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## Too Much and Too Graphic: Dr. Ruth Westheimer and the Struggle for 1980s and 1990s Feminism

### Cover Page Footnote

I want to thank Dr. Shira Klein for her faith in my work and her support of feminist history. I also want to express my sincerest thanks to Dr. William Cumiford, whose support changed my life.

“Too Much and Too Graphic”

Dr. Ruth Westheimer and the Struggle for 1980s and 1990s Feminism

By Louisa Marshall

On Dr. Ruth Westheimer's 90th birthday, a copy of *The New York Times* was delivered to the front door of her Manhattan apartment, the same one she had lived in since moving to the United States. "The *New York Times*, the most important paper in the entire United States. On my birthday, front page," she said, as she pointed to a picture of herself and a front page article tease about the life and legacy of the cultural icon. The above-the-fold article, featuring a photo of Westheimer, was entitled, "Speaking, Not Sexually, With Dr. Ruth at 90" – a prominent example of the sex therapist's decades-long commitment to challenging the status quo. "Not only was I one of the first to talk about matters of sexuality, but consider the timing," she said in the aforementioned 2019 article. "When I started the radio program in 1981, not many people were talking about sexuality. Not many people were talking about AIDS or HIV. I said you have to use condoms and know with whom you go to bed."<sup>1</sup> A sex therapist, author of dozens of books, television personality, and activist that rose to cultural prominence in the 1980s, Westheimer still finds a way to appear on the screen, in print and in the cinemas, challenging Americans' understanding of sexuality even decades after her rise to fame.

Westheimer has been a staple of United States culture dating back to the early 1980s when she started her now-famed WYNY radio show *Sexually Speaking*. She swiftly moved from radio to television, to standing columns in newspapers and guest appearances on talk shows. She was, without question, the dominant voice in the 1980s and 1990s on sexuality, something that she was both praised and criticized for.<sup>2</sup> Ruth reentered the homes of Americans in 2019 with the Academy Award nominated documentary, *Ask Dr. Ruth*, a chronicle of her life's work and an examination of her much more private personal world.<sup>3</sup> The film served as a reminder as to how

<sup>1</sup> James Barron, "Speaking, Not Sexually, With Dr. Ruth at 90," *The New York Times*, June 3, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Westheimer, "Ask Dr. Ruth Advice," *The Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan White, *Ask Dr. Ruth*. Hulu, May 2019.

trailblazing Westheimer's work was, showing that she pushed the envelope at a time when Americans largely balked at topics like contraception, Planned Parenthood, and female sexual pleasure.<sup>4</sup> The following will address how Westheimer, her work, and the critiques she garnered reflect larger conversations about feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. It will argue that her ideas and those of her critics reflect both the strides made during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1980s, and the conservative backlash to second wave ideology throughout the following decades.

The 1980s and 1990s were the two decades that immediately followed the second wave of feminism, a period that lasted from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s.<sup>5</sup> The second wave is largely categorized as a turning point for the feminist movement. Unlike the first wave of feminism – which predominantly pushed for the woman's right to vote – the second wave capitalized on unprecedented, protest-filled energy, the involvement of feminist thinkers and thus pushed progressive talking points into the mainstream.<sup>6</sup> Both structural changes like the legalization of abortion in the United States and an increase of women in politics, as well as female political action groups and campaign funds contributed to the second wave. Many saw the era as an opportunity to further the understanding of issues like abortion, women's rights in the workplace, equal pay and the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>7</sup> The era arguably laid the foundation for many women's rights activists to take stake in the country's progress towards gender equality, and with achievements like the *Roe v. Wade* decision that legalized abortion

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Westheimer, "Ask Dr. Ruth Advice."

<sup>5</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism," *Journal of Policy History* 24, no 1. January 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Marisa Chappell. "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: the Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

across the majority of the United States, the second wave has widely been considered a successful movement by the academic community.

Feminism of the 1980s and 1990s, however, garnered significant backlash. Despite the cultural strides made and the changed perceptions of women in the home, workplace, and society at large that were accomplished during this era, the decades that followed counteracted much of the progress made.<sup>8</sup> The country was experiencing a political shift from the liberal agenda of President Jimmy Carter to the conservative agenda of President Ronald Reagan, and negative attitudes towards women's rights and women's role at large became mainstream.<sup>9</sup> Reagan was not known for being overtly sexist in his words, but the policies that his administration endorsed and established worked against the second wave's progress and against institutions like Planned Parenthood, a staple that the movement helped create.<sup>10</sup> With allies like Phyllis Schlafly, one of the United States' most staunch anti-feminists, Reagan's time in the White House allowed a cultural attitude that rejected many of the steps forward that the second wave brought with it.<sup>11</sup> The ideas and structural changes made in the name of women's rights during the second wave of feminism have been utilized by academics and examined widely. Just as thoroughly researched as the second wave itself was the ways in which the 1980s and 1990s posed significant threats to the perceived role of the woman in the United States bolstered by the Reagan administration's policies that threatened the stability of organizations like Planned Parenthood. The administration reaffirmed that women belonged in the home and not the public sphere,

<sup>8</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

<sup>9</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

<sup>10</sup> Linda Gordon. *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand*. ; Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

highlighting how the era following the second wave squashed much of the changes it had brought.

This was the environment in which Westheimer rose to cultural prominence, an era where the role of women and conversations about gender and sexuality were not only taboo, but frowned upon. The following will not only present and analyze the history of this woman and the contributions she made to the feminist cause, but will examine the discourse that she provoked about sex and women's sexuality among the American people. This work is important, as the historical area of gender and sexuality is still very young. Unlike sub-sects of historical research like war and government that have been extensively researched, women's issues, gender, and sexual history are still largely undeveloped. This will contribute to what we know about the discourse about sexuality and feminism in the 1980s and 1990s and how said topics were seen as threats, as well as how the proponent of this information, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, was accepted and treated by society. Within the work that has been conducted in this subfield, there have been parallel studies conducted by historians, who have focused on a prominent feminist woman or anti-feminist thinkers, as case studies to provide key insight into this era of history.

