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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

Abstract – p. 2
Field Notes – p. 3
Transcript – p. 4

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 his 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,

