

Speaker

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make a legal behavior a crime by making it impossible to practice that legal behavior,” she said.

She said it may be argued that the United States is beginning to resemble its old self before abortion was deemed legal — an era in which “in some places it was legal, and in some places it was illegal.” Today, she noted, the procedure, while legal, is more readily available in some states while nearly impossible to obtain in others.

“Certainly, we are in the middle of a war about women’s place in society, equality, sexuality and power,” Reagan said, “and that is being fought over and in women’s bodies and reproduction systems quite literally when we’re going to have state-mandated vaginal ultrasounds.

“Women’s health is being harmed, their autonomy violated and their lives put at risk,” she said.

Much of Reagan’s talk focused on her findings of when the nation’s focus turned toward criminalizing abortion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her search of court records, inquests, newspaper investigations and medical data reveals the consequences of that societal shift, and questionable methods used to enforce laws.

Reagan is associate professor

of history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her fields of research include U.S. medicine and public health, history of women and gender.

“Legal abortion was the never the only goal of the (women’s) movement in the 1960s, or now,” Reagan said.

She said women and some aspects of the medical community fought for equal access to safe abortions by race and income, but the Supreme Court focused on physicians’ rights, women’s rights and privacy, not equality.

Reagan began her talk by asking her audience to consider this question: “Could it be that abortion is a crime today in the United States? I want to use tonight’s talk as an occasion to think about that question with you.”

She also said it is important that the Roe vs. Wade U.S. Supreme Court decision, which declares state laws banning abortions to be unconstitutional, should not be used as a definitive marker of when abortion was a crime in the United States.

“We could use other measures to determine whether or when abortion is a crime in the U.S. I want to suggest that we move away from the narrow legal question, to something like, are the pre-Roe vs. Wade days here?” she said. “What were the conditions of the past before Roe vs. Wade that convinced so many people — starting in the early 1950s and growing to so many people by the late 1960s — that the criminal abortion laws had to be

rewritten or completely thrown out?”

Early advocates of abortion in the United States didn’t simply want the practice to be deemed legal.

“They wanted it to be safe,” Reagan said. “They wanted it to be available to all women who needed it regardless of their status — whether or not she was poor or rich, no matter what her race or religion, where she lived or her age. They expected to see deaths and injuries due to abortions decline once safe abortions became available.

“They wanted it be like any other medical procedure — a procedure that women could receive without shame, without receiving judgmental lectures from nurses and doctors, without sexual harassment and with humane treatment.”

Abortion was not always a crime in America, nor was it always illegal.

“In colonial America, and through most of the 19th century, abortion had been a quiet, domestic and legal practice,” Reagan said. “The states passed laws in the 1860s and the 1870s that criminalized early abortions from conception on. They aimed to stop abortion among married, middle-class, Yankee women in northern cities in particular.”

The new laws also addressed population fears, with their authors reasoning that if abortions were prohibited, middle class white families would be larger and the men who held political power need not fear a shift in

power because of a change in demographics.

“This is the reverse of how we think of population control today, for it aimed to control the reproduction of privileged Anglo-Saxon women in particular,” Reagan said. “By making abortion illegal and difficult to obtain, Yankee women would be required to bear larger families.”

In the 20th century, she said, the representation of abortion changed to emphasize death.

“The new emphasis on death came from the medical profession and the media,” she said.

Anti-abortion physicians had been preaching that abortion was murder to their patients, but at that time, there were plenty of physicians who practiced abortions. Women, if refused by one doctor, would simply find another.

Despite the warnings of doctors and newspapers, the practice of abortion flourished and most women survived, she said. Public belief in the criminality of abortion was so weak that prosecutors discovered that when abortionists were tried, juries failed to convict.

Prosecutors shifted their focus to cases they knew they could win — cases in which women died because of an abortion.

“Recognizing the impact of reproductive policies on women requires looking closely at the details of women’s experiences,” Reagan said. “and the interactions between women and their doctors, women and police, and

women and lower-level government officials.

“In abortion cases, the investigative procedures themselves constituted a form of control and punishment,” she said, in which women were interrogated about sexual matters by male officials often when women were on their deathbeds. “Each interrogation was an attempt to get a legally valid dying declaration in which the woman admitted her abortion and named her abortionist.”

These declarations would lead to arrests of doctors and were used in court as evidence.

In the 1950s and 1960s, despite being illegal, abortion remained prevalent. As more and more doctors were jailed for performing abortions, individuals who remained adopted new, secretive and unsafe practices.

“Growing numbers of women began self-inducing their own abortions, and it contributed to a rising number of deaths,” Reagan said. “In a time when childbirth was becoming safer thanks to antibiotics, the number of women who died due to an abortion doubled in the 1950s.

“By the late 1960s, the majority of the medical profession came to support the legalization of abortion,” she said. “In part, this is because what they were actually experiencing themselves, and seeing.”

Criminal abortion laws always had exceptions for physicians to provide abortions for “bona fide” medical reasons, such as to save the life of the woman. When states tried to erode those excep-

tions, public attitudes toward abortion shifted.

“The states’ actions struck at the understanding between the state and medicine, and struck a chord among doctors,” Reagan said. “It outraged doctors, it united them, and really developed a movement to change the law and reform it. The unprecedented investigations by the states contributed to remaking American political culture and energized the emerging pro-life and reproductive rights movements of the 1960s.”

Several states legalized abortion in 1970, and in 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruled that state criminal abortion laws are unconstitutional.

Women’s history, at its beginning, is rooted in activism and a struggle for equality and justice, she said, and has reached a pivotal time today.