Prominent feminist author Betty Friedan has been used by several historians to examine the second wave of feminism, as her influential written work including the "The Feminine Mystique," dismantled many traditional ideas about women and gender, including their role as wife, mother and homemaker. Historian Lori E. Rotskoff described Friedan's contribution to the progression of feminist ideology as "groundbreaking social analysis," tying her actions to decades of the feminist movement.<sup>12</sup> Friedan's success as an author of many unnamed pamphlets,

<sup>12</sup> Lori E. Rotskoff, "Home-Grown Radical or Home-Bound Housewife? Rethinking the Origins of 1960s Feminism through the Life and Work of Betty Friedan," *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 1. March 2000.

as well as “The Feminine Mystique,” has garnered her a significant amount of attention within the feminist historical subfield. On the adverse side of the feminist spectrum, studies about anti-feminist women have also been used to shed light on the discourse of this time period. Phyllis Schlafly, a staunch anti-Equal Rights Amendment thinker, has also been utilized by historians to display the wide range of perspectives that topics like gender and sexuality garnered during this time period. Beginning her political career by becoming active in Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign, Schlafly made a name for herself as a traditional woman, determined to spread her ideas of conservative family values. Schlafly rose to prominence in the early 1960s with the publication of her book entitled “A Choice Not an Echo,” and worked for decades to oppose political movements in favor of women’s rights. Arguing that it was a woman’s physiological role to be a homemaker, mother and wife, Schlafly was a vocal opponent to the Equal Rights Amendment among other progressive ideas like contraception.<sup>13</sup> Historian David Farber categorized Schlafly in his work the woman who “showed that subversion had a new name” – feminism.<sup>14</sup> These women, much like other figures that both supported and challenged feminism, have been utilized by historians to shed light into this important era that ultimately changed the course of gender relations in the United States. However, Westheimer has not yet been used as a case study to examine this time period.

The 1980s and 1990s have also been used by feminist historians to show the complexities of how issues like gender and sexuality were discussed, and subsequently, pushed back from the mainstream consciousness of the United States. Feminist historians and scholars, predominantly Marisa Chappell and Marjorie Spruill, have looked at the 1980s and 1990s as an extensive

<sup>13</sup> John M. Cunningham, “Phyllis Schlafly,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, March 6, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> David Farber, “Phyllis Schlafly: Domestic Conservatism and Social Order,” in *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

example of the complexity of the feminist movement at large. Chappell's work argues that one of the most complex and severe challenges that the Reagan administration faced was the feminist movement, the voter gender gap, and Reagan's lack of popularity among females across the country. Chappell discusses that both trepidation and hope were intertwined within the feminist movement, and thus the 1980s reflected "profound social, economic, and cultural change in women's roles and family structure, rapid shifts in public policy and law as a result of feminist activism."<sup>15</sup> Basing her argument on the implicit dangers that the New Right posed to progressive gender ideology, "anxieties about changes in sexual behavior, gender roles, and family structure fueled the development of a New Right, which mobilized voters around the so-called social issues: prayer in public schools, sex education, abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment."<sup>16</sup> The New Right, Schlafly's Stop ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), and the Moral Majority, a politically prominent Christian organization affiliated with the Republican Party, are just some of the intricately planned opposition to the women's movement. The existence of these groups displays the complexities of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s and how the pendulum swung in opposition of women's rights.

The scholarship that displays Westheimer's embodiment of second wave ideals during the late twentieth century directly relates to the work of feminist historians who have examined the 1980s and 1990s as decades that redefined the status of women in the United States. Spruill uses examples of the National Women's Conference, the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the publishing of "The Feminine Mystique" to curate her argument. She emphasizes that the roots of the second wave of feminism were dug up and challenged by the New Right, religious groups, and conservative politicians in the decades that followed. "Although most feminists

<sup>15</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

<sup>16</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

regarded reproductive rights – including the right to legally terminate a pregnancy – as fundamental, others, including many Catholics, opposed abortion,”<sup>17</sup> Spruill argues, before pointing to Schlafly as a driving force behind the conservative movement that followed the second wave of feminism. Both Chappell and Spruill utilize examples like Schlafly to show the ways in which backlash to second wave ideas were challenged; their useful analysis shows how anti-feminist ideology was embodied and perpetuated throughout society. As stated previously, the research conducted and presented in the following thesis will contribute to what the historical and academic communities know about the rejection of second wave ideals in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as expose the discourse surrounding topics like female sexuality, access to contraception, Planned Parenthood, and the perception of women, like Westheimer, in United States’ society.

Westheimer was born Karola Ruth Seigel in 1928. A survivor of the Holocaust, she moved to Washington Heights, New York in 1956 to pursue her education, receiving a Masters degree in sociology from The New School and a Doctorate degree from Columbia University.<sup>18</sup> After graduating from Columbia, Westheimer started her career in the progressive realms of the private sector, working at Planned Parenthood. Her work with the organization ultimately sparked her interest in female sexuality as a sub-sect of her field, before leaving family planning and medical provider Planned Parenthood to start her work as a postdoctoral researcher and professor at the New York Presbyterian Hospital.<sup>19</sup> Westheimer emerged as a media figure in the 1980s, as she began her soon-to-be-famous radio show *Sexually Speaking*. Betty Elam, a manager at WYNY radio, after hearing one of her lectures on sexuality offer her a show, she

<sup>17</sup> Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand*.

<sup>18</sup> Joanne Kaufman, “Dr. Ruth Westheimer: Her Bedrooms Are Off Limits,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Davitt Publications, “Westheimer, Ruth,” German American Corner, 2000.

commenced her career as a public sexuality expert.<sup>20</sup> The radio show featured callers who turned to Westheimer for sexual and relationship advice. “Tell him you’re not going to initiate,” she told a concerned caller in June 1982. “Tell him that Dr. Westheimer said that you’re not going to die if he doesn’t have sex for one week.”<sup>21</sup> This was the tone of her advice; sharp and to the point. *Sexually Speaking* aired at midnight on Sunday, but as it gained popularity, Westheimer saw offers coming to the table. By 1983, *Sexually Speaking* was the most popular radio show in the New York area, and a year later it was picked up and broadcasted by NBC Radio.<sup>22</sup> By 1984, she was on television and became known for her candidness, her charm, and her catch phrase, “Get some.”<sup>23</sup> Her television show on Lifetime featured questions and answers from the live audience, call in questions, and featured Westheimer’s specific style of communication: explicit and detailed. But while her popularity and media exposure grew, so did the volume of her critics, who regarded her work as far too progressive and offensive during the 1980s and 1990s, two decades marked by traditional politicians and conservative leaning societal expectations of women.

