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VF AGENDA

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The Accidental Activist

She appeared to be the perfect plaintiff in a case that changed America's political landscape: *Roe* v. *Wade,* decided by the Supreme Court 40 years ago this month. But Norma McCorvey, now 65, was never what she seemed: neither as the pregnant Texas woman who won fame as abortion-rights icon "Jane Roe," nor as the pro-life activist she would become. Retracing her life through family, friends, and advisers, Joshua Prager investigates.

By Joshua Prager

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SEE THE TRANSFORMATION OF *ROE V. WADE*'S NORMA MCCORVEY FROM PRO-CHOICE ADVOCATE TO ANTI-ABORTION SPOKESPERSON

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT SHERBOW/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES.

PRO-CHOICE Supporters of abortion rights, including Eleanor Smeal, Maxine Waters, Carol Moseley Braun, Gloria Steinem, and Bella Abzug, demonstrate in Washington in 1992.

It is a spring night in rural Texas, and crickets sing as a woman in her 60s with broad shoulders and short brown hair stops a pregnant young woman on an empty sidewalk. The older woman has heard that the younger woman, her neighbor Lucy Mae, may be seeking an abortion. "You don't have to do this," she says, her brown eyes and long loose cheeks filling with emotion. "Children are a miracle—a gift from God!"

The women are performing a scene in *Doonby,* a movie about a drifter who awakens a sleepy Texas town to its spiritual possibilities. The movie, tentatively set to be released this year, is directed by Peter Mackenzie, a Catholic filmmaker from Britain. It stars John Schneider, best known for *The Dukes of Hazzard,* who is a born-again Christian.

The older woman is born-again, too. Her name is Norma McCorvey. She is not a professional actress. But back when Nixon was president, McCorvey landed the role of a

lifetime: that of "Jane Roe," the plaintiff in what would become one of the most divisive legal actions in American history.

Forty years ago, on January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Roe* v. *Wade* that women had the right to an abortion "free of interference by the State," as Justice Harry A. Blackmun wrote in the Court's majority opinion. The decision greatly expanded the legal boundaries for abortion in the United States, allowing women to terminate a pregnancy at any point during the first 24 weeks—that is, through the first and second trimesters. (Roe did, however, permit states to impose regulations in the second trimester, including who could perform abortions and where. It also gave states the right to ban most abortions in the third trimester.)

McCorvey, under the pseudonym Jane Roe, had brought the precipitating lawsuit in 1970, when she was pregnant for a third time and living in Texas, where abortion was prohibited unless the life of the pregnant woman was threatened. (The Wade in *Roe* v. *Wade* was Dallas County district attorney Henry Wade, the named defendant.) *Roe* v. *Wade* was a watershed legal ruling. But it also helped to turn abortion into the great foe of American consensus. Subsequent cases have made it clear that the Supreme Court majority in favor of abortion rights has been eroding, from 7 to 2 in *Roe* to 5 to 4 in cases decided in more recent years (with the majority deciding against abortion rights in a number of cases). *Roe* is undoubtedly the most familiar legal ruling in the minds of most Americans—not for nothing did Katie Couric ask Sarah Palin in a 2008 interview to cite any Supreme Court case *except* that one. But few people know much about the woman who prompted the ruling in the first place.

Norma McCorvey, now 65, has presented a version of her life in two autobiographies, *I Am Roe* (with Andy Meisler, 1994) and *Won by Love* (with Gary Thomas, 1997). In McCorvey's telling, the story is a morality tale with a simple arc: An unwanted pregnancy. A lawsuit. Pro-choice. Born-again. Pro-life. Peace. The truth is sadder and less tidy. And with the help of a cache of documents retrieved two years ago from the clutter of a Texas home she had abandoned, as well as interviews with people once close to her, the story can be more accurately told.

Young Norma McCorvey had not wanted to further a cause; she had simply wanted an abortion and could not get one in Texas. Even after she became a plaintiff, plucked from obscurity through little agency of her own, she never did get that abortion. McCorvey thus became, ironically, a symbol of the right to a procedure that she herself never underwent. And in the decades since the *Roe* decision divided the country, the issue of abortion divided McCorvey too. She started out staunchly pro-choice. She is now just as staunchly pro-life.

But in truth McCorvey has long been less pro-choice or pro-life than pro-Norma. And she has played Jane Roe every which way, venturing far from the original script to wring a living from the issue that has come to define her existence.

