however they were, whatever, just making that as good for that little space of time as I could.

JW: What was the name of the clinic at the time?

DW: It was Volunteer Medical Clinic. It's now Volunteer Women's Medical Clinic.

JW: And had you received training as a nurse that helped you to be able to take care of the women?

DW: Well, I had gone, like I said, through a hospital nursing program for practical nurses as an LPN, which practical nursing, which they're phasing out kind of, you get no management training, but you get more how to take care of the physical body, the patient. It's just completely about patient care, which was really perfect for me and perfect. So I had a license. I was a licensed nurse, but the nurses that were already there trained me to take care of them in recovery, and I learned it's the safest surgery that's done in America. It's like eleven times safer than childbirth if you're thrilled to death that you're pregnant.

And so all those things, I had certainly come from that era of at least hearing, not directly, but hearing of women having to go all scary places and dying and all of that. But it was legal abortion and it was wonderful to be there where you saw women there that are healthy, for the most part, or they wouldn't have gotten pregnant and that the actual surgery itself took about five minutes from the time the doctor walked in the room until left. The women were ready to walk out half an hour after, were asking to walk out sooner, but we made them stay until we could check their blood pressure and everything. We gave them antibiotics just prophylactically and gave them free birth control if they wanted it. So it was just a great, just filled such a need in the community was my feeling about it.

JW: And how had you ended up in Tennessee?

DW: I had divorced my first husband that I married in high school before high school was over and then, though I didn't intend to marry the man I had my first pregnancy and later second pregnancy with, we married purely for practical reasons and we got along. We also had promised each other that if things didn't work out marriage-wise that we would never, ever, ever be hateful, mean, or manipulative with the children or anything. And we didn't stay together for probably three months after the actual marriage, but we had a second child and we always kept them together and were fair with each other and shared expenses. So I had, when I had a toddler and a three-month-old, had met my next husband and married him and had gotten pregnant actually during nursing school and was about to deliver during graduation. So he was a cabinet maker at the time and later a contractor and wanted to go into business with a lifetime friend of his. He was from east Tennessee and that's why we moved over to the Kingston-Knoxville area was so that he could go into business for himself. And so that's what got me over here.

JW: So when you started working in '82, how was the clinic being received at that time by the broader community?

DW: We got referrals from doctors, and clinics were only in bigger towns. So we had doctors in Grundy, Virginia, and coal mining towns and Corbin, Kentucky and of course, down as far as Chattanooga and into Georgia and from everywhere, doctors referring to us and health departments. And the University of Tennessee, the health clinic knew about us and there's another good clinic in town, Knoxville Center for Reproductive Health, and they opened around the same time that the clinic I worked in had. So between the two of us, I think people weren't real verbal about it, but it was just we were needed and were here is the feeling that I had. The protesting didn't start until 1984. I'd been there two years and I had, in that two years, started

being a counselor and doing public relations work for the clinic, going out to visit these doctors up in these coal mining towns. And where do these women come from? How do they find us? And being amazed when you go up into the mountains of Virginia or Kentucky and think then they show up at our door for an appointment. It still gives me chills. It just seems so magical. It also seems horrible that they have to get up at four o'clock in the morning and drive down here, but they're so thankful that we are here even still.

JW: So traveling to those places, did that change anything that you were doing at the clinic to be able to see where people were coming from?

DW: Well, the man that owned the clinic, Ernest Harris, though I'm sure he would not call himself this, he was really a saint. He was really an angel and when abortion became legal, he had a friend that was a family practice doctor. And Ernest was a businessman from Charlotte, North Carolina, and his friend who was the doctor said, "Ernest, there is a real need for this, for these clinics, and it's not going to get you invited to join the country club, but it will work financially. You can still offer really low and affordable prices to the women and the women of this country need this badly." And so he had opened, I think, the first clinic in every southern state where he had one, the Carolinas and Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee.

And he was the kind of man always where he said, "The patient is the most important thing, period, and when she walks in that door, everything from the way your face meets her face, your eyes meet hers, that you have a comfortable place for her to sit, that her kids are allowed to come in because she may not have a babysitter." And you know still, that was in 1982 when I started, still as far as I know, we are the only clinic, my clinic here in Knoxville, which is that one, and my clinic in Charlotte are the only clinics in at least these two states, but in most of the country that allow children.

JW: Really?

DW: Yeah. People have very strong feelings about that, and there's some very good providers who are my colleagues who do not allow children. I'm the exception to the rule. He told me to go out and get a cart, like a cart, he said, "You know like when you're flying and the attendants come down and 'would you like a Coke, some peanuts?'" He said, "Get a cart." And he said, "Get cookies and crackers." He said, "These people have driven from who knows where." He said, "Make sure there's always a fresh pot of coffee in the waiting room and get some Cokes and soft drinks." And so I did that. I went to Mayo's Garden on Kingston Pike in Sequoya Hills and bought actually a pool cart, like for the swimming pool. I got two high school girls that were kind of friends and got them little sweatshirts with "Volunteer Medical Clinic" on it and they wore jeans and tennis shoes and they pushed the cart through the waiting room for the patients' families and also for the patients and served them. And so that was part of that knowing that people had gotten up and driven, that maybe they had scraped together all the money they had even to just get here, much less couldn't stop at a restaurant, even fast food, on the way back. So we just tried to attend to everything that we could attend to.

JW: Do you want to describe when the protests started, when they reached Knoxville?

DW: Yeah, and I don't know what prompted it, but in 1984, we started having protestors on Concord Street in front of the clinic. At that time, we had off-duty Knoxville city police officers for security. There were a lot of preachers, and they were kind of running rampant just doing whatever they wanted to. So we maybe went, I can't remember what the situation was, but I ended up with the prosecuting attorney saying, "You've got to have pictures of this. You can't just come down here and he said, she said." And so it was like, "You mean go out there and take

pictures of them?" And he said, "Yes." I said, "Well, isn't that going to cause fights and stuff?" He said, "Well, we're not saying cause a fight, obviously, but you've got to have proof."

And so I got a little instamatic camera and went out there and was taking pictures showing that they were standing in the street or blocking the driveway or trespassing. And I remember one day being out there and taking a picture of this preacher, Jim Dodrill, and the next thing I knew, I was down in the street in Concord Street in the traffic lane. He had just thrown me down on the ground. So that was the first assault, physical contact, and I was very, very, very distressed by it. I lost fourteen pounds in two weeks without trying. We went to court. I don't even know if, I don't remember even what happened with the outcome of it. But I remember my boss told me, he had a clinic in San Juan, Puerto Rico, also, and he said, "Go to San Juan for a couple of weeks and relax and just lay in the sun." And I remember going down there, which was great because I'd never been to Puerto Rico, and hanging out and trying to kind of get well and coming back.

But there was this increasing feeling of *justice is too slow when it's something that is about people getting hit or pushed or that kind of thing*, to say nothing of just the threats and verbal abuse and that we went to court it seems like handfuls and handfuls of times. And maybe they were convicted of trespassing or pled no contest or I don't even remember about that. But that just increased up until about in 1988 or '89, I think it was '89. Operation Rescue had been to Atlanta and had done the blockades and everything. So that would have been, wasn't that with the Democratic Convention, which would have been '88?

JW: Yeah, '88, '91.

DW: Yeah, and so '89, February, is when they were coming to Knoxville and they met with the police and the DA's office and then the captain of uniformed police and the public

relations person for the police and some other ranking officers came, asked for a meeting with me at the clinic, and they said, "These people are going to do a sit-in." And they said, "They won't tell us which clinic, whether it will be you or Knoxville Center for Reproductive Health on Clinch." And I said, "What do you mean they won't tell you?" And they said, "No, it's nothing to worry about, Deborah. These are good Christian people. They're like your aunt or your uncle." And I said, "Respectfully, no, they're not." And I said, "So what's going to happen?" They said, "Well, if it's here, they will come and they will come onto the property and sit down and block the doors, and we've already made arrangements with them of how to arrest them and then we'll arrest them and get them on." I said, "Well, how about stopping them at the edge of the property and starting to arrest them when they start to trespass?" They said, "Well, no, you have to tell them." I said, "I know, but why can't we tell them at the edge of the property that they're trespassing instead of letting them come to the door?"