### **Westheimer’s Work and Identity: Pushing Boundaries and Pushing Back**

Westheimer did not conform to the traditional, nuclear family structure that was prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, nor did her work or the topics she engaged with. A working mother and a married woman after two divorces, Westheimer did not fit the mold of traditional family values. Second wave feminists, from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, sought to challenge the environments women were allowed to exist in. This era of feminism significantly challenged the

<sup>20</sup> “Dr. Ruth Westheimer,” Biography.com, A&E Networks Television, May 15, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> “Sexually Speaking,” New York: WYNY, June 1982.

<sup>22</sup> “Dr. Ruth Westheimer,” Biography.com.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Kahn, “A Sex Expert for the Ages,” *The Boston Globe*, April 7, 2011.

patriarchal structure that had dominated the home and the workplace, but like many progressive movements, the decades that followed the second wave brought criticism and challenge.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, another trailblazing woman who pushed boundaries similarly to Westheimer, argued in her 1984 work “Feminism, Church and Family in the 1980s” that the psychology of the American woman as a mother, wife, and individual was constructed and manipulated to conform to traditional gender roles.<sup>24</sup> Ruether concluded that although the workplace had opened slightly to women when society demanded it, women would be “marginalized and exploited,” in order to maintain the patriarchal structures that were seemingly cemented in place.<sup>25</sup> The 1980s brought an extreme sense of peril to the progress of the second wave, with political action being taken to affirm the woman’s place in the home. The “Pro-family bill” of 1980, presented to the Senate by Reagan’s former campaign manager and senator, Paul Laxalt, is an example of the consistent political reminder to American women that they belonged only in the private sphere as a wife and a mother.<sup>26</sup> Ruether highlights that the bill instigated enthusiasm in the New Right, a conservative movement that gained grounds in the 1980s due to its opposition to the second wave. “The attack on feminism ... became the emotional center of (the New Right,)” as the movement claimed “to protect the ‘family’ against the attacks of feminists, homosexuals and godless communists.”<sup>27</sup>

Westheimer’s role as a wife and a mother came under intense scrutiny in the form of newspaper articles during the height of her media career, which ultimately shaped the ways in which she was perceived. Westheimer was categorized – not as a graduate of Columbia, not as a

<sup>24</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Church and Family V: Feminism, Church and Family in the 1980s,” *New Blackfriars* 65, no. 767. 1984.

<sup>25</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Church and Family V.”

<sup>26</sup> Paul Laxalt, “Family Protection Act (1979 - S. 1808),” GovTrack.us, September 24, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Church and Family V,” 206.

successful sex therapist, not as a cultural icon – but as a wife who was not fulfilling her perceived sexual duties and as a mother who was not caring for her children. This is a direct reflection of the cultural attitude towards public, working women of the 1980s. A notable article that criticized Westheimer’s neglect of her private sphere duties was a 1984 piece written for the *Los Angeles Times* entitled “Gurus of the Airwaves: Ruth Westheimer”:<sup>28</sup>

It’s 20 minutes after midnight in a cluttered 10th-floor apartment on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Fred Westheimer has had enough. He’s going to bed without his wife of 21 years, Ruth, who is growing more renowned all the time as a radio sex counselor. Fred says, stifling a yawn but adding a nervous laugh, “I taught her everything she knows.” ... Inside the Westheimer home, the only sound outside Dr. Ruth’s tinkling laughter and Jewish mother’s advice is ... Fred, snoring in the bedroom next room over.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that Westheimer’s personal life was brought to the surface in this piece is particularly poignant, as it very much highlights the inequality that she and her work faced. Throughout the piece, it affirms that Westheimer was not fulfilling what was expected of her as a married woman in this time period. This article stabs at the heart of what the backlash to the second wave of feminism was truly composed of: the devaluing of women and the desire to keep them at a second-class standing. Westheimer’s marriage was brought to the surface of this article and arguably exploited to fit the narrative that was trying to be pushed: the sex therapist who doesn’t give her husband sex.

Westheimer embodied second wave ideology and systemically rejected the traditional, hierarchical structure of the home and workplace that was promoted during the Reagan and Bush senior eras. With the nuclear family dynamic keeping women in the private sphere for the first half of the twentieth century, the second wave affirmed that women belonged just as predominantly in the public sector. During the second wave of feminism, the progress made due

<sup>28</sup> Dennis McDougal, “Gurus of the Airwaves: Ruth Westheimer,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 1984.

<sup>29</sup> Dennis McDougal, “Gurus of the Airwaves.”

to these talking points significantly altered the ways in which women were viewed in society. The idea that women should have agency in both the private and public sector in the United States had been introduced before, but largely during wartime when the public sector significantly lacked available male workers who were not serving in the military.<sup>30</sup> When large troops of men returned from war, the public sector would once again veer in the direction of male dominated dynamics. For example, many women entered the public sector during World War II to fulfill the duties of the men who were no longer available to work, but were quickly forced back into the private sphere when the war concluded which reaffirmed the traditional role for women as wives and mothers.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, the push of women back into the private sphere birthed the second wave of feminism. Women woke to the realization that they would have to fight for equal rights, to access academia, and to work in the public sector.

Westheimer, like many trailblazing women of the 1980s and 1990s, fundamentally went against the grain as a professional, wife, and mother and through her job, challenged what her society thought was the female's status quo. Westheimer confronted patriarchal structures and values through her work and livelihood, as her personal brand of feminism prioritized her career. Aside from her professional success, her life as a mother of two and twice-divorced person directly challenged the traditional structures that women were expected to fulfill. Her third marriage to her late husband Fred, she says in the 2019 released documentary *Ask Dr. Ruth*, was the marriage she was always supposed to have.<sup>32</sup> But being a divorced and single mother came with its challenges. An inhabitant of New York City and a working parent, Westheimer did not embody the life of a private sphere woman who doted on her husband and served the nuclear

<sup>30</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Reckoning with Gender," in *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research*, (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Marc Miller, "Working Women and World War II," *The New England Quarterly* 53, no. 1. March 1980.

