

The Converts of *Roe v. Wade*

Two pivotal figures who fought for abortion rights became passionately pro-life

by Carolee McGrath

Dr. Bernard Nathanson was the most vocal of advocates. Thousands of women, he claimed, would die in back-alley procedures if they were not granted the right to obtain an abortion, and he had to protect them. So, in 1969, the OB-GYN from New York City co-founded the National Association for Repeal of Abortion Laws. A year later, he became the director of New York's Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health, the largest free-standing abortion facility in the world.

But abortion was still illegal in many other places, like Texas, where local attorneys and activists in Dallas were ready to challenge the state's anti-abortion law. They took as their case an unmarried, unemployed young woman named Norma McCorvey, who was denied access to abortion when she became pregnant.

In the case, McCorvey went by different name: Jane Roe, or the "Roe" in *Roe v. Wade*, which eventually made its way to the Supreme Court in 1973.

The landmark decision decriminalized abortion nationwide, and in a certain sense, Nathanson and McCorvey had achieved victory — but that is not the end of their stories. In the years that followