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Janet Lefkowitz: In The Deep South, Deep In The Abortion Debate

Posted on [June 14, 2019](#) | [15 Comments](#)

In 1965, Connecticut was at the forefront of an important battle on women's privacy and reproductive rights. The US Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Griswold vs. Connecticut* paved the way to legalize birth control for unmarried couples — and then for *Roe v. Wade*, which guarantees safe and legal abortions.

Nearly 5 decades later — as abortion and women's reproductive rights are under assault in parts of the nation — Connecticut stands on the other side. State legislators follow citizens' leads in protecting — even strengthening — abortion laws and reproductive health choices.

It's easy to sit here and tsk-tsk places like Alabama and Georgia, where women's rights to abortion — and personal choices, and ultimately their health — are under attack.

It's another thing entirely to live there, and be on the front lines of those battles. Westport native Janet Lefkowitz does, and is.

At Staples High School, she enjoyed a broad range of activities: Players, WWPT-FM, senior class vice president.

After graduating in 1983 — and 4 years later from Sarah Lawrence College — Lefkowitz did children's theater. She temped.

She did not — immediately — follow the career path of her father, orthopedist Dr. Larry Lefkowitz.

But her family, and Temple Israel, had imbued in her a strong belief in *Tikkun Olam*: acting as constructively and beneficially as possible, for as many people and as long as possible.

Eventually, Lefkowitz found her way to medical school. During her residency in obstetrics and gynecology in Hartford, she realized that field was perfect for her.



Dr. Janet Lefkowitz

“I was working with generally healthy women. There were emergencies, but I could help them help themselves,” she explains.

Her personality — “formed in Westport,” she says — was perfect for that specialty. “I could talk to people,” Lefkowitz says. “As an OB-GYN, you spend a lot of time building relationships with patients.”

She joined a busy practice in Rhode Island. She counseled women, performed surgeries, and taught at Brown University. Her husband — former Staples classmate Jonathan Leepson — was in banking. When his job took him to Atlanta, Lefkowitz moved too.

Though Atlanta is a young, thriving and cosmopolitan city, it’s still in Georgia. Schools teach abstinence-based sex education. Lefkowitz was stunned.

The wife of a rabbi was past president of the local Planned Parenthood chapter. She encouraged Lefkowitz to get involved.



Realizing that women’s access to reproductive health care was at great risk, she soon became chief medical officer of [Planned Parenthood Southeast](#). The organization provides reproductive health care, along with advocacy and education, throughout Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.

Those states are ground zero in the current national abortion debate.

Officially a part-time job — she was hired to work 21 hours a week — it is actually much more. Yet it’s a “labor of love,” Lefkowitz says.

It’s also very frustrating.

“We’re having constant conversations about things that are should-haves — access to cervical and breast cancer screenings,” she notes. “It’s eye-opening, and scary.”

For a while, she worked behind the scenes. But when Alabama passed one of the nation’s most restrictive abortion laws — it would permit abortions only if the mother’s life is at risk or the fetus cannot survive, but not in cases of rape or incest — and Georgia and Mississippi pursued legislation that would ban abortion as soon as a physician detects a fetal heartbeat, the national Planned Parenthood office asked her to speak out.



The video “sort of outed me,” Lefkowitz. Previously, some neighbors did not talk to her because of her work. Now, many more people knew what she does. And where she stands on perhaps the most controversial topic in the region.

“There’s a lot of emotion, and a lot of misconceptions,” Lefkowitz says of the current debate.

She sees the issue as “protecting a woman’s right to do what she wants with her body, for the good of her family and herself. It’s fundamentally a health issue.”

So I wondered: After spending time on the front lines, is she optimistic or pessimistic? Proud? Worried?

“All those things!” Lefkowitz says.

“I’m super-proud to be engaged in this work. Women are being denied their rights. If I can help people understand that abortion is safe — and that it’s not a choice made lightly — that’s good.

“I’m angry that politicians don’t see women as responsible decision-makers. They feel they need to make choices for us.”



Alabama is ground zero in the national abortion debate.

They're also forcing doctors like her, she says, "to choose between providing ethical care, and breaking the law." If the new wave of legislation is upheld, she believes most doctors would follow the law — or leave the area. That would worsen the already poor state of health care for women.

Yet Lefkowitz is also hopeful the laws will be stopped in court. She's heartened that what's happening in the South has spurred activism around the country. States like Connecticut, New York and Vermont are trying to widen — rather than restrict — women's reproductive rights.

And she is heartened that people are now talking about the issue.

Personally, Lefkowitz says, one good thing has come out of her recent activism.

"This has helped me become a more compassionate physician. Women are being forced to make heartbreaking decisions. But I'm glad to be with them, taking care of them during a very important part of their lives."