<sup>32</sup> Ryan White, *Ask Dr. Ruth*.

family. Even before she became the culturally iconic Dr. Ruth, Westheimer worked, pursued her education, and raised her children. She did not conform to the prescribed life for married women and mothers before she rose to fame, nor did she conform to it afterward. Westheimer's life pushed boundaries in many ways, joining only a handful of women who actively rejected the prescribed role of their gender. Although many working class women did not embody the life that the United States' patriarchal structure deemed natural, Westheimer's increase of notoriety in the 1980s and 1990s cast a spotlight on the changing familial structures within the country. She publicly challenged these ideas and outwardly supported women in the workplace, working mothers, women running for political office, and topics alike. This not only came with backlash directed at her as a well-known television personality, but also brought scrutiny to her performance as a wife and a mother.

Westheimer's work, criticized as "too much" and "too graphic," is reflective of this era as progressive topics of conversation, like female sexuality and marital sex, found support during the second wave of feminism, and experienced demonization in the decades that followed it.<sup>33</sup> The cultural climate of the 1980s and 1990s brought forth more conservative ideology into the forefront of cultural conversation. Thus the discourse surrounding sexuality and contraception, that expanded during the second wave of feminism, was cast aside as inappropriate and uncalled for.<sup>34</sup> Reagan's administration systemically defunded Planned Parenthood, largely ignored the AIDS crisis, and ultimately reaffirmed what many conservative thinkers hailed true – that pro-Christian, pro-conservative values should reign over anything deemed immoral.<sup>35</sup> Many

<sup>33</sup> "The History and Impact of Planned Parenthood," Planned Parenthood, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand*.

<sup>35</sup> "The History and Impact of Planned Parenthood.," Caitlin Gibson., "A Disturbing New Glimpse at the Reagan Administration's Indifference to AIDS.," *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2015. ; Gerald Boyd, "Reagan Urges Abstinence for Young to Avoid AIDS," *The New York Times*, April 2, 1987.

conservatives who criticized Westheimer and trailblazing women like her saw their commentary as a threat to what they perceived as America's moral order. This order mandated that a family should consist of a married father and mother, that contraception was acting against nature and God, and that same-sex couples were sinful. In their minds, conversations about female sexuality and contraception were not only taboo, but also did not belong in the mainstream media.<sup>36</sup> Their ideas and perception of progressive talking points were bolstered by the cultural shift that came with Reagan's White House win.

With the rise of the New Right, a new faction of conservatism that found strength during this time period, many felt the cultural attitude towards women shift negatively. Abortion became a prominent talking point again for Evangelical conservatives, Planned Parenthood started receiving threats, and anti-feminists found a new sense of strength unlike the decades prior. One of the most prominent anti-feminists, Schlafly, was without question Westheimer's opposite. Not dissimilar to Westheimer, Schlafly hosted a radio segment, *Eagle Forum Live*, from 1973 until 1989 and was an outspoken supporter of Reagan and his gender discriminatory policies. Schlafly feared that "the traditional family concept of husband as breadwinner and wife as homemaker," was threatened by the Equal Rights Amendment and its supporters, wrote in a late 1970s report from the Moral Majority, and saw women like Westheimer as threats to the traditional family structure.<sup>37</sup> Schlafly's criticism of Westheimer and figures like her lasted for decades. In a 1999 piece she wrote entitled "The Dangers of Sex Education," Schlafly pointed to Westheimer, as well as Gloria Steinem, Anita Hill, Madonna, Ellen DeGeneres and others as public figures who were perpetuating inappropriate sex education practices and promoting

<sup>36</sup> Marisa Chappell, "Reagan's 'Gender Gap' Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism."

<sup>37</sup> Seth Dowland, "'Family Values' and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda," *Church History* 78, no. 3. September 2009.

“provocative sex chatter.”<sup>38</sup> Dismayed by sex education in public schools and the partnership between Planned Parenthood and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, Schlafly categorized the work of Westheimer and other progressive figures as “rampant immorality.”<sup>39</sup>

The 1999 piece by Schlafly was not the first time that she and Westheimer had crossed paths, as she critiqued Westheimer due to her ideas on sex, contraception, access to abortion, and their differing perceptions of the societal and familial role of women throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Westheimer and Schlafly ran into each other numerous times throughout their careers, proving that the conversations deemed “too much” by conservative thinkers existed within the same realms. A 1980s television program entitled *Main Street*, dedicated to teaching safe sex practices to teens and young adults, found Westheimer and Schlafly head to head, one defending the nature of sex education and the other denying its importance. “Schlafly proscribe(s) sex among young people as an absolutely rotten idea. It is unfortunate the New Right has a monopoly on the position,” reported *The New York Times* about the show.<sup>40</sup> Westheimer said the following to an audience member in front of a panel, whose members deemed her far too progressive to be there: “We as a society must make contraceptives available, she says bravely. We are a hypocrite society. We are not honest. It's our fault.”<sup>41</sup> This dynamic between the two women is a direct reflection of the ideas and people that the New Right and conservatives of the 1980s and 1990s deemed “too graphic” and saw as a threat to their way of life.

Despite the trepidation and concern of Westheimer’s work, it did not stop her from using her radio show as a means to convey her thoughts about contraception, female sexuality, and

<sup>38</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “The Consequences of Sex Education,” *The Eagle Forum*, July 21, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Phyllis Schlafly, “The Consequences of Sex Education.”

<sup>40</sup> John Corry, “On 'Main Street,' Sex and the Young,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 1986.

