

NEWS DESK

THE REALITY OF ROE



By Sarah Stillman

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When I first met Dr. Susan Wicklund several years ago, she had given up on disguises. Back in the early nineteen-nineties, when her photograph began appearing on posters that read, “Wanted for the Murder of Children,” she’d adopted a curly auburn wig, bright red lipstick, and a garish beaded jacket for her workdays on the road—a costume that hid both

her identity and the loaded gun she carried from a shoulder harness. Many days, she travelled with a bulletproof vest, too; it brought some relief when she drove home to her husband and young daughter in Cambridge, Minnesota, only to find menacing strangers lurking in her front yard. “Every time I went to my car,” she later wrote of that period under siege, “I checked the tires, looked for nails on the ground. Each time I turned the key I waited for the bomb explosion, held my breath while the engine caught.”

I knew nothing of this backstory in the winter of 2008, when, browsing the aisles of a Manhattan bookstore, I stumbled into a public talk featuring the silver-haired Wicklund at a small podium, undisguised and forthright. I wasn’t inclined to stay. It was cold out; I had work to do; and, really, if I were being honest, I didn’t feel there was all that much new or surprising to say about the topic at hand: abortion.

Wicklund had just released a memoir, “This Common Secret: My Journey as an Abortion Doctor,” and only after eavesdropping from the store’s checkout line did I get pulled in by the sheer wildness of her story—the barrage of death threats she’d received as one of the Midwest’s sole abortion providers, and also the home invasions, the arson, the letters from a stalker who offered “descriptions of how he was going to kill me—tear off my arms and legs, squish my head and watch the brains come out like Jell-O, set me on fire and listen to me scream.” That night, I stuck around the bookstore listening to Wicklund. Afterwards, I stayed up late reading every word of her memoir. Now, five years later, on the fortieth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, I’m still thinking about Wicklund, and about how she transformed my sense of what’s at stake in the abortion wars.

As someone born in the mid-nineteen-eighties, I grew up taking the legality of abortion as a given. It struck me as an immutable part of *How We Live Now*, a battle that earlier generations had fought and largely resolved. I realize today how wrong that presumption was—how ignorant, in particular, of the experiences faced by huge numbers of women across America who still have to overcome serious obstacles in order to obtain reproductive care.

For years, Wicklund drove some two hundred miles a day to meet her patients, often leaving before dawn in storms or blizzards and working six days a week to the chants of protesters. She did this because there weren't many other abortion doctors offering services in the region, and sometimes there weren't any—more than eighty-seven per cent of counties in America lack even a single provider. Today, she runs her own women's clinic in Livingston, Montana, about thirty miles outside of Bozeman. The work keeps her attuned to the fact that, as she told me recently, "patients are having a harder time than ever before obtaining abortion services." Partly, this is due to the ripple effects of a struggling economy; in some cases, she says, desperate women are resorting to buying cheap herbal "abortion pills" on the Internet, or attempting improvised remedies at home. But it's also due to a new surge of state laws aimed at curbing basic access. In the last two years alone, according to the Guttmacher Institute, lawmakers have passed a record-breaking hundred and thirty-five restrictions on abortion services, from mandatory waiting periods to insurance bans and parental-consent requirements. "Across the country," Wicklund says, "there are many more clinics that have closed and fewer physicians providing abortions. Every year, there are more and more roadblocks for patients."

What does this mean in practice, on the fortieth birthday of *Roe v. Wade*? For the likes of Rep. Paul Ryan, who is co-sponsoring a new fetal-personhood bill, it's a triumph of surprising proportions. But for those who've read Wicklund's memoir, the more likely association is the author's maternal grandmother, whose story haunts each page of the book like a pre-Roe ghost.

Years ago, when Wicklund's daily routine had become so dangerous that she decided to speak out to the media for the first time, she felt that she had to come forward beforehand to tell her grandmother about the work she did. The likelihood of reproach terrified her. But when she finally had a "coming out" of sorts, her grandmother replied with a story. "When I was sixteen years old, my best friend got pregnant," she said quietly. "I always believed it was her father that was using her." Not sure what else to do, Wicklund's

grandmother agreed to help her friend “make the blood come” by sticking something “long and sharp ‘up there.’” Then she had to watch as the girl bled to death in the bed beside her. “I know exactly the kind of work you do,” her grandmother concluded. “And it is a good thing.”

The weight of that family secret still informs Wicklund’s decision to stay at the forefront of abortion’s access wars, and to do so without the safeguards of anonymity. Just the other day, as she was cleaning out her home and sorting through old boxes, she came across some of the getups she used to wear while sneaking into clinics where she worked in the early nineteen-nineties: the wigs, the wild polyester pants, the gaudy stuff that always looked so out of place on a low-key woman fond of humble glasses and pastel comfort-wear. The bulletproof vest, she’s keeping, but much of the rest of it she’s decided to purge. “I just gave my beaded jean jacket away to a teen-ager,” she told me, seeming to laugh at the very idea that such a thing could possibly be back in style.

Illustration by Matthew Hollister.



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