Norma McCorvey Took the Money of the Anti-Abortion Movement and Lost Herself. 'AKA Jane Roe' Is Her Attempt at Atonement.

In a stunning deathbed confession, the woman who made Roe v. Wade possible tried to erase years of anti-abortion activism. But the damage has already been done.

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Norma McCorvey puts on a cannula and adjusts the scarf on her head. "This is my deathbed confession," she says. McCorvey, the woman better known as Jane Roe, is ready.

It was 1969 and an impoverished McCorvey was pregnant for the second time. She'd tried to get an abortion by telling the doctor she had been raped (later, she would admit that she hadn't); afterward, she went to an underground abortion provider but didn't go through with it. Instead, McCorvey went to an adoption attorney, who told her about two young lawyers, Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee. They had just graduated from law school and were looking for a plaintiff for their suit to overturn the Texas law against abortion. They needed a poor woman because abortion was legal in some states at the time, and thus a plaintiff who couldn't afford to travel to one of those states would show the burden of the law.

"I know how I felt when I found out I was pregnant, and I wasn't gonna let another woman feel that way—not cheap, dirty, and no good. Women make mistakes," McCorvey says. "And they make mistakes with men. Things happen. It's just Mother Nature at work. You can't stop it, you can't explain it, it's just something that happens."

In March 1970, McCorvey decided to sign on as Jane Roe, which eventually led the Supreme Court's 1973 landmark decision, saying abortion in the first trimester was a consultational right and the state could start imposing limited regulations, if it related to the health of the mother. (Everyone forgets that McCorvey never had an abortion, and in fact had a child taken away from her because she was a lesbian.)

McCorvey should have been a hero to the pro-choice movement. But in 1995, she took a hard right turn: She was baptized in a backyard pool, said she was no longer a lesbian, joined an anti-abortion advocacy group, and claimed, as a Christian, to not believe in abortion. But in *AKA Jane Roe*, a documentary premiering Friday on FX and Saturday on Hulu, McCorvey says she never stopped believing in pro-choice and pro-abortion ideals. Her change of heart in the '90s, a true hard right to evangelical Christianity, was an act undertaken for money. Filmmakers found IRS records that she'd received cash payments totaling at least $456,911.

"I think it was a mutual thing. I took their money and they put me out in front of the cameras and told me what to say and that's what I'd say," McCorvey tells the filmmakers.

What kind of things was she told to say? "'We've gathered here today to pay homage to the children that are being aborted in this abortuary. We're doing this because abortion is wrong. And I, as the former Jane Roe of Roe v. Wade, do regret signing the affidavit for the pro-abortion camps.' That was probably about it," McCorvey recalls.

"It was all an act?" an interviewer asks her.

"Yep."

The documentary intertwines interviews with abortion clinic workers; pastors; attorney Gloria Allred, who helped McCorvey navigate the press after coming out as Jane Roe; and of course, McCorvey herself over the last year of her life. (McCorvey died in 2017 at the age of 69 in Katy.) During its 79-minute run, the documentary gives McCorvey the opportunity to atone for something she felt she needed to atone for.

As for the rest of us? A sad truth underlies all the anti-abortion activism McCorvey chose to be a part of. Choice means nothing without access. While a deathbed confession corrects the historical record, it doesn't do much to reverse decades of losses to reproductive rights—even if it's well-lit and framed beautifully, as it is in *AKA Jane Roe*. Reproductive rights are restricted more and more each legislative session. In Texas, abortion is banned after 20 weeks and requires a woman receive counseling at a separate appointment before the procedure. Before the now-infamous House Bill 2 that then-state Sen. Wendy Davis tried to filibuster out of the Austin statehouse in the summer of 2013, Texas had more than 40 clinics providing abortions. Now there are just over 20, in a state of 29 million people. Nationally, 11 million-plus women live more than an hour's drive from a clinic.

Norma McCorvey, *19*

How was little Norma supposed to know she would become part of legacy? McCorvey was born in 1947 in Louisiana to an abusive, alcoholic mother who made it clear she didn't want her second child. Her family would move to Houston, where McCorvey was queer and poor in Texas, a place where it's still a hard go to be queer and poor, even post-*Obergefell*. At 10 or 11, she ran away to Oklahoma City with a female friend, whom she was caught kissing in a hotel by a maid. Afterward, she was sent to reform school in Gainesville. She would marry a man and have a child, who would later be taken away from her by her mother because McCorvey was gay. In the summer of 1970, McCorvey met her longtime girlfriend, Connie Gonzales, when she was shoplifting at Gonzales' store. In the documentary, old videos of McCorvey and Gonzales are filled with love and happiness. Connie seems proud of McCorvey's choice to be Jane Roe. "She stood up for a lot of women. She saved a lot of women. She will always be Jane Roe," Connie says in an old clip.