<sup>41</sup> John Corry, “On 'Main Street.’”

other “taboo” topics. As Westheimer rose in cultural prominence, so did the vocality of her critics. Westheimer began to break ground in the early 1980s with her radio show *Sexually Speaking*, and although it was broadcasted at midnight on Sundays, which is arguably the worst time for a radio host, the show drew thousands of listeners.<sup>42</sup> Despite the high ratings and number of call-in listeners, the content of Westheimer’s radio show was typically looked upon by the people both in and outside her field as controversial, inappropriate, and overly provocative. In part due to her role as a woman in radio as well as the topic of her show, she was not a celebrated host by the station. In a 1984 article published in *The Chicago Tribune* entitled, “Everyone’s Talking: Sex Hits the Dial,” concerns about Westheimer, her show, and its topics are presented as the foreground of concern for Federal Communications Commission chairman Dean Burch, who issued a ruling looking into Westheimer’s presence on the radio due to her show’s subject nature.<sup>43</sup> The article states, “The commission ruling found the show ‘patently offensive to community standards,’ and FCC chairman Dean Burch added his opinion that topless radio was ‘electric voyeurism’ and ‘just plain garbage.’”<sup>44</sup> Burch added, “We’re not after the ‘Femme Forum’ sound, I’ll tell you that.”<sup>45</sup> In response to Burch’s remarks, Westheimer told *The Chicago Tribune* that “this society needs people to talk directly to the issues and call an orgasm an orgasm.”<sup>46</sup>

Despite the trepidation surrounding *Sexually Speaking*, Westheimer went on to produce her radio show until 1990 and utilized her television platform that began to grow in 1984.<sup>47</sup> She

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Blanchard, “Broadcast Talk Shows,” in *History of the Mass Media in the United States*, (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Eric Zom, “Everyone’s Talking: Sex Hits the Dial,” *The Chicago Tribune*, January 2, 1984.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Zom, “Everyone’s Talking.”

<sup>45</sup> Eric Zom, “Everyone’s Talking.”

<sup>46</sup> Eric Zom, “Everyone’s Talking.”

<sup>47</sup> Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

continued to be a person of concern for those who deemed her work too provocative and inappropriate. Less than a year later after her Lifetime show *Good Sex! With Dr. Ruth* began airing, Westheimer faced concerns from higher ups about the nature of her work due to its content once again. The backlash to progressive conversations in the mainstream came from Westheimer's higher ups as well as publications across the country. Many at her network valued money, advertising, and public image far more than the substance that she was providing to her viewers. A 1985 article in *The Chicago Tribune* describes the upheaval that Westheimer faced at her network, despite the massive ratings her show brought in:

Mary Alice Dwer-Dobbin, Lifetime's programming vice president, admitted the network approached Westheimer's debut the way it might approach an angry rattlesnake. "There were some among us who were very nervous," she said. "There was concern that we would offend our advertisers and offend our affiliates and offend our audience. There were concerns that the subject matter, and Dr. Ruth's explicitness, just might be too much."<sup>48</sup>

Described later in the same piece as the "diminutive doctor," it can be clearly seen that Westheimer not only was facing a society that was swinging in the opposite direction of progressive and feminist ideology, but was also battling the people who controlled the exposure that she and her work received.<sup>49</sup> Westheimer and her radio and television shows defied the idea that talking about sexuality was morally wrong. This article is a prominent reflection of her and her critics, as it shows the concern that even powerful women such as Dwer-Dobbin had in regards to Westheimer and the topics she discussed on her show.

Despite the criticism and the uproar from those who deemed Westheimer's work as immoral and far too graphic, by the mid 1980s, she expanded the number of people she engaged with on her show immensely and gained more prominence than before.<sup>50</sup> However, she was still

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth Clark, "Lifetime Sets Out to Be the Talk of Cable Television," *The Chicago Tribune*, June 20, 1985.

<sup>49</sup> Kenneth Clark, "Lifetime Sets Out to Be the Talk of Cable Television."

<sup>50</sup> Sally Bedell Smith, "Phones Have Viewers Talking Back," *The New York Times*, January 30, 1985.

belittled by those who opposed her explicit style and was continually deemed a threat for being too sexually inappropriate in her thoughts and the means by which she shared them. In a 1985 article published in *The New York Times* entitled “Phones Have Viewers Talking Back,” Westheimer’s practice of on-television sex therapy was criticized as too much for the viewers. Her professionalism itself is also targeted.<sup>51</sup> “Dr. Westheimer entertains in different ways. Dispensing her advice with a heavy German accent, she describes sexual organs in explicit clinical terms and squeaks with frequent laughter,” the article states, arguing that despite the almost 3,000 callers who would try to speak on air with her during her show, Westheimer’s style was too explicit, too progressive, and that she was not qualified to be sharing her thoughts.<sup>52</sup> This article is a reflection of this time period because it shows that despite conservatives deeming Westheimer’s thoughts as too progressive and too inappropriate, people sought to engage in the topics of conversation that she was promoting on her show. These topics were not new: sexual freedoms and pleasures were cornerstones of the second wave of feminism and had been circulating through society, despite the conservative backlash they faced. However, Westheimer helped push this conversation into the mainstream and encouraged engagement from her viewers.

Westheimer was consistently categorized as a mother and a wife in newspaper articles before she was described for what she was culturally known for. The criticism ignored her role as a prominent sex therapist who pushed the boundaries of what people thought of women, their sexuality, their role in society, and their freedoms. Called a “fox” by a weatherman on *NBC’s Today Show* in 1985, “a big tease” by *The Washington Post* in 1998, and consistently demeaned for her small stature, Westheimer was no stranger to the sexist remarks of the news media that

<sup>51</sup> Sally Bedell Smith, “Phones Have Viewers Talking Back.”

<sup>52</sup> Sally Bedell Smith, “Phones Have Viewers Talking Back.”

covered her.<sup>53</sup> She very rarely responded to her critics, but she did stand up for herself and her work while speaking to *The Chicago Tribune* in 1985. “It’s common sense. I dispense common sense with a smile, based on good scientific knowledge,”<sup>54</sup> she said in response to those who deemed her unqualified and inappropriate. These examples of both criticism and sexism begs multiple questions: Why wasn’t she introduced in these pieces and commentaries about her as a published author, a Columbia graduate, and a sex therapist? Why was she solely categorized as what she was in the private sphere: a wife and mother of two, who, according to the news media that covered her, was not performing her private tasks with the adequacy that she should have been. The notion of not only a working mother, but a successful and prominent female media figure was still largely rejected. Despite her authority and media platform, Westheimer’s identity in and of itself challenged the environment around her.