But they had it all planned and so I called a friend or two who had been through this, that were clinic directors, and they said, "It's horrible. There's no way we can prepare you for it. Just don't let them block the door." And I didn't really get that, and so we were in the clinic the night before. We stayed in the clinic. The guards and I and some staff were up all night trying to sleep on the couches, get a little rest, and they said that they would do this so that we couldn't open. In other words, it wouldn't happen like at four or five in the morning because the police could have it completed and the patients could get in. So they would do it so that it would be blocked when we opened at eight o'clock.

So we get up and are all bundled up and we look out and it looked like a column, like block formation, marching. All these vans and buses started coming into Tyson Park and then they got out in like military block form and there were between two and three hundred and they

just started toward the clinic. And so my guard and I went out to the edge to at least say, "You are trespassing." And they just went straight by us and we ran back to the door because our friend had said, "Don't let them get the door." Because they weren't trying to come in. And so we kind of stood with, say, my back against the door, and him and another off-duty officer from a nearby town were there and they came and were very rough, number one, which I had not counted on. And four men sat down in front of our knees and were pushing us against the wall and then the leaders were standing up in front of them so any video—it was all very orchestrated. Any video or anything, if you looked at it, would show them there and us back there, but not these guys down there.

JW: Who were pushing you.

DW: Oh and elbowing. They bit my guard on the buttocks. They were hitting, pinching. They were hurting us. And they blocked the back door also and were singing hymns. They had a bull horn. Like when I said out to the police officer, I said, "They're hitting us." And he said, "Well, sweetheart, just climb out of there and let us take care of this." Well, the door swings out like in most public places from the inside out. So my staff, the whole staff, was trapped in the building and the windows are screwed shut for security reasons and so they couldn't get out. Even as loud as all that was with them singing hymns and all that stuff, if I got right at the crack of the door and said, "Are you guys okay?" They go, "We're alright." And I went, "Everyone?" "Yes." So I was the only communication and we didn't have cell phones and all that. So I said, "Well, if you'll put an officer up here, I'll be happy to get out." And he said, "Well, after we get them arrested, it'll be just get on out of there." But there's no way that I was going to leave the staff stranded.

So it ended up taking three and a half hours from the time they came until the police arrested and dragged away the last ones. And they had told the police that they were going to go limp and not give their names and the police were going to put them in wheelchairs and on stretchers and carry them to a city bus, but that once they got to the bus, they would get up and walk on the bus and sit down. That was part of the deal. But then what they started doing was not getting on the bus. So the officers had to get out and drag them up the steps of the bus. They would put them on a seat and they would fall into the floor and the officers had to-- So the officers figured out in the midst of all this that-- I later found out they were pretty mad about the way it turned out and they were also, like if they, say, tried to arrest some of them and then have an officer with them, they would crawl back. They'd already gone through the arrest process and they'd crawl back. A lot of police officers got hurt and injured from carrying these people. We ended up with a hundred and three named defendants.

So toward the end of the day when they had gotten them all finally in the buses and everything, an officer came up to me and said, I don't remember the exact words, but they had a warrant for me for assault and I said, "What? Against me? Are you saying they're saying--?" I said, "I was on the cameras the whole time. My hands were up. I know how these people are." And they said, "Well, they said that your knees hurt their back." And I said, "Because they had a hundred of their friends pressing them up against us." I said, "We weren't kicking them or anything." They said, "No, they said your knees, they were pressed against them, that that hurt them, and we just want to be fair to both sides." Well, that sentence came, starting in that moment until this very day, is one of my least favorite things to hear because we are not two sides. I am law-abiding, a professional. I am not out disturbing the peace and causing trouble with people, and they were trespassing, disobeying the officers, doing a list of illegal things.

But I found myself charged with assault, and I remember going to an employee that I had here, Katherine Calloway, whose family has been in this town a long time and I respect her very much and her parents. And I asked her, I said, "If you or someone in your family were charged with a criminal charge, who would you hire to be your criminal defense attorney?" And she told me Charles Fels and so I made an appointment with him and then over, that was on a Saturday, and Saturday night, I went to one of my nurse's houses. Her and her husband and my guard, and the news was covering this, the Knoxville news, and they said there was a peaceful sit-in at the Volunteer Medical Clinic on Concord Street by Operation Rescue. It was peaceful and there were no injuries and at that moment, because I had already shown them and usually if you get bruises, they don't show up until the next day. I pulled my shirt up and my pants just barely down on my hip, and I looked like I had been in a gang fight. My arms, everything, they just looked like I had been--. And this was just a few hours afterwards.

And so I said, "I'm going to go to the emergency room at Park West just to have a record of this because this doesn't sound like it's going right." So I went to the hospital and I can't tell you how traumatized we were. We wanted to get some pizza because we hadn't eaten all day. And I don't think words can describe it, but everywhere we looked, every person, that could have been some of them in the crowd. Is that some of them? Is that? And it sounds insane, but it was very, very real. We didn't know who the enemy was and felt extremely unsafe. So when I got to the ER, I remember walking in and having this, "Oh my God, what if one of them works here?" So when they said, "Can we help you? What's wrong?" I said, "Yeah, I got pushed around against a wall and sort of beat up by a lot of people against a wall." Period, nothing about the clinic, nothing about Operation Rescue, because really I just wanted documentation of what I looked liked.

So they told me to go in the room, put on a gown, and I went in the room and put on a gown and laid down on the cart and the nurse came in and she opens my gown and she went, "Oh my God." And then she steps out and calls another nurse in and she goes, "We have to call the police. This woman's been beaten." And I was just, because I thought, "What if it's the wrong police?" The sergeant who came actually was one of the sergeants who had come down when they first told me that these people were coming and it was not him that had said, "They're nice like your aunt or uncle." They showed him and he looked at me and he said, "Deb, I'm so sorry." He said, "I told them. I tried to tell them," he said. That was good. That's just to give you, because it's one thing for me to say, "Oh yeah, I was bruised and beat up and whatever," and then for a very objective, they don't even know I work at a clinic or anything about Operation Rescue, for these nurses to be horrified, ER nurses to be horrified, and say, "We have to call the police," because that's how beat up I looked within four or five hours after the arrest.

So I went on Monday. Bernie McNabb, who owns Knoxville Center for Reproductive Health, had called me and said, "Don't you think that we should go to talk to the police, to city hall essentially?" And I said, "Definitely." So we went down there and she is just elegant and beautiful and intelligent. She's very articulate. So we went in and there was maybe a captain and a head of the uniformed officers before and the person, the kind of PR liason to the public there. And we sat down and Bernie said what she had to say and she said, "How do you think that it went?" And they said, "Well, we think it went great. It was perfect really." And I just remember Bernie being almost speechless, being so angry. She handled herself very well, but essentially said, "We don't." And I said, "We really don't."

And we were trying to explain to them. I said, "Really just three things that I want. I want you to put up a police tape at the edge of the property." Because they were going to come back,

they'd already said. A police tape at the edge of the property so at least there's a mark because some of these people of the three hundred didn't want to get arrested. They were just like in this prayer, singing crowd and the other ones were at the door. And so at least we keep the people who didn't want to get arrested off because they're not going to cross the police line and make it clear as we are videoing. And it would be better for the police and safer and everything.

I said, "That's one thing. The other thing I would like for you to arrest the leaders, the ones that are orchestrating with the bullhorns, when I say, 'He is trespassing, sir. I want him to leave,' and go through the song and dance. I know we have to do it three times, but do the leaders first." Because they had an agreement to arrest the leaders last so they could keep orchestrating because they thought that the leaders would keep everybody in control.

And I said, "The other thing I would like, the third thing, would be for you to just put an officer at the door up where I was. Just put him there. I'm not saying they have to arrest people. You decide that. That's your business. But just those three things." And so they went into a long response with each one of why they could not do those things and Bernie and I would say, "Well, this. Well, this. Well, this."

And then I just had this moment of practicality and I would perhaps go so far to say genius response and I said, "Okay. I understand what you're saying. Where do we get the legal kind of stun guns?" And they went, "Oh you don't want stun guns. That would be a big mess." I said, "Of course we don't want stun guns." I said, "But all my employees, their families, their dads, husbands, moms, sisters, everybody is terrified for all of us and we want to get trained to use them. So do y'all have somebody that could train us or do you have a retired person that you would refer us to? Because we want to be very safe with the stun guns, but I want every

employee to have one.” And they were quite horrified and I was quite serious, and then it turned out pretty quickly that they felt like they could do those things that we had asked.

JW: And did you own the clinic at that point?

DW: No, no. I was director at that time, yeah.

JW: Did you find allies in Knoxville at that time, people who you could count on to help support you and back you up?