(Hat tip: Emily Silverman)

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15 RESPONSES TO “JANET LEFKOWITZ: IN THE DEEP SOUTH, DEEP IN THE ABORTION DEBATE”

Dan Katz | [June 14, 2019 at 5:14 am](#) |

Thank you, Dr. Lefkowitz, for going out there and DOING something to help reverse the unconscionable assault on womens' and FAMILY rights.

Thom Meredith | [June 14, 2019 at 6:33 am](#) |

Dan Today's Post is not only your best but most important to date since I've been reading your daily 6880. I'm so sure of my position on this issue that Im (perhaps radically) in favor of a national plebiscite/constitutional amendment to decide this..but that ONLY women can vote on it. Thank you for sharing. Thom

Sharon Paulsen | [June 14, 2019 at 9:19 am](#) |

Excellent article.

Glad she's down in the trenches of this very important work! Takes a strong person to keep fighting this crucial fight!

Sandra Lefkowitz | [June 14, 2019 at 9:20 am](#) |

As a mother I am proud of my daughter; as a woman I feel so glad that she has taken a public stance; as an American we do have equal rights under the law and that should include access to all health care regardless of our political point of view.

Fred Cantor | [June 14, 2019 at 12:19 pm](#) |

Sandy, you absolutely should be very proud.

Stephanie Bass | [June 14, 2019 at 9:22 am](#) |

2 years ago I suggested to Jonathan Steinberg that only people with uteruses be allowed to vote on abortion issues. He said that wouldn't be fair.

America has become selectively fair.

Susan Feliciano | [June 14, 2019 at 10:22 am](#) |

I agree with that statement, that ‘America has become selectively fair,’ in that no one is considering the life that is held in the balance. It’s a difficult subject, without question, but there is more to the story.

Barbara Schwab | [June 14, 2019 at 2:24 pm](#) |

A well written article about a superior woman and doctor. I agree that there is a wide discrepancy between men and women in our country
People like Janet Lefkowitz will help us move in the right direction to equality

Ann Chernow | [June 14, 2019 at 11:11 am](#) |

a great article, and once again, Staples is in the act. There are uncountable stories about the important issues that Staples graduates have brought into the worlds of medicine, the Arts, Government, etc. the gamut of our lives.... Staples provided a second family for many students, the teachers were their second parents, some still keep in touch with their students, Janet Lefkowitz is a perfect example of Staples influence on students who were motivated and continued that motivation through college and into their careers, As a mother of two Staples graduates. I know, first hand, what the teachers and the opportunities presented meant to them, and following the lives of their friends, how the Staples influence led to wonderful citizenship, like Janet, a very special person.

Nancy Cleveland | [June 14, 2019 at 2:57 pm](#) |

I encourage readers to watch the movie Unplanned. It is a true story about former PP employee Abby Johnson. She assisted in thousands of these barbaric procedures. She watched as Ultrasound guided tube sucked the baby apart. This is a violent procedure and the voiceless need our voices ...they are not given a choice to live or die are they?

Bobbie Herman | [June 14, 2019 at 4:22 pm](#) |

To which I say — don’t approve of abortion? Don’t have one!

Susan Feliciano | [June 16, 2019 at 9:35 am](#) |

...or don’t be one???? That simply doesn’t make it right.

Ralph Christian | [July 7, 2019 at 3:15 pm](#) |

Women celebrating turning their womb into a snuff movie, how nice. In order to allow all of this nonsense fluff you stuff around this topic to make it morally ok in a very unconvincing way removes THE TRUTH.

YOU’RE CUTTING UP A HUMAN BABY.

Abortion doctors speaking out on the matter is also the sort of unavoidable truth you can't get away from. Listen to this guy....

<https://alltruth.exposed/2019/07/07/former-abortionist-dr-levatino-ruins-the-pro-choice-argument-emphatically/>

[Bobbie Herman](#) | [July 7, 2019 at 5:26 pm](#) |

When men can become pregnant, they will have a right to make these decisions.

[Ralph Christian](#) | [July 7, 2019 at 7:18 pm](#) |

When women can get pregnant without our initial materials provided and raise children without any support of a husband or a father to child who looks like them then I guess we can fairly draw that division.

We are inexhaustibly grateful for the way you do that initial 9 months physically but it wasn't our choice. If you think that it allows you to have complete control over the choice to pull it apart while alive and us have no say then you're as deluded as that act is disgusting. It's not even close to commensurate to suggest that 9 months trumps the net 18 years involvement and this is reflected in the alimony laws that favour women in divorce in cases where they remain the primary caregiver. Legally, morally and logically you will get dropkicked on this point so stop parroting what you hear on CNN and consider human life and the worth of the family in your misjudged words.

Can I just check though, take men out of it, are you ok with pulling a kid apart alive?

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