### **Dr. Ruth’s Affiliation with Planned Parenthood, Contraception, and Progressive Forums**

The decades that preceded Westheimer’s rapid but contested media career introduced contraception and planned parenting to the foreground of American life. From the widespread access of the contraceptive pill to the rethinking of American life for women after the mass spreading of Friedan’s 1963 work, “The Feminine Mystique,” structural elements of the nuclear family began to change.<sup>55</sup> The notion that a woman could control her own body and reproductive system was not a new principal, but the second wave metaphorically shoved it into the spotlight. The excitement that came from access to reproductive control on one side of the political spectrum came with trepidation and anxiety from the other, especially from politically

<sup>53</sup> Sally Bedell Smith, “Phones Have Viewers Talking Back.” “Dr. Ruth’s Big Tease,” *The Washington Post*, May 1998.

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Clark, “Good Sex!': Dr. Ruth Makes House Calls through Cable TV,” *The Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1984.

<sup>55</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964).

conservative and religious communities. By 1987, 14 years after abortion was legalized, the Reagan administration proposed the Title X Gag Rule, forbidding family planning facilities from patient counseling.<sup>56</sup> This is just one political example of how women's access to bodily autonomy was undermined by politicians and utilized to reaffirm traditional female roles in society.

Anti-abortion and anti-contraception rhetoric was well integrated in United States society by the time Westheimer rose to cultural prominence, proving that the pendulum had swung away from progressive ideas of the second wave and towards the rise of conservative perceptions of women and the family throughout the 1980s. Not only was the Reagan administration active in rolling back funding and reproductive health rights that had been fought for and won during the second wave of feminism, but also the societal rhetoric that was established during the president's duration in the White House stemmed from a place of fear, that the patriarchal structure of gender and conservative American families were at risk of extinction. Anxiety surrounding the AIDS crisis research also heightened concerns among traditional voters, as the prospects of supporting the LGBTQIA+ community was largely overlooked.<sup>57</sup> Not dissimilar to maintaining the "traditional women's" role in the home and family, conservative politicians and ideologies dictated that sex was something to be shared between a married man and woman, and was not an act that could involve two men or multiple partners. Reagan himself categorized homosexuality as an "erosion" to heterosexual couples during the 1984 campaign, saying that he would "resist efforts to obtain any 'government endorsement of homosexuality.'"<sup>58</sup> The early 1980s saw an increase in AIDS cases and was considered a crisis as the decade wore on as

<sup>56</sup> "Domestic Gag Rule," *National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association*, June 2017.

<sup>57</sup> United Press International, "CAMPAIGN NOTES; Reagan Would Not Ease Stand on Homosexuals," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1984.

<sup>58</sup> United Press International, "CAMPAIGN NOTES."

thousands of people met their deaths due to the illness. It was not until 1987 that Reagan publicly addressed the AIDS epidemic for the first time, after almost 23,000 people had died due to the disease.<sup>59</sup> He acknowledged the epidemic, but suggested that moral and ethical behavior would eradicate the sexually transmitted disease. “After all, when it comes to preventing AIDS, don't medicine and morality teach the same lessons?” Reagan said in a 1987 speech to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.<sup>60</sup> This manifested the conservative idea that traditional family practices and patriarchal, hierarchical structures would save people from sexually transmitted diseases.

Despite the cultural attitudes of the time, Westheimer explicitly tied herself to the AIDS crisis and fundraising efforts for research. As master of ceremonies of the Aid for Friends of AIDS Research dinner in Washington, Westheimer emboldened her stance and arguably shoved the crisis of AIDS and lack of public political action in the faces of conservative thinkers and subsequently, the Reagan administration. “Westheimer has fascinated millions with her radio and television appearances, giving advice on what she enthusiastically labels ‘good sex,’” read a 1985 article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled, “Aid for Friends of AIDS Research: Lavish Washington Dinner Raises \$130,000 for Campaigns AIDS.”<sup>61</sup> Bringing her career of sexual health work and therapy to the foreground, this piece encapsulates Westheimer as a fervent supporter of AIDS research and sexual freedom, in a cultural and political time in which topics like AIDS, female sexuality, and safe sex were not discussed, and were seen as morally loose. Her very public leadership role in pursuing AIDS research and subsequent funding is a direct

<sup>59</sup> Caitlin Gibson, “A Disturbing New Glimpse at the Reagan Administration’s Indifference to AIDS,” *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> Gerald Boyd, “Reagan Urges Abstinence for Young to Avoid AIDS.”

<sup>61</sup> Betty Cuniberti, “Aid for Friends of AIDS Research: Lavish Washington Dinner Raises \$130,000 for Campaigns AIDS,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 1985.

contrast to the environment in which she was working in, and garnered both support and criticism.

Westheimer's alignment with other progressive entities like Planned Parenthood and her support of contraception came under intense scrutiny throughout her career, and specifically during the 1980s. Categorized as an "adamant advocate" for contraception, Westheimer was an ally for the fight against unwanted pregnancies, spoke freely about the benefits of contraception on her television show, and was forthright about its usage in her standing column with *The Chicago Tribune* in the 1990s.<sup>62</sup> Her active and very vocal support was in direct contrast to both the cultural and political actions that were taking place during this era and the subsequent backlash that the second wave faced, proving that her specific type of feminism and support of contraception, Planned Parenthood, the Women's Campaign Fund, AIDS research and other progressive platforms, directly contradicted the political and cultural environment she was working in. Westheimer did not shy away from her history working for Planned Parenthood, nor did she hide her support of contraception for single and familial women. Her early support of family planning was on full display throughout her career on both her radio and television programs as well as within media coverage of her comments that were without qualms or hesitation.<sup>63</sup> "(Westheimer's) attitude was strengthened, she says, by years of working with pregnant teenagers at Planned Parenthood," a 1984 article in *The New York Times* explains, "As a result, almost everyone who calls 'Sexually Speaking' – regardless of age, sex or type of problem – is asked, 'Do you have a good contraception?'"<sup>64</sup> The candidness that Westheimer spoke to the

<sup>62</sup> Tom Shales, "Dr. Ruth, TV's Pixie Of Passion," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1985.