DW: Yeah, and it was wonderful in that the pro-choice community came out and offered to do essentially anything as far as helping or escorting patients or making a physical barrier or counter protests or whatever, which made us feel wonderful, but was also scary because it was so chaotic. What I feared was I couldn’t tell who was who. And the legal issues were so complex, but we had some meetings and people came to help figure out what to do and explain the police situation. We didn’t feel alone and the police also, here I have to say, by the second time they hit, which was, I think, maybe March eighteenth and we already had a temporary restraining order in federal court and then they came back and did it again. So that time, we had the judge’s temporary injunction, I guess it was, temporary injunction and we were showing it to them as they were laying down, going, “You’ll be arrested if you don’t leave. You can avoid arrest by, this is Judge Jarvis’s order here.” And they were just calling us satanic witches or they would tear them up or make rain hats out of them, which no judge wants to see his or her order treated that way.

And so we ended up going back into court with RICO and civil rights charges. So for RICO, they have to have, I think, it’s three or more predicate acts, maybe two, but three or more and you have to show that they conspired together, that they interfered with crossing state lines, which, of course, they had, plus our patients come across state lines, and there has to be state

involvement, which was that the police department, in trying to just keep the peace, we'll say in the kindest way possible, helped them carry this out initially by agreeing to not arrest them like they would anybody else. Then we did get a permanent injunction.

This was also happening at the same time I was executive director for the other clinics that my boss owned and so this was happening in Alabama and Asheville, North Carolina, with Joseph Foreman and that Operation Rescue crew and Jackson, Mississippi with Roy MacMillan and Greenville, South Carolina, Steve LePhimon and all those people. And so we were going to rescues it just seemed like all the time. We would get word there was going to be one and have to get there and plan and figure out how to deal with the police and what cities were dealing with it correctly. So then I became litigation coordinator for all of the clinics and hired the attorneys and did the work with them so that we didn't have to reinvent the wheel each time.

JW: Did you see differences in these places?

DW: In the municipalities?

JW: Yeah.

DW: Oh definitely. At the time, Jackson, Mississippi, was really about the worst. They just were terrible, wouldn't arrest the people. Birmingham, Alabama, was stellar in their way they handled it. They pulled a bus that seemed to be involved with law enforcement, pulled a bus up right in the clinic parking lot, had the SWAT team out there, had everything set up, had just what I had suggested innately, a police tape the boundary, and then when the people came on, they told them, "You're trespassing. You can avoid arrest," or whatever Alabama's, Birmingham's required thing is. And then they put them in those plastic handcuffs and put them on the bus. And I remember the pro-choice group in Birmingham being across the street singing, "And another one rides the bus, uh, and another one rides the bus," after that song and it was

very uplifting that there was somebody out there and it was very serious, but there was some sense of humor between us. We were so thrilled that the police did the right thing. I can't tell you how just right in America that seemed, like that's what's supposed to happen.

I remember at the end of the day, by that time I had a couple of people that drove me, that were security people that had become close friends. I was dating one of them by that time. At the end of the day, we were standing there going, I said, "I'm only bleeding in two little places. Who's got blood?" Somebody would go, "I don't have any." "No, I've just got a little place." And that, for the end of the day, was always like how there was barely any blood on us. That was a win because sometimes it was just so horrible and we really got beat up. But Birmingham did great, Birmingham did great, and we did try to tell the other municipalities because rightfully so. I don't think that law enforcement wants Deb Citizen coming up and going, "What you need to do is blah blah blah, "but to hear it from other law enforcement professionals and in some ways, in places, that kind of worked.

But in Jackson, Mississippi, we had gone into federal court. They were having some big Joe Scheidler "right to life" thing down there and we went into federal court to ask just, we said, "We're not asking to take away their freedom of speech or right to assemble. Just if they trespass, if they come onto the property unlawfully, we would like an injunction so that they would have violated a federal court injunction so it would be we can keep the peace. It makes more sense. We're not asking them not to protest or not to say certain things or any of that." And Judge Wingat, a fairly young federal judge, denied it. He denied our request. It was on a Friday, and I remember coming down the steps of the courthouse in Jackson, Mississippi, and by that time, I had a cell phone, but one of those giant ones that looks like a shoebox. They called me

and said that they had the doors blocked already. Word had gotten to the clinic because we saw patients on Friday afternoon.

And I remember being in my pink pinpoint cotton blouse with the little tucks on it and my pearls and my nice shoes and a linen skirt coming out of court and going down to the clinic and seeing these nuts just everywhere and the doors blocked and then these women who had driven from all over out in the Delta just being angry, ashamed, bewildered, everything. As I was standing there, this one really small in stature woman left her car and went over and was headed toward the door and I said, "Ma'am, they've got the doors blocked and it would not be safe to just try to get through them. They aren't nice and you could get hurt. So you could either wait until they move or until the police decide to arrest them or something." And she said, "No, I have a babysitter to pick up at whatever time and I have to get in here and get this done and get back to my kids. They're not stopping me."

And I just, in that moment, I said, "Well, let me carry you." And so I bent over, got her on my back because I'm tall and strong, and the pearls and the pink shirt didn't inhibit me in any way. And thank goodness, she was small and I carried her on my back and just started stepping over them to get to the door: "Excuse me, don't let me hurt you. Excuse me, excuse us, don't let me hurt you." And then I handed her. She just held her body out straight and the guards were in the door because then we had learned to prop the door open so that thing that had happened in Knoxville didn't happen and there was medical staff there too. So she just held her body out board straight, and I handed her over to them. And there was an Associated Press photographer there who got a photograph of that, which if you want, sometime I'll get that for you or get someone to send it to you that caught that moment.

But that was the first time and then the next morning, we had clinic Saturday morning and I just said, "We're not going to ask them to be arrested. Jackson's not doing anything. It's costing the city." The average was something like twenty to eighty thousand dollars a day. And we had an old Cadillac Seville that had belonged to my boss. The radio would come off and on, it didn't work right, but you could drive it. So I pulled the grill, the front headlights, the front of it straight up flush against the building, against the kind of side door because what we had learned is they didn't want to come in the building, they wanted to block the door, and that there were levels, that only certain ones would get on that front line. And so instead of being able to block it with two or three people, it would take as many as it took to circle around a Cadillac Seville. It was like instant logic in an emergency.

And so then as the patients came, we told them the safest thing to do would be reschedule or wait until they leave, but you can, if you want to, go over the car. And so I would help the patients get onto the back of the car and kind of hold their hand and they would walk over the top of the Cadillac and again, we had the door open, but blocked with the car, and then the guards, who were tall inside, would take them in and we got, I don't know, probably twelve or fifteen people in like that.

JW: How did the protestors react when you were doing that?

DW: They were apologizing to the newcomer protestors, saying, "I'm so sorry you're not going to get to go to jail. It's such a wonderful experience and you get to," is it testify that they call it? Like if you're in jail with somebody—

JW: Yeah.

DW: Which was my worst nightmare to be locked up and then have somebody like that trying to convert me. But they apologized to the newcomers and they just, they were mad, they

were ugly, they were surprised, they felt lame, but we just didn't really know what else to do and so we did start using that.

We used that in Charlotte, North Carolina, more than once and the Charlotte police were not good at all and still are horrendous. And not all, I don't mean the uniformed officers that come out, they're really great, but somewhere in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg police system and I don't even think it's the chief, but somewhere in there, there is a glitch where the uniformed officers are not allowed to enforce the trespass laws, FACE, the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances, state or federal, they're not allowed.

But back then, they also were terrible. They would not let anyone but me lift the patients. Like the men could not help, volunteers or the guards. And so I remember one day on Durwood Drive, which is right behind Carolina's medical center now. The building is torn down. But I remember squatting down to let the person get usually on my shoulders and then standing up and then handing them over the layers by then of anti's and handing them over to the guards. If they were heavy, then volunteers and staff people would stand in front of me and the person would get on my shoulders and then they would help pull me to the standing position and then we would put them over the top. I remember the first time in Charlotte, I lifted eighteen people, meaning husbands, boyfriends, moms, patients, everything. It was just insane.

I still worked at that point for Ernest Harris's family and he had died by this time and so I opened my own clinic on Morehead Street in the old Wachovia Bank building that was Wachovia's first branch bank. It was at the intersection half a block from Tryon and Morehead. And they did this Operation Rescue thing, and we pulled the car up and then this woman came walking up who was tall and quite heavy with her daughter and grandbaby, and apparently, her daughter had an appointment. I realized I could not lift her and so her daughter, I got her in and

then I said, "I'm really afraid for you to try to carry the baby while walking on the car." And this baby was like maybe crawling, but definitely not walking. We're talking maybe nine months old, this beautiful little boy.