“We are at a historical moment when, knowing history not of great heroes but of ordinary women who through living their lives and through their actions asserted their right to bodily integrity ... to be of great importance,” she said. “We owe it to ourselves and to future generations of girls, women and men, to pay attention to this history and to speak of it, and to speak with honesty about the meaning and value of legal abortion to all women and men, whether or not they ever had physically the need of or have had an abortion.”

Help

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\$2,500, which is a small amount. I think we could come in with at least \$2,500.”

TransCanada has been following the three river events and has been impressed with their quality and growth, Latimer said.

“We have heard about these events, and they’re so impressive. We like the idea of speaking to kids, who are our future. And the clean-up has gotten so huge,” he said. “We asked (National Park Service ranger) Dugan Smith how we could be involved. We consider ourselves to be part of the community, and this work on the river is a great fit for us.”

TransCanada has been on the local scene since 2006 but has been working on other projects, Latimer said. Now is the right time for the company to commit itself to the three river events, he said.

“I heard about (these activities) a number of years ago, but (our company) was too distracted with getting our pipeline up and operating in the Midwest,” he said. “Joe (Mueller) and other employees live here, and it seemed timely to attend this meeting and help financially.”

The TransCanada contributions wouldn’t be limited to cash, Latimer said. The company is acquiring six 21-foot Packman landing crafts as part of its response equipment, and any or all of the crafts could assist with the river clean-up, he said.

TransCanada employees also want to volunteer for the events, Latimer said.

“We can’t just carpet bomb you with money,” he told Friday’s audience. “We consider ourselves part of the community and want to get involved as well.”

TransCanada isn’t expecting any special recognition at the events, Latimer said.

“We’re not expecting some grandiose display of our logo (at the events),” he said. “It just makes sense for us to be part of the program.”

The educational festival in particular has seen a surge in popularity, according to organizer Mary Robb with the City of Yankton.

“We were planning for 380 students this past spring, but we had some additional schools that came that day and we ended up with 425 kids,” she said. “And that was without Vermillion, who couldn’t come this year. If Vermilion returns next year — and they certainly may — we will easily go over 500 students.”

Organizers said Friday they aren’t capping the participation at the educational festival because they want to offer the opportunity to all students. The festival will remain a morning-only event, as many schools would need to return home before the end of an afternoon session.

The line-up of presenters hasn’t been finalized, Robb said. However, the festival will expand to 19 stations and again cover a wide variety of topics.

“We want to stress more hands-on learning and experiences. Kids learn more if they touch something. They know it’s related to the Missouri River and Yankton, South Dakota,” Robb said. “The kids can picture things and think back about it. The kids remember that kind of stuff, and

they look forward to it in the future.”

Robb has received positive feedback from students.

“The kids love this event,” she said. “We weren’t even asking for comments, and we got critiques afterwards. One of the kids said, ‘This was the best day I have ever had.’”

While the educational festival looks to reach record levels, the river clean-up — marking its 10th anniversary — faces its own growing pains.

Last spring’s clean-up started again at Gavins Point Dam and was extended an additional four miles downstream, said Ranger Smith, the event organizer. The effort collected about 3.5 tons of debris.

However, the historic 2011 flood has changed the river channel, its levels and the amount and type of debris, Smith said.

“Last year, we did a pre-survey where we went out and saw where things were at. We then made specific plans for the clean-up with our resources,” he said. “We will again want to have a plan on how to attack the cleanup. We may need to cut up wood or do other things beforehand.”

Last spring’s cleanup drew about 120 volunteers, and Smith would like to see the number grow. He is adding a safety coordinator because of the changing river as well as the expanded clean-up territory.

He also hopes to add river-cleanups at Vermillion and Pickstown on the South Dakota side and Ponca and Niobrara on the Nebraska side.

The third activity, the Clean Boat Event, has been successful in keeping invasive species out of

the upper reaches of the Missouri River, said organizer Lepisto.

“The silver carp is in the James River up to North Dakota because of last year’s high water,” he said. “But Gavins Point Dam continues to be the line for holding back the Asian Carp and zebra mussel.”

The clean boat event will be held May 11 and at other times to be determined in May and June. The event could use more volunteers to hand out materials and talk to people to heighten awareness of invasive species.

“I don’t think you will see us go to a single weekend again. It’s a lot more work, but we make so many more contacts, and you aren’t just relying on one day when something could go wrong,” he said.

“We have done this for four summers so far, and we haven’t had anybody say it wasn’t a good idea. By and large, people have been very supportive.”

As for the future, Tran-

sCanada’s donation brought a large measure of relief at Friday’s meeting.

Lepisto said he was “flabbergasted” at the news.

“TransCanada asked how they could be involved, and they stepped up with this type of generous donation,” he said. “(They) see the value of these events to the river and community. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

However, the three events still need the support of other donors and volunteers, Lepisto said.

“We have set the bar high and need to continue at this pace. We’re not done yet by any means. We want a quality event and need businesses to help out,” he said.

“And with the growth of the (education) festival, we need at least twice as many volunteers as we did last year. We’re looking at needing 50 volunteers if we hope to pull this off with more than 500 kids.”

Smith spoke of the need “to remain frugal” when it comes to expenses. “This (TransCanada donation) has acted as a pressure valve and eased things up, but we still need to receive more donations and volunteers,” he said.

Robb said she was “very surprised and pleased” at the TransCanada cash donation and offer of its boats. “This is totally great,” she said.

However, she emphasized the need for a broad base of support for the events.

“We still need the community’s help. We still need all the people that we have relied on for years,” she said. “They have made such big contributions in the past and have been a part of the event.”

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