Even when McCorvey finally took control of her narrative through a memoir and media appearances after a string of abortion clinic bombings in the 1980s, it's clear that she never felt accepted enough in a movement quite literally built on her experiences. I wish the filmmakers pressed her more on what she was expecting. Did she want to be revered like Rosa Parks or have her name spoken forever like Oliver Brown? Alfred talks about how upset McCorvey was that they didn't ask her to speak at the National Organization for Women March for Women's Lives in in 1989 in Washington, D.C. Instead, they had a slate of celebrity speakers like Whoopi Goldberg. McCorvey was incredibly candid about so much, like what it was like after nursing home found out she was that McCorvey; I wish they had pressed her on what she was hoping to get out of the period of her pro-choice activism. But now she's dead.

Director Nick Sweeney shows that McCorvey was a person who liked and wanted attention, an uneducated woman who felt slighted by the pro-choice movement's decision to hunt her and her unpredictable nature. Charlotte Taft, an abortion counselor with the South Street Women's Clinic in Dallas, puts it, rather bluntly: "[McCorvey] was not the poster girl that would have been helpful to the pro-choice movement."

The film gives the impression that the decision to switch sides was something McCorvey did because she simply woke up on the other side of the bed one day. But anti-abortion activists like Flip Benham had waited her out, establishing an office of Operation Rescue, the zealous anti-abortion group, next door to the women's clinic McCorvey worked at. The anti-abortion movement accepted her and celebrated her as a woman who felt neglected. Additionally, McCorvey's admission that this was a money grab is so benign-sounding that I wished other figures could fill in the blanks. I recognize that McCorvey was dying and the filmmakers had only so much tape to work with, but the explanation in the last 20 minutes of the film feels as though something is missing. Reverend Rob Schenck, the evangelical pastor who says he's remorseful for his anti-choice ways after being by McCorvey's side for much of her activism, provides some insight to the audience, but even in his enlightening interview, there's a lack of specifics that leaves the viewer with even more questions about what happened between McCorvey and the antis. "For Christians like me, there is no more important or authoritative voice than Jesus. And he says, 'What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world and lose his soul?' When you do what we did to Norma, you lose your soul," Schenck tells the filmmakers.

One of the most honest moments of the film is an interview with Benham, an anti-choice pastor, who is filming harassing people at a North Carolina clinic. He says, "If you believe abortion is murder, you need to act like it's murder." This mode of thinking is a direct throughline to the murders of clinic workers in the '90s as well as the shooting and eventual murder of Dr. George Tiller, an outspoken Christian physician who specialized in third-trimester abortion care. The documentary glosses over the death part, instead mentioning a few of the people arrested for vandalism and bombing clinics. Particularly with all the focus on Operation Rescue, omitting the death of someone like Dr. Tiller, whose clinic was repeatedly targeted by the organization, gives the impression that the filmmakers didn't do all their homework.

By the end of *AKA Jane Roe*, a profound sadness had overtaken me. Believing in the right to choose is the ultimate act of solidarity. It believes that your fellow person knows what is best for their life and body at any particular moment in time. McCorvey threw that away. But beyond the collective, McCorvey threw the love of her life, Connie Gonzales, under the bus during her conversion period. When she joined the anti-abortion movement, McCorvey said she was no longer a couple with Gonzales, the woman she had lived with for 10 years. The most heartbreaking scenes are the interviews with Connie, who explains that the couple was now just friends, after McCorvey's conversion. There wasn't sex, just a different kind of love. McCorvey's decision hurt the pro-choice movement, but it also profoundly damaged this woman. They would continue to live together, platonically, until McCorvey moved out.

When she was young, McCorvey dreamed of being a movie star. Now, she's gotten the fame she sought, but only through a series of choices that led to the legitimization of people and positions that're hurt so many. The rise of the anti-abortion movement can't be pinned only on McCorvey, but as *AKA Jane Roe* illustrates, her selflessness cannot be forgotten, even if it might be forgiven.

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