One of the most poignant memories in my whole career is that grandmother looking at me in the eyes for a second and handing me her grandson to hand over the top of these people into the guards. And you think how much, not just trust, she decided to trust, but how much need that she had to help her daughter and then we helped her onto the back of the car and she walked over the top of the car into the clinic the way we had done in the old days. But I just couldn't, I could not believe that she was able to just hand me her baby and it wasn't like "Oh yeah, here's the baby." I mean, it was a big, you could tell it was huge for her. Just hearing this, can anybody imagine going to the doctor and going through this?

JW: And surrounded by people who you don't know what they're going to do.

DW: Who are screaming and waving and hitting with Bibles and all this. It was just chaos.

JW: And had there been personal threats against you?

DW: Oh yeah, yeah, probably starting back in the '80s here in Knoxville. We were in the same location we are now and I remember going out one day and we were trying to think of non-violent resistance. So we had put water sprinklers. We thought maybe that, because we had a beautiful lawn and azaleas and everything, we thought maybe that would. Well, one of my guards came in and said, "There's a guy out there ripping the sprinklers out of the ground." And I went, "He can't do that." And so I walk out and this guy comes up to me chest to chest, hands at his side, and starts just walking, pushing me back with his face right next to mine, going, "Hit me, hit me, hit me, hit me. You'll be charged with assault. Hit me, hit me, hit me." And I didn't

and I was going, "Call 911" to the guard and the police came down and when they came, they took a look, got back in the car, and said, "We have to call a captain." And I said, "What's up?" And they said, "He's a police officer." It also turned out that he had a .38 revolver stuck in the back of his plaid polyester weekend pants while he was pushing me and asking me to hit him.

He started following me. Just like I would be picking my daughter up from daycare and driving and he would be behind me, and so I would make something up, like, "We've got to go to the store. I totally forgot." And she'd go, "We never go to this grocery store." Or we would just about to pull into an apartment I had rented and I would go, "Oh I totally forgot to," something, anything. And that was really--. That was in the '80s, so before Operation Rescue, and that's when I started being afraid to have my address on anything. To this day, my address is the clinic address. And that feeling of being really terrorized and stuff was happening around the country, people being kidnapped, shot. I had three kids and it was just that's where it began to be horrifying.

I think that, and I can't remember how many people had been shot, shot at, pictures sent of their loved ones to them through the crosshairs of a rifle, taken through the crosshairs of a scope, but we began, in that time the main fear was of being shot at long distance, from long distance with a rifle. So I remember playing games with my kids at the house of, "Okay, we're going to say who can stay below," and it was the window level, "for the longest time and you get," and it would be whatever, some cereal that we never got or just anything, trying to make it like we're learning how to turn somersaults and if you put your head above this level, which was window level, then, just anything because I felt like we were going to be killed. To this day, I can't sit in front of an open window anywhere at night where I'm lit and it's dark outside. No way, it's just not worth it. It's just been so many and for so long.

And we did win in federal court here. We got a permanent injunction with fines and the judge said that we needed to let anyone who wanted to get out, get out, but by paying a small amount. My attorney said that's the appropriate thing. If a judge suggests something, you, of course, do it. And so I said, "Okay. If they trespass one time, they need to pay." I think it was then two seventy-five or two twenty-five for a first trimester abortion. If they did it twice, they need to pay five hundred or whatever it was for a second trimester abortion. And I'm going to let it be known on the picket line that if they bail, they're paying for a poor woman's abortion and so some of them did bail out. One reason we won is that we named not just the individuals, but the churches, like Calvary Baptist Church on Kingston Pike, named them as a defendant in the lawsuit and also the minister. And any of the other churches that were represented there, we named the ministers. So we were getting checks from Church Mutual Insurance. The church insurance was paying. And we didn't collect. I collected, I think, twelve thousand dollars, which was like a drop in the bucket compared to the attorney fees, but I don't think anybody else has ever collected anything from them.

And we got a judgment in South Carolina. I don't remember the district, but it's in Anderson, South Carolina, like on eighty-five toward Atlanta, and the judge's name was Anderson and we got a judgment under RICO for a hundred and ninety-two thousand dollars, which, with RICO, there's joint and several liability, meaning if you and I get in trouble and I don't have any money, then you have to pay my part because of the conspiracy aspect. So what they started doing and had begun to do and did very quickly was to put their properties in their cousin's name, their wife's name, whoever wasn't a defendant, so they became judgment-proof. So we did not collect any of the money in South Carolina.

And also that's when Operation Rescue changed its name. It had been Randall Terry and then Keith Tucci, who was down near Charleston and they reorganized as Operation Save America with Flip Benham, who was then in Dallas. He, in 1992—one of the most, I consider really the most dangerous of the anti[-choice] people in Charlotte was a man named David Dry. He died and left a trust fund for Flip Benham to come to Charlotte, to move national headquarters there to close me down. And so in 2002, Flip Benham moved to Charlotte and held a press conference and said he would be there until I was gone. I can only assume they targeted me because of taking them into federal court and being somewhat effective in stopping them and them having to change their name and all that. I don't know any other reason.

So he has been there since and it's so bad and their conduct so egregious. Flip has shoved me, pushed me, hit me as recent as fall 2009, October 2009. They have started telling me, and I own that property, that I can't be outside, like I can't walk in the driveway. I tried to just avoid them after a point, but I was out there and he was telling me I couldn't be out in the driveway. I didn't even know they were there. I thought they were gone and then I went out and he and his mother and sister were there and he hit me in the stomach with his Bible, I mean like a sucker punch and I don't mean like, oh, he brushed by me and his Bible; I mean just a straight sucker punch. And he used to be a baseball player in the minor leagues. So he's like me, an athlete in his own mind, and he just hit me in the stomach.

JW: What did you do?

DW: I didn't hit him back, and I hit 911 on my phone. His mother and sister were there and they had been calling me names, saying, "Fat ass, you fat ass. Jesus hates you because you're fat. Jesus hates you because you're fat," just kind of grade school stuff. As soon as he hit me, they came up with those giant signs and kind of made a little barrier around us, which I

didn't think anything about at the time. And so the police came, and I waited and Flip ran over there to talk to them and his mom and sister did, and then when the policeman was free, I went over to him and he handed me a card and said, "This is her name and they're going to go to the magistrate and ask for a warrant for assault against you." And I said, "What are you talking about?" And it was Flip's sister, Christine Evans, and I said, "That's his sister." I said, "She didn't touch me. She's a pain in the rear, but she didn't touch me. I didn't touch her." I said, "Technically, yes, she probably hit me with her sign, but I wasn't even calling about that." I said, "He hit me in the stomach with his Bible." I said, "He's a repeat offender. So maybe she's just trying to take the fall for him." I said, "But neither one of us touched each other."

I couldn't get that straightened out. I called all day to the precinct. I told them what had happened. And then I realized, "Well, there is going to be a warrant for me." So I just went down to the magistrate's office to turn myself and tell him what happened. So they didn't arrest me, but also we never really got anything done about that.

But they're doing things like, I guess this was in fall of 2009, the clinic had a mysterious power outage and I say "mysterious" because we're in a grid of buildings and so you know how the weather is in North Carolina. We have power outages. And so every time the power is out, all the buildings in that grid go out. Well, ours was the only one out and there was also a smell like a burning electrical smell. So they had called the police maybe and then the police, like when the firemen heard that because it was us, they came down. Then one of the detectives with the police department thought to ask Duke Energy, the power company, if this kind of thing could have been caused because he said it looked like a power surge, but only at our spot. And he said, "Oh yeah. Anybody that knew how to do this could cause it." And so whatever. It's not the kind of thing you could prove.

Well, within about a week, maybe five days, something like that, I was at my house in North Carolina, which is about forty-five, fifty miles from the clinic in a farming area, and I have never at home called 911 in all these twenty-eight years with all the stuff that's happened; I never ever have. I was in the house and I heard something out my back door and I'm in the country, so you know all the sounds. I stopped and if I were expecting you to arrive, it would have been a normal sound, but I wasn't expecting anyone. So I stood up to get a different angle and then I heard it again and it sounded like somebody was coming in. My personality is such that anytime I hear anything anywhere, I don't go hide in a closet. I don't do that. I open the door and go toward whatever the sound is because I don't want to be scared. I would rather just deal with however bad it is. I'd rather deal with it right there and know, oh, it was just a raccoon or, oh, it's some kids playing that shouldn't be here and tell them to get out.