<sup>63</sup> Georgia Dullea, "A Voice of 'Sexual Literacy': 'With Ruth, It Works' A Fanatic About Contraception," *The New York Times*, December 4, 1981.

<sup>64</sup> Georgia Dullea, "A Voice of 'Sexual Literacy'."

wide use of contraception, on her show and when talking to media outlets, is a blatant display of her specific feminist ideas.

The year 1985 saw Westheimer affirm on her commitment to promoting contraception as well as affirm her stance on abortion. “On the matter of contraception, she is an adamant advocate,” stated a 1985 article entitled “Dr. Ruth, TV’s Pixie of Passion: The ‘Good Sex’ Adviser, Explicitly Old-Fashioned,” published in *The Washington Post*.<sup>65</sup> “I would love to be the first one to do the commercial on condoms on television or on diaphragms” she said, acknowledging that television stations did not accept commercials for different means of birth control.<sup>66</sup> By 1985, the 1973 decision of *Roe v. Wade*, the legalization of abortion across the United States, had been molded into feverish talking points for both the conservative right and the progressive left. A largely uncontested ruling at the time, *Roe v. Wade* was not necessarily celebrated, but was largely left alone by both sides of the political aisle. By the time Westheimer was entering a place of cultural stature, the *Roe v. Wade* ruling was being both supported and protested with immense passion, oftentimes proving that a middle ground would not be found. Asserting oneself on one particular side of a highly politicized issue was incredibly risky, for both professional and personal concerns. But in the same 1985 article published in the *The Washington Post*, Westheimer established herself as a pro-choice supporter, thus solidifying on her commitment to progressive ideology and the ideals that were established during the second wave of feminism.

Although Westheimer conveyed in her radio and television programming that sex education and access to contraception would be her first wishes regarding family planning, her

<sup>65</sup> Tom Shales, “Dr. Ruth, TV’s Pixie Of Passion.”

<sup>66</sup> Tom Shales, “Dr. Ruth, TV’s Pixie Of Passion.”

support of widespread access to abortion prominently solidified her as a progressive voice, especially during a decade in which Planned Parenthood entered a contentious environment.

Westheimer commented on the pro-life movement in the piece “Dr. Ruth, TV’s Pixie Of Passion:

The ‘pro-life’ movement: “I myself don’t like people to have abortions. But abortion must remain legal as a measure of contraceptive failure... I am very upset about this nonsense of bombing Planned Parenthood centers and things like this. That’s not what we need in this country. What we need is everybody to pull together and find a good contraceptive and good sex education.”<sup>67</sup>

This couldn’t be a more direct indication of Westheimer’s thoughts on controlling fertility in an era in which contraception was seen as human interference in natural bodily functions. In the era before *Roe v. Wade*, many abortions were practiced in butchery-like conditions that endangered the lives of the women who were acquiring them.

Similar to her affiliation with Planned Parenthood, Westheimer continued to involve herself with political committees and events that promoted progressive ideas and politicians. Westheimer’s affiliation with the Women’s Campaign Fund (WCF) upended any remaining belief that she was nothing if not a progressive feminist. At a 1985 event supporting the WCF, abortion rights efforts and the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, Westheimer was candid while sharing her thoughts on the political environment. “‘Somebody like myself,’ said Dr. Ruth, ‘who speaks so much about women taking risks and women being in the forefront,’ has the support of women in politics in mind, she told *The Washington Post*.<sup>68</sup> The WCF, still in operation today, and “is a national nonpartisan organization that commits to 50/50 representation by women and men in elected offices nationwide,”<sup>69</sup> and Westheimer’s early support of it

<sup>67</sup> Tom Shales, “Dr. Ruth, TV’s Pixie Of Passion.”

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Kastor, “Gender Power: Dr. Ruth & the Women’s Campaign Fund Campaign Fund,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 1985.

<sup>69</sup> “About WCF,” Women’s Campaign Fund.

arguably alienated herself from any kind of conservative base. Westheimer planted anxiety into the minds of those who would have wanted to continue to see women in the home serving the family, not in political office serving the nation. This piece is perhaps one of the strongest that publicly links the ideas and progress of the second wave of feminism to Westheimer, who directly contrasted both the cultural and political actions that were taking place during this time and the subsequent backlash that the second wave faced. Westheimer was a guest of honor at this WCF event, which raised over \$50,000 for female political candidates, and the topics of discussions ranged from the ERA to gender equality to sex. Westheimer's prominence at this event and her support of the WCF only reaffirms the heavy second wave influence on her work, and thus the anxiety induced backlash she received because of it. Aligning herself with organizations like Planned Parenthood, like WCF and with bills like the ERA, proves that Westheimer was aligned with feminist theory and the progression of society towards the wants and wishes that were set forth during the second wave. Additionally, her cultural importance and popularity soared, despite the efforts and comments of her critics and members of the conservative, Reaganism movement.

Westheimer's embodiment of progressive ideas and support of contraception fundamentally went against the grain of the society she was working within. Cultural anxiety about access to contraception increasingly grew during the 1980s and 1990s, as both politicians and country leaders denounced its usage. A dominant aspect of the second wave of feminism was promoting ever-growing access to contraception and sexual liberation, and Westheimer's support of this on a wide scale not only tied her to progressive ideology, but also gave ammunition to conservative voices that tried to silence her. John R. Quinn, the Archbishop of San Francisco, called contraception an "intrinsic evil," within society, according to *The New York Times*, and

outwardly supported the March for Life, an anti-abortion and contraception rally that still takes place today<sup>70</sup>. His comments were echoed by Kenneth Whitehead, the vice president of Catholics United for Faith, who categorized the widespread access and use of contraception, like the birth control pill, as a “general moral decline in American Society” and termed contraception as “a form of moral insanity.”<sup>71</sup> In conjunction with Whitehead, Reverend Kenneth Baker, the Pastoral and Homiletic Review editor, “denounced abortion, contraception” and other progressive areas like divorce as “the logical consequences of the secularistic, atheistic mentality in our society.”<sup>72</sup> Whitehead, Baker and 50 other anti-abortion and contraception leaders made up the Life Amendment Political Action Committee, which endorsed Reagan during his presidential campaign due to his anti-abortion and contraception perspectives.<sup>73</sup> This was the cultural climate in which Westheimer spoke in favor of contraception and abortion, and she was drastically targeted by conservative thinkers, politicians, and figures within the religious community as a result. A 1985 article in *The Chicago Tribune* disclosed in reference to Westheimer’s television show:

