



Roe vs. Wade: An Update

By Gaea L. Honeycutt

Thirty-five years ago, *Roe v. Wade* (RVW) changed the face of America and launched a new epic women's rights battle that continues today. The Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal, gave women more control over their bodies and their futures. At the same time, the decision left a lot of room for opponents to reshape the precedent one step at a time.

The Nation's Capitol has witnessed commemorative demonstrations from both pro-choice and anti-abortion advocates in January 2008. Karen Mulhauser had only been National Executive Director of NARAL Pro-Choice America for a few months when the first anniversary occurred. "I started working at NARAL in 1973, the year of *Roe v. Wade*. My first job was to organize the national anniversary." She reflected, "At that point, abortion was legally available to anyone...Since then they've

been chipping away. Today, we're fighting the whole battle to keep it legal and available."

The most notable move by opponents was the *Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics*. Issued in 1975, the document reaffirmed the Catholic Church's ban on artificial contraception. But, the Declaration was not a big surprise. Contraception had always been a part of the debate. "I can remember clearly the debates in the mid-70s when most of the people against abortion were really against contraception as well. [The Declaration] really made clear that they believed you shouldn't be having sex if you weren't willing to become pregnant," Mulhauser explained.

Low income women benefit most from legally available family planning and abortion services. "Before *Roe v. Wade*, high income women could travel out of the country and low income women had few resources. One big change is RU486. It makes abortion more available for low income women." Potential legislation may be the answer to helping them. Originally introduced in 2005, the Prevention First Act (HR-1709) would "expand access to preventive health care services that help reduce unintended pregnancy, reduce

the number of abortions, and improve access to women's health care." Majority Leader Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) and Rep. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) reintroduced the bill in both the Senate and the House of Representatives a year ago.

Mulhauser said, "Everyone who is pro-choice would much rather prevent unintended pregnancy and Prevention First would do that. And, availability of real sex education rather than abstinence-only would make a difference." It's true that last year the U.S. teen birth rate increased for the first time since 1992. Some experts cited abstinence-only programs that have been pushed by the current Administration. The Prevention First Act would require sex education programs that covered contraception as well as abstinence.

However, Mulhauser stresses that more has to happen in order to protect a woman's right to choose. "The best thing we could do at this time is elect a president who will appoint justices who support RVW. Beyond that, elect a Congress who will restore services that have been taken away."

~Gaea L. Honeycutt; freelance writer in Alexandria, VA.