And that night for the first time ever in my life, as we would say in Arkansas, you could have not melted and poured me near that door. I turned all the lights off, got on the floor, got the telephone, and called my neighbor, who's about my age and lives across the road and is a hunter, and I said, "It's Deb. I hear something outside and I'm coming out the front door." Well, to a person from the country who's a hunter, who knows me, that said volumes. I don't use my front door; I've never. Like I might call and say, "I hear coyotes. Do you think they're going to bother my horses?" That kind of thing, but never ever has he heard me say, "I'm scared about people." So I keep a Mossberg twelve-gauge pump shotgun within arm's reach all the time. So I have the shotgun just normally anyway, and I remember opening the door and looking down each side of the house just thinking, "Please God, don't let there be any of them out here." And crawling backwards down the step so I wouldn't fall with the shotgun barefoot and went across the yard just trying to not hit any leaves, crawled under the board fence on my stomach, and when I got to

the pavement, I could already see his truck backing out of his house coming, my neighbor, and then I was just running full force. I'm athletic, but I, so then I was what, fifty-six, I guess, fifty-five. I don't run, especially barefoot on pavement. I was hauling, I was running, carrying the shotgun. I was going, "I'm running carrying a shotgun." I was going, "Yep, I've got a good grip and I know the road."

And then I got in the truck with him and he said, "Is it okay if I pull up in there?" He also had a shotgun. I trusted him totally, gun safety, he's the one who helped me. So we drove up around the house and he looked in the out building and shined lights and I realized I didn't know what to look for. We didn't see a person there. I'm not a forensic criminologist. I didn't know. And so we went back out over to his house and he said, "Do you want me to take you to your daughter's? Do you want to call them? Do you want to stay at my house? I've got an extra room." And I said, "No, I'm going to go back." And he said, "Well, if you're not okay, just call." And I said, "Well, I'm going to hear 911 if I hear anything else, but I just wanted, I had to have immediate safety."

So I went back in the house and turned the light on in the living room and kitchen and then I didn't think a lot about it at the time, but three lights blew out on different circuits: "Pop, pop, pop." Just all out, and I was like, "Okay." I'm still there with the shotgun and the joint terrorism taskforce had come a few days prior to that, FBI, ATF, all of them, and I remember the joint terrorism taskforce guys saying, "If you have to call 911, be sure and tell them you have a shotgun so you don't walk out and they think you're the offender." So I call 911 and told them who I was and that I owned the women's clinic and that I had heard something outside and I've been dealing with this for twenty-something years, I'm not a scaredy person, but this is different and things are not okay and I need an officer. And I said, "And also the FBI told me to tell you

that I have a shotgun when I call.” And she goes, “You have a shotgun right now?” And I said, “Yes, ma’am.” And she says, “Put the shotgun down.” And if you could have seen my face and I finally just said, I said, “You’re kidding me, right?” And she goes, “Put the shotgun down.” And I said, “Ma’am, I didn’t go get a shotgun all dusty out of a back closet because I’m scared.” I said, “I live with this shotgun in arm’s reach at all times and I don’t really feel safe to do that.” And she said, “I can’t send an officer out until you put the gun away.”

So I put the gun away from me, like where I couldn’t reach it, and I said, “Okay, I don’t have the gun anymore.” And she asked me questions and everything and I said, “Okay,” once she had gotten everything. I said, “Okay, I have a flashlight,” and I said, “I’m going to go outside and get away from the house.” And she went, “No, do not leave the house. Do not dare. Lock all your windows and doors.” And I said, “I really don’t think I can do that, I really don’t.” I said, “I feel trapped.” And she said, “Do not for any reason leave the house. That’s the safest place.” And I did leave the shotgun in the house because that made sense about the officers and everything, but while I was on the cordless phone with her, I just opened my front door and crawled back down the steps, did the same thing across the yard, crawled under the fence, and just went across the road and laid down in the ditch because my neighbor and I mow all of that. So that’s ground that I know. It’s at kind of a crossroads or three-way intersection and there’s cattle and row crops out there. So it’s not wooded. So you can see in all directions and it’s fairly flat. So I felt very safe out in the open so I could see anything open.

And so when I got out there, I said, “Okay.” I said, “I’m across the road and I have a flashlight with me. So tell the officer to signal and I’ll signal.” And she went, “Are you at your neighbor’s house?” I said, “No, I’m lying in a ditch.” And she said, “Why are you in a ditch?”

And I said just what I just told you, was because I feel safe here. So the sheriff's department, a deputy came out and just drove around, said, "I don't see anything," and they left.

I did notice during that night it seemed hot, but I thought, "Oh I'm just stressed out." And by the next morning when I woke up, I was calling the hate crimes detective, the one that had talked to Duke Energy, and the guy from the joint terrorism taskforce, all of them, and saying this happened. My air conditioning was out also and the lights had blown out. So I knew some electrical thing had happened at that time when I heard something. So they said that I should go talk to the sheriff of the county and just update him. I met with him when Flip first moved there. This was 2009. I had talked to him in 2003 when Flip first had his big national convention and they said, "You just need to make sure he has your number highlighted so when you call, not that it's not important if anyone hears someone outside, but that there's a particular risk." So I did that. So really when I got back is when I really realized the air conditioning was out, the electricity was jacked.

Also it seems like, I read something I wrote the other day in that time, my tires had been slashed four times in the last month. My headlights on my car weren't working, like they were working and I come out of a restaurant. Any one little thing you would think, "Oh that could happen," but I really didn't feel safe. I also just had the feeling of there's no one to take care of us. There isn't anyone. That had been really strong for the past year. So probably December 2008, I remember calling Susan Hill, who was the best as far as talking to me during those times because she understood completely. She never thought I was crazy. If she thought I was perhaps in that moment prone to do something that wouldn't serve me later, she would just say that, but she didn't minimize my feelings or my response or anything. So I remember calling her and

saying, "You know--." I also have been beaten up, like beaten up by a preacher in front of the clinic in June 2007, not counting Flip hitting me and all this other stuff.

And a patient had gotten, Flip and them had egged her boyfriend on after he took her in there and he said, "If you were a real man, you would go back. If you were a real man, you'd go." He said, "Do you mean just drag her out?" And bless his heart, he was a crack head and so he did, where that would be distressing, upsetting and could have a lot of different reactions on a lot of men, this guy went back in the clinic, picked his girlfriend up by the neck, bounced her off of a wall, and then my staff got her behind a door and then he proceeded to, with his fist, beat the door around my clinic director and break out a safety glass and solid core door panel. And it took five firefighters to subdue him and he was maybe one fifty, five eight, and he was just crazy.

So all this stuff, and we just weren't getting help from the police with this stuff. And the officers who would come out were often, they were just usually even great and they would say, "I'm so sorry. They won't let us enforce the law here." And then prior to my calling Susan that late fall 2008, I remember my clinic director who then, she was probably sixty-two or something and I'm fifty-eight, but I'm athletic and always have been. She is just not that, very strong, smart woman, but not athletic and she had a walking cast on her leg. Some of Flip's crew had built scaffolding and the police had particularly always said, "If there's any lone wolf types, these people are not going to hurt you," which is not true, but that's what they said, "But lone wolf, take a picture." So she went out there with her walking cast to take a picture of this guy who was new, we'd never seen him, and he was being really hateful on the microphone and he got irate that she was taking his picture. He got down off of the scaffolding and pushed her so she fell off into the street.

There were police officers across the street sitting in a squad car. They always have them just sit over there, and they just didn't do anything and she had called me and told me what had happened. And they said he just didn't know the rules. And then I went up that day and I asked the officers. I drove in to the clinic. I said, "What happened earlier today, sir?" And he said, "What do you mean?" I said, "With the guy on the scaffolding pushing my director into the street." "Oh, he just didn't know the rules. He didn't mean any harm." And he had reached behind her, like his stomach to her back, reaching with both hands over her. He was six foot two and was trying to rip the camera out of her hands and that's how he had ended up knocking her out into the street. And I said, "Do you mean to tell me if right now I went down to Old Navy or Target down the street and I went up behind a stranger and put my arms around them from behind and tried to rip something out of their hands?" I said, "I would under the jail." He said, "Well, there wasn't any crime." And I said, "Well, we would like a report so that at least she would have the option." And he said, "For what?" And I said, "For assault." And he said, "Well, there wasn't any assault. So I'm not going to do that." And I said, "Well, write a report of whatever you need to." And he said, "If I write it, I'm going to say I don't think there was any assault." And I said, "Okay, sir, do whatever you think." And he wrote something up and gave it to me and then he went over to Flip and started patting him on the back and Flip said, "But you're going to say there wasn't anything?" And he went, "Yeah."