Her advocacy of contraception and legalized abortion... puts her on a collision course with the Catholic Church, and the Moral Majority has been rumbling ever since she started her candid radio commentary three years ago... “It’s just more cable porn as far as I’m concerned,” said Evelyn Dukoveka of the New York-based Morality in Media.<sup>74</sup>

Cultural anxiety about Westheimer and her affiliation with Planned Parenthood and contraception was readily established in the 1980s, and embodied by Father Edwin O’Brien in a 1982 article published by *The Wall Street Journal*. The director of communications for the

Catholic archdiocese of New York, O’Brien was not shy about his thoughts on Westheimer’s

<sup>70</sup> Kenneth Briggs, “Archbishop Stresses Stand Against Birth Control,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 1980.

<sup>71</sup> Leslie Bennets, “Abortion Foes, at Conference, Plan Strategy of Political Activism,” *The New York Times*, January 21, 1980.

<sup>72</sup> Leslie Bennets, “Abortion Foes, at Conference, Plan Strategy of Political Activism.”

<sup>73</sup> Leslie Bennets, “Abortion Foes, at Conference, Plan Strategy of Political Activism.”

<sup>74</sup> Kenneth Clark, “Good Sex!”

support of contraception in the article entitled “It’s 10p.m. – Do You Know Where Your Children Are Tuned?” Likening Westheimer’s comments on contraception, female sexuality, and other progressive ideologies to the frivolities of soap operas, O’Brien called her work upsetting and morally compromised, as tying sex to pleasure, unmarried couples, and members of the LBGTQIA+ community, was against the traditional messaging O’Brien supported. “‘It’s pure hedonism,’” O’Brien said in the 1982 article. “‘The message is just indulge yourself; whatever feels good is good. There is no higher law of overriding morality, and there’s also no responsibility.’”<sup>75</sup> His ideas on Westheimer and her work became emboldened by the Moral Majority, which categorized her thoughts and practices as “no different than pagan fertility rites.”<sup>76</sup> Much criticism of the second wave of feminism encapsulated the idea that women pushing for change were hysterical and morally compromised, that they had lost sight of their role in the family and the home. This 1982 article highlights the ways in which Westheimer’s prominence and work is a direct representation of the backlash the second wave’s ideas faced, because not only did she not shy away from the topics of her discussion, but also religious groups committed to criticizing her.

Criticism of Westheimer and her ideas on contraception, Planned Parenthood, and sexuality continued well throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Ahead of a 1989 conference with the State Boards Association in New York to discuss contraception with the local school district associates and students, Senator James Donovan said he was “disgusted” by Westheimer and disavowed her presence. An article in *Buffalo News* read:

<sup>75</sup> Jane Mayer, “It’s 10 P.m. Do You Know Where Your Children Are Tuned?: Odds Are It’s Radio WYNY, Where Dr. Ruth Is Giving New York Bedtime Advice,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 1982.

<sup>76</sup> Jane Mayer, “It’s 10 P.m. Do You Know Where Your Children Are Tuned?”

State Sen. James Donovan, R-Chadwicks, said Wednesday he's staying away from the weekend state School Boards Association conference because sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer is spreading her 'immoral' message there ... [Dovovan said,]"I think the message she conveys . . . is an affront to every parent in New York state who has high moral standards for their children."<sup>77</sup>

Westheimer's presence at the conference was supported by Louis Grumet, the executive director of the association, who told *Buffalo News* that "it's important for school officials to hear about sex education in this time of AIDS and high teenage pregnancy rates," /but his support did not assuage the concerns and criticisms from Donovan.<sup>78</sup> Westheimer was once again targeted by politicians in 1998 when she was lobbying for the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters, a "curriculum designed to help struggling families," in Washington, D.C.<sup>79</sup> Due to her reputation of sexual candidness, Senator John Kerry's communications director, Jim Jones, accused her of "improper lobbying."<sup>80</sup> Not dissimilar to the 1982 article and the comments from Father O'Brien, the comments from Senator Kerry's staff and Senator Donovan himself directly speak to the ways in which progressive ideas, embodied by Westheimer, were characterized and treated during this era.

In the rare occasion that Westheimer remarked on her critics, she said that she "take(s) these criticisms very seriously," but *The Chicago Tribune* concluded in 1984 that "all the criticism in the world, however, cannot dampen Dr. Ruth's enthusiasm – especially when her audience comes bearing gratitude instead of heartaches."<sup>81</sup> Westheimer was, arguably, a catalyst for change regarding conversations surrounding birth control and contraception, sexual pleasure, protection against sexually transmitted diseases, and other second wave ideas and pushed people

<sup>77</sup> "Dr. Ruth's Message Called Immoral."

<sup>78</sup> "Dr. Ruth's Message Called Immoral."

<sup>79</sup> "Dr. Ruth's Big Tease," *The Washington Post*, May 1998.

<sup>80</sup> "Dr. Ruth's Big Tease."

<sup>81</sup> Kenneth Clark, "Good Sex!,"

like O'Brien and Donovan to comment. The criticism she faced and the personal attacks on her character, professionalism, and credibility speak volumes to the impact she had on progressive talking points and prove that Westheimer, her work, and the critiques she garnered expand the historical discourse of this post-second wave era. As of publication in June 2020, Dr. Ruth Westheimer is still alive at 92 years old. Despite the waves of criticism and backlash she faced during the 1980s and 1990s, Westheimer has not retired from her media career, and still actively contributes to ongoing conversations about sexuality and contraception. She released her 45th book in 2019 and still makes appearances on talk shows including *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, *The View* and others. Westheimer has pushed the United States into uncomfortable territories and has expanded what we know about sexual pleasure, access to contraception, and mutually functional relationships. She is, without question, a living embodiment of feminism, of second wave ideology and of progressive politics.

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