"I almost forgot i have a one thousand dollar fee," she texted in August in response to a request for an interview. Told she could not be paid, she texted back: "Then we wont speak."

wild at heart

In June 2010, Connie Gonzalez sat smoking Marlboro Lights outside the home on Cactus Lane, in Dallas, where she had lived for some 35 years with Norma McCorvey. Gonzalez had lost her short-term memory—and her lesbian partner—after suffering a stroke six years earlier. But at age 79 she remained big and sturdy, a colossus in white sneakers and blue jeans and an aqua shirt that read GRITS: GIRLS RAISED IN THE SOUTH. She also remained clear about McCorvey. "She's a phony," said Gonzalez, her niece Linda Tovar helping her to find elusive words.

Gonzalez said that McCorvey had not visited her in years. But traces of McCorvey remained everywhere in the ranch house. The ashes of her father, in a blue-glass urn, sat beside figurines of Jesus and J.F.K. A black-and-white photograph of McCorvey—a girl of seven in cat's-eye glasses crouched beside a German shepherd on a dirt road—stood in a frame. In the garage, rat-chewed boxes held McCorvey's bills and prescriptions, photos

and letters, clippings and speeches. McCorvey and Gonzalez had wrangled over money after their split, and a bank was about to foreclose on the property. The files in the garage were set to be thrown out. Gonzalez and her family gave them to me instead.

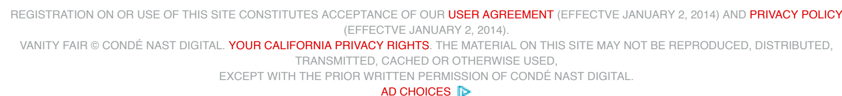
Taken as a whole, the files are a registry of loss: social, financial, physical, familial. They begin with the photocopied birth certificate of Norma Lea Nelson, born in Simmesport, Louisiana, on September 22, 1947—four ounces shy of seven pounds. Hers was not a happy household. Her mother, Mary, was physically abusive. Her brother, Jimmy, was mentally ill. Her father, Olin, a TV repairman, was soon gone, rarely to return. Norma was soon gone as well—off to a Catholic boarding school and then, after minor brushes with the law, briefly to a reform school.

Mary Sandefur (formerly Nelson), 90 this month, resides in an assisted-living home in a suburb of Houston. Approached last fall at another facility, in Dallas, she clutched the silver arms of a wheelchair with her hands, veins prominent under slack skin. Her eyes were light blue and cloudy, her white hair pulled back in a braid. She wore a zippered gray sweatshirt and black sweatpants bunched in the crotch. Her socked feet—pink-toed and bearing in black marker her room number, 225A—rolled her wheelchair slowly back and forth.

Mary now suffers from dementia. But then, she exhibited few symptoms. And speaking publicly of her daughter for the first time, she was lucid. She said that she had not seen McCorvey in a year. McCorvey had come to visit briefly in the Dallas trailer park on Fadeway Street, where Mary had been living. The antipathy between mother and daughter was quickly apparent. "She drank and she took dope and she slept with women," Mary recalled, speaking of McCorvey's young-adult years. She referred with contempt to her daughter's sexual activity ("She was a die-hard whore"), which was primarily but not exclusively lesbian from a young age. Mary acknowledged that her own behavior was less than perfect: "I beat the fuck out of her," she said, silently mouthing the obscenity, a solitary tooth rooted in her upper gum. "You can only take so much of nerviness. She was wild. *Wild.*"

Norma was short and slight, nicknamed "Pixie" by a friend in Dallas. She had a thin nose and thin lips, an oval face with a high forehead and sunken chin, a poof of thick brown hair, and a voice loud and husky. According to *I Am Roe,* McCorvey was 15 when one night, while working as a roller-skating carhop, she drove off with a male customer in a black Ford who had ordered a "furburger." The man was Elwood "Woody" McCorvey, a 21-year-old sheet-metal worker. Within a year, he and Norma were married, and Norma was pregnant. But Woody, she wrote, could be violent, and Norma divorced him even before the birth of their daughter, Melissa, in May of 1965. Soon afterward, Norma granted her mother legal custody of her daughter.

Joshua Prager is a journalist in New York. His memoir, ***Half-Life: Reflections from Jerusalem on a Broken Neck,*** is due out from Byliner next month.



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