JW: Oh my gosh.

DW: So that's Saturday. Monday morning, this same clinic director calls and says, "Can we have our property resurveyed?" By this time, our patient load is really low. People are afraid to come in and there are other clinics in town so that you could go there. We have no money. We've built this stupid fence that the police told us to build and that we didn't want. We just had

no money and she called and said, "Can we have a survey?" I said, "Why?" And she said, "Well, Flip is now saying he can be back on some gas line right away and he's coming through the parking lot back on our property."

And I said, "No, we can't." I said, "Let the city do it or maybe Lance." Lance Company is our neighbor. With that common property line, I said, "Maybe they could do it if they want." And I said, "But no, we just keep jumping through hoops and nothing helps." So I told her, I said, "I'm on my way to the office and I have a .12 gauge pump shotgun and a subcompact .45," which is a handgun, and I said, "I'm not angry and I'm not in any way out of control or anything like that, but I want to tell you that," and I said, "Because we've reached the end. This is the end." There's no one to protect us but ourselves. They're hitting us. They're beating us. They're knocking a sixty-two-year-old woman in the street in front of the police. These are not "he said, she said." Then Flip has now decided he can come onto the property, not just in the part they've given him to protest, but he was coming down on my property. This has been, what, seven years that we've been dealing with this?

So I got into the car and drove into the little town of Marshall, which is what my mailing address is and I stopped at the police station and I went inside and it happened, it turned out to be the chief, but I said, "Sir, I live out on so and so road. My name is--. But I work in Charlotte and I own a women's clinic there and I haven't had to take my guns to work in a long time, but I have to today. Can you make sure I'm carrying everything legally? I don't want to be not doing it right." And so he came out and I said, "Now the handgun has to be just visible, right, not hidden?" He said, "That's right." I said, "Does it have to be unloaded?" And he said, "No." He said, "Just it has to be visible. Don't put it in the glove box or under coats or anything." I said, "Okay." I said, "Now the shotgun," I said, "I unloaded it and put it in the back seat." I said, "Is it

the thing about the reach or something about that?" He said, "No, you can have the shotgun up here." And I said, "So I don't need to put it in the trunk?" He said, "No, you can have it right here beside you. Just don't hide it. Don't have a coat over it or something." I said, "But it needs to be unloaded?" He said, "Well, that wouldn't do you much good." And I said, "Okay, thanks."

So I'm driving in in my Mercedes sedan and my little pearls and myself, mother, grandmother, nurse, and with this shotgun and this very powerful handgun with extra clips and everything and going, "This is a moment it would really be wise to say, 'Am I insane?' Literally. 'Am I out of control?'" And I was going, "No. I can take my pulse and it's not high." This is like if a flood came, what do you do? What can work and what can't work? It's just things seem very clear and I thought, "I think somewhere in me says that's probably a bad sign to have that thought that everything's very clear." And then I thought, "Well, so what are you going to do?" These are all conversations with myself. "Are you going to go to their houses?" And it was just like to myself, "Of course not." These were just thoughts. I said, "Of course not. I'm not a predator."

This was all about really being an American, being a single mom, who had with no assistance from anyone been able to buy this property and this building in south Charlotte and have this business that's taking care of women from all the way when I was in a leased space and that was ground that I had bought. I obeyed all the laws and the regulations. These people, because of waving the Bible or saying "Jesus" to everybody, triggered some kind of shame either in the police department, the whoever, so they were untouchable because of their use of their fundamentalist religion. And I just thought, "They're just not going to hit us or our patients or roll over the top of us anymore. If I have to sit there and have food brought to me, they're not."

And all the time, I knew that it was potentially one of those things that I would be looking back at from my prison cell.

And so I called the hate crimes detective and said, "This is Deb Walsh. I'm on my way to the office with a loaded Mossberg .12 gauge pump and a loaded subcompact .45 and I'm not mad. I'm not out of control. I'm not going after anybody, anything like that, but no one is going to do this to us anymore, no. And I'm going to be on my property, and I've already stopped at the police station to make sure I'm doing everything right. So I'm not like on some rampage or crazy or anything." And I said, "We have to have help." And he said, "You know there's not anything that we can really do." And I said, "I know. I know, but I have to do the right thing." He said, "I will come out. I have a meeting. I'm not saying I can do anything, but I will come out." And he did, which was--. But I said to him, I said, "Isn't there like a chaplain, somebody? I'm telling you I've never gone anywhere because of being bullied for seven years or in response to something armed like this and I still, in this moment, think it's the right thing to do. I said, "I'm not crazy. I think this should send off some alarms. It's sending off alarms in me." So he, anyway, said bye and he would come.

And then I called the precinct captain for our neighborhood and left a message with him, same thing I told, and with the main desk of the precinct. I called up town to the police general information thing and told them the same thing. And I called Feminist Majority and I think I called DC and they maybe got me with LA, and they have been really by my side, literally and figuratively, since that moment and really did take action. So for that whole year, November, December 2008, all the way through then, I was armed all the time and then this stuff happened with the electrical and the electrical at my house in the fall of 2009.

I went to a meeting, a providers' meeting in Chicago, and after dinner one night, one of colleagues, Diane Derzis, I don't know if you know her, she's a friend of Susan's, and she owns the clinic that was bombed by Eric Rudolph, which had been my old clinic during Operation Rescue. She owns that clinic. She came over with another friend and sat down beside me and she said, "We're doing an intervention." And I said, "For real? I barely even drink unless I'm in a hotel like this where I don't have to drive or whatever." And she said, "Not that." She said, "You've got to go." She said, "You've got to go. You've got to go somewhere else, be out of the country. You've got to go because you're going to get killed or you're going to kill somebody." I said, "Well, so what's new about that?" And she goes, "You've got a friend saying you've got to go." And she said, "It took me ten years after the clinic was bombed before I could really be back and be healthy to be there." So she went upstairs with me. I said, "What about my staff?" She said, "We'll take, they can call us if they need anything." I said, "They don't even know you." She said, "Well, weren't they down here earlier? Let's go and wake them up." So we went upstairs and they essentially told them. She said, "Just don't even go home. Just fly out of here. Just fly out of Chicago."

I said, "Well, I'm not going to do that." So I went home and tried to get things kind of together. I left in October 2009, just driving, as much stuff as I could with me, and drove to the west coast, crossed the border, and I just felt like a refugee, like I couldn't be at home, worried about emails and worried about my phone, about my daughters, about communicating with people. I never said really where I was. I stayed moving all the time and I was gone, I guess, from October 2009 until Thanksgiving 2010. I got to spend some time in LA and go to the Feminist Majority offices and work with them on gathering information about these people to try to deal with them through the legal system.

But there was a time, there was a two-week period, where I was homeless and I didn't have enough money because of what had happened with the clinic. I didn't want to lay any staff out, so I just quit getting paid and so I had a nice car and I did have credit cards and stuff, but I couldn't afford to stay even in a cheap motel every night. So I ended up in California for a two-week period living in my car. It's an experience that can't be really learned. It's one that the experience is what informs you about it. And I remember one of the days, I would usually drive at night, just drive around, learn how to get places, learn LA. "Oh this is Compton. Oh this is here, this is here." And then as the sun came up, I would find somewhere that seemed safe to sleep.

So I had decided to go to Venice Beach because Susan Hill and Ann Rose had said that they went down there one time when we had gone out to see Ellie with Feminist Majority, and I did go and they said, "Oh you should go, you should definitely go." So that's where I was headed and I went down there and there are all those little streets and everything. I had no idea really where I was going, trying to look at my navigation, and the sun's just coming up. I saw a lot of homeless people in the street. And I saw a young woman probably in her 30s wearing a dress and as I'm at a light or a stop sign creeping along there, she pulls her dress up and squats down over a cardboard box and is just there and I realize she's having a bowel movement in a box because if she were just urinating, it would be--. I don't know how that knowledge came to me that instantly, but it did and I went, I don't know why that was so, of course, people on the street don't have bathrooms. Of course, we all know that.

The park opened. There's a park ranger at Venice Beach. I don't know if it's a state park or whatever. And I go to the little thing and you have to pay five bucks or something and because of how I looked, I'm in the black Mercedes and have blonde hair and whatever, they said, "Are

you with the shoot?" And I went, you say "shoot" to me and I'm trying to keep face right and they said, "The television crew, whatever." Paula Deen was doing a cooking show and they were just going to flag me right over into all that because that had to be why. I went, "No, I'm not with them." And I parked and put the seat back and went to sleep and when I woke up, it was hot and I had the windows up because I was sleeping on Venice Beach. But it was hot and I was sweaty and I just woke up with that little kid whiney feeling of like, "I'm hot and I don't have anywhere to go and this is just--." And then that thought of that woman that was going to the bathroom in a cardboard box right out in the open on the sidewalk and I thought, "No. She has a reason to whine. I'm in a Mercedes. I've got nice clothes to put on if I could find a place to take a shower and I do have credit cards that I could use." I stopped whining immediately then.

But the being homeless during that what I call my "refugee period" just added a whole level. I thought I already knew what privilege meant and realized that by being white in America and having features and limbs that look within some certain range, that that inherently makes me privileged. But when you're out and particularly away from your car and I don't identify with my car, there's some irony in it at times, and there are times when I realize it kept me safe because it made people think I'm not scary, which is horrible to say as far as the state of our society, that's true, but people don't know you and you could be a scam artist. You could be a criminal of the worst sort. They don't know you. People are so discriminated against and treated so badly and it's just part of it. You just deal with it. You don't take it as your fight. You don't. You just get through. You get through each day.

So that didn't feel gift-ish at the time, but I think those parts of that were really a gift. I would definitely have described myself as having, I'd say, extraordinary compassion for people and for sure for people that are down and out and having hard times, but after that year, it's just

like it broadened the roots and the leaves of that, of just of that compassion, knowing what people really do go through and also realizing how privileged we are, those of us who that's not part of our day to day life.

JW: So what are you doing now?

DW: I'm working in the clinic, actually taking care of patients, still have those stories. Just a few weeks ago, a young girl called and she wanted to get a judicial bypass, which Tennessee has if a person doesn't want to talk with their parents because there's a parental consent law. And before there was a law, we always had adult involvement policy where it could be their grandmother or their aunt or their teacher or their minister or someone in their church, whatever. So she said that she was seventeen, will be eighteen in a few months, 4.0 average. She had started volunteer programs for children in the community, volunteer programs to help children. She obviously was quite able and her boyfriend was supportive with her and so I told her what we knew and to call the clerk's office.

And so they got an attorney and they were calling back and forth and then she said, "Well, once I get my hearing or appearance before the judge, then I'll call and make the appointment." And I said, "That's okay and it's flexible. You can come earlier or later. Just make sure--." She calls and she goes, "I need to reschedule because they denied me." I said, "Oh I'm so sorry. Why?" And she said, "Well, I think that judge didn't give a reason." So they went before another judge and the judge said she didn't know enough and I said, "About what?" And I said, "I'm not trying to be a smart alec and I know you've got enough issues, but did they ask you if you know how to take care of a c-section scar or a circumcision on a baby or what to do if your baby screams all night?" And she goes, "I know." She said, "I've raised my little sister. So I know." She said, "And no, they didn't ask anything about do I know how to have a safe

pregnancy or have a baby.” And I said, “Well,”—ever optimistic—“I would hope that they’re just afraid to be the one that made the decision because it had been eleven years in this county since they had had a young woman come before them.” I said, “Hopefully, it’s just fearfulness.”

And so she finally said that she had to go before a state supreme court judge and I gave her all of, like, information, websites, everything about how to connect with clergy, post-abortion counseling, pre-

(sound cuts off)

It was just the saddest and most infuriating thing and she was just very determined and I referred her to a second trimester clinic out of state and encouraged her to just talk to someone in her family and: “I know you think they’ll be mad and I know you think they’re busy and you want to spare them, but just talk to them,” which I’d already done that, but I thought at this point really just bite it. And she said there just was no way that she was going to talk with them and they had their backup was that if anybody, if they needed help, that her boyfriend’s mother would be the one that they would tell.

So then she ended up the week before her appointment calling me, saying her boyfriend had decided he really wasn’t that into this and he wouldn’t return her calls and she had no money. And I said, “I think he just doesn’t realize how connected his future well-being is with your well-being right now. And hopefully if you’re forced to have a baby, you guys will get married and be happy the rest of your life and all that, but half the time that doesn’t happen even when everything is planned and great and there aren’t all these issues. So nothing against you or him, that’s just the way it is with most people, and just keep talking to him. Just keep talking to him.” And she goes, “Well, really, he’s got a headache and he had a flat tire.” And I said, “Okay, I can tell that you are very uber capable, but now is not the time to be trying to take care of him

and if he can get you through to Sunday.” Her appointment was Saturday. I said, “If he can just get you through to Sunday in your life, then you can take care of him as much as you want to, but just focus on getting him to get you through to Sunday.” And she would call me. We talked for hours.

I called Devern Ganes in Los Angeles with Feminist Majority and told her the situation and I said, “She doesn’t have a car. She’s up in like the mountains. She doesn’t have anything and she’s so bright.” And I said, “Isn’t there something about, didn’t they try to pass something where it makes it a crime for you to take a minor across a state line for abortion?” So Devern looked it up and she said it didn’t pass and I said, “Well, I just want to go get her and take her.” I said, “She’s not my patient, she’s not ever, but I mean just as a human being and a citizen, this kid needs help.” And I said, “But I don’t want to break the law.” I pay my parking tickets and my library fines. I’m a geek in that aspect and I said, “So what if I talk to her attorney, the one that helped her, the woman that helped her get the judicial bypass, to see if there’s any, is there something I’m not thinking of?” And Devern said, “Deb, if the attorney is worth anything, what she will tell you is it doesn’t matter if it’s illegal. People can sue you for anything and this family could definitely take action against you.” And I said, “Okay. I’m not up for that. I’ve been through too much to do that.”

So it was really down to the last hours on Friday with me still talking to this girl and telling her, “Just be hopeful. Think of getting through this. Keep talking to him. Keep talking to him.” And then I just didn’t hear anything and I just sent her a text on Monday that just said, “You okay?” And she answered back, “Yes, ma’am,” the southern way that we have, and, “Thank you so much for helping me through this. He did come through and took good care of me and we’re back on track now,” and whatever. But that’s like a week recently.

We also saved a woman's life the other day, which is not the first time it's happened, but I was all excited and I sent Devern and them an email. I said, "You guys have been by us and helped us so much and you hear all of our agonies and woes. I just want to share some joy." But this young woman had come in early in pregnancy to have an abortion on a Saturday here in Knoxville and we give every patient this sheet not only to read and put in their chart, but one to take home with cautions about ectopic or tubal pregnancy. And so I did her ultrasound and she was really early and I said, "Based on this, I can't tell. You could just be too early, but I can't tell if you're pregnant. Let's have your lab work done and then we'll go from there." And then I handed her this sheet.

Well, most people just throw it away or it ends up under the couch or something. In just a little while, my director came back who was new, just started maybe in February, and this woman had come into her and said, "Deb gave me this sheet and I think I have these symptoms." The director came directly back to me and said, "So and so has symptoms that she feels like match the ectopic precautions." And I looked over to the doctor and said, "She's got a two- or four-month-old baby and a toddler and she's--." And I said, right as I was saying, "She needs to go to the emergency room," we said simultaneously, "She needs to go to the emergency room right now." And I said, "Good."

So we chart that, head up front, and she was on the phone and I said, "I want to call you an ambulance." She said, "No." She said, "My sister's on the way and we know where Fort Sanders is. I'm going straight there. Trust me." And I said, "Okay." And then she got off the phone. She said, "Well, I want to smoke a cigarette. Is that okay?" And I went, "Yeah." So she walked outside. So I carried a chair out of the clinic behind her and set it on the sidewalk, said, "Just sit down here." She was like, "Oh you're so sweet." And I'm just a nervous wreck. I said,

“So where’s your sister?” And she said, they’re texting each other back and forth, she said, “Well, the GPS in her car got her lost.” And I said, “Okay, so where is she?” And she was at yard sales and stuff. So then the GPS got her lost again and by this time, I’m ready to just put the girl in my car and the sister pulls up. I walked over, got her in the car, and told her sister. They said, “Okay, well, thanks a lot.” And I said, “Y’all just follow me,” because they weren’t from here, but they knew vaguely where the hospital was.

So I got in my car and they followed me through all the little one-way streets. We got up to the emergency room and I looked back to make sure they had pulled in behind me and you could see them mouthing the words, “Thank you, bye bye.” And I thought, “Oh no, no, no.” I put it in park, flashers on, and I got out and ran in the emergency room, got a wheelchair, took it over to the car, got her in, and I told her sister to go park and just meet me inside. I took her into the triage desk and told them who I was and that I was from Volunteer Women’s Medical, the women’s clinic near Tyson Park. And the woman looked at me and she smiled like very politely, “Oh yes, I know you,” which was a great moment. Any other health care provider doesn’t have those, but we’re used to either, often another response.

So that was good and I told her what we were worried about, that she might be rupturing an ectopic and if that happens, somebody, depending on where it ruptures, if it ruptures by an artery, you can bleed to death so fast that even if you were in good hands and knew what to do, you could not make it to the hospital. If it ruptures elsewhere, you can bleed to death over a period of anywhere from minutes to hours, and the hospital doesn’t want you to tell them the diagnosis. I just said we couldn’t rule out ectopic and wanted her to have a hospital ultrasound to do that. So then I left. I said, “Be sure and call and let me know.”

Well, that was on a Saturday. We got a call the following Monday and she called asking to speak to me. They said, "Well, she's not in, but can we help you?" She said, "Well, I want to thank all of you, but I particularly wanted to thank Deb just for saving my life because I did have an ectopic that had ruptured and by the time they did surgery, I had bled all the way up to my diaphragm. My whole abdomen was filled with blood." And she said, "I lost an ovary and half of my tube." And she said, "But I don't think I would have lived."

And then she tracked me down like a few days later and called, and she said, "I just really feel like you saved my life." And she said, "Women get so much judgment." She said, "I'm a single mom. I have a four-month-old and," I can't remember, a three- or four-year-old, and she said, "I get a lot of judgment about that." She said, "I'm on methadone," which I hadn't even noticed that. All I looked was to see if she was allergic to anything. I said, "So isn't that good that you're working on not being an addict since you've got kids?" She went, "Yeah, you'd think so." She said, "But you get a lot of judgment." She said, "Y'all didn't judge me, you didn't. You just took care of me." And she said, as a matter of fact, at the hospital, they didn't believe her, they didn't believe me, and the doctor actually discharged her and her sister was pitching a fit, going, "Just check her, please." A nurse went outside and got them and brought them back in, thank God, because it was six and a half hours from the time I took her in there until they did surgery and it had definitely ruptured and she was full of blood.

So I think indeed, I think that women have an instinctive knowledge about themselves, is an understatement. But had she not felt like, for whatever reasons she could have articulated or not, "I need to go to this clinic and have an abortion," what all, whatever informed her about that, if she had not wanted to have an abortion, what is the likelihood that she would have ended up somewhere where anybody would have picked that up? Because as she said, she said the pain

wasn't that bad and women, especially moms and you don't [have] money, you kind of suck it up and just get through it. She said, "That would have never taken me to the emergency room." It's not the first time it's happened with ectopics, but it was really a wonderful, wonderful feeling to just be there at the right time, be able to do all the right things, and help somebody and literally save her life.

That's part of what I'm doing. The other part is we have protestors here now and they are supposed to stay across the street. I think they actually are supposed to be across the street, but they are at the edge down the street, but they don't come up close to the building. They do go on the side street where they're not supposed to go and just yell things as the person, the woman gets out of her car to get out and go in the door with her family. They'll yell things to try to shame her, scare her. I pretty much have just taken the "I'm going to ignore them and give them no feedback, no fun. I'm not going to be fun for them."

But the other day, one of my employees came in and she's an intern. She's volunteering. She's a microbiology student at UT. And she just looked over at me and she said, "That man and woman out there called me fat." I said, "What?" And she said, "No one's ever called me fat my whole life." I said, "Which ones?" "Well, they looked like--." I said, "I've got binoculars in here. Show me." And she went, "Well, those ones." And I just went out there with the injunction and my phone that has a camera and before I could even get up to them, they started saying, the guy goes, "Are you the abortionist? Are you the abortionist? Are you the abortionist?" And his wife said, "No, she's the baby killer. She's a baby killer." And he said, "Are you the abortionist? Are you the--?" And I just said, "You were just mean to a really sweet young woman and you have no idea, not that it's any of your business, why she's there. And it's not okay." And he said, "Oh

you can't tell me what to do," and started getting in my face. And he said, "Don't take any pictures of me." I said, "Oh yeah, you're definitely going on record here."

He started coming at me and she goes, "Jim, Jim, stop, Jim." I said, "What's your last name, Jim?" "I'm not telling you." I said, "That's okay. That's okay because I'll take pictures of every car here until I find out who you are. You can't do this to people." So I went over and just started taking pictures of the license plates of all the cars and the women from the crisis pregnancy center came up and said, "Why are you taking pictures of our cars?" And I said, "Because that guy, Jim, won't tell me his last name and so I'm going to get all of the plates and so when other things happen, we have a record of this." And they said, "We're so sorry. We don't do that and be mean to people." And I said, "Well, are you going to find out his name? Because if you're not, then I am." I stopped taking pictures and went back because they appeared to be going to handle him.

I guess that's the second time in the last month or so where that was stimulated by somebody else. When the people said something to me, it didn't really--. I would just--. But another, just one other time when I got out, they said something and I thought, "I've never been in trouble. I was a PTA mom, no unpaid tickets. I'm going to knock that guy down in the street. I'm just going to knock him out and if I have to do time, then I have to do time, but somebody has to stop this." And at that point, I went, "You need to go inside. Keep walking inside, inside." And so I was able to kind of (breathes) and get over it.

So that's the other thing is just working on how do you deal with, all capital letters, INJUSTICE. How does a sane person deal with that? It makes sense when people that I respect say, "Oh just don't pay any attention" or "Don't give them any energy" or whatever. Well, yeah, I would probably say that to somebody, too. So now it's eight years, nine years. We're at eight

and a half years that I've been directly focused on, targeted, and bullied by Flip Benham and Operation Save America and now they're even bold enough to call themselves Operation Rescue. Eight of our colleagues have been shot and killed. Bombings, burning, all of this. What is, and I mean literally, what is the right amount of relax or tension or response or lack of response? Because I never have been and don't want to be a "fly off the handle" person, but my brain, any intelligence that I have and even any cultural intelligence that I've acquired from living in this society tells me this is not okay and I don't mean just in political terms, the idea. I mean literally this is not okay for people to be able to just hit us, beat us, push us, drive on the grass, do anything they want, and to be untouchable by the law. And so that's the thing that I'm dealing with now. I guess it's the biggest thing I'm dealing with now is I don't know what to do about that.

JW: We've gone for awhile now. So are there any final thoughts, and we can always do a follow-up, but for this session anything else you want to add?

DW: No. I'm sure some things will come and I'll just maybe tell you and we can see if it's something that you'd want to put. I think one the most interesting things is the patient stories, the stuff that you hear. I thought of the other day, an eleven-year-old girl, a long time ago when I was first a counselor, was pregnant here and she was saying, "I don't know if I want to do it or not." We were like, "Well, any way is not going to be easy or perfect or anything, but at the very least, you have to want to do it," meaning have this baby out of you now, not have a baby and give it to somebody to take care of or take care of it yourself. But to have an abortion, you have to want it. It doesn't mean you don't have to be scared or have feelings, but we're not going to hold you down and make you do this ever. And I remember I just spent hours with her. I think she was in the fifth grade and I said, at about this amount of exhaustion, I said, "Okay, what do

you want to do? Even if it's just for today, what do you want to do?" "I really just want to ride my bicycle."

A woman the other day, Saturday, when I called her in, said, "I might be a little jumpy." And I said, "I can handle that. Are you here because you want to be?" And she goes, "Yeah. I was beat almost to death and raped." I said, "We can handle that. We can handle however you are as long as you know you don't want to have the baby." And she said, "No, it's from the rape. I don't, no." And you could almost just see like she'd been kind of put back together, even just her face and everything. When people come in like that where they have been in just the most horrendous of circumstances and found their way to our door and our love for them and our openness about them, their individual stories are the ones that, to me, are the most spectacular thing about this work.

JW: Thank you so much for sharing.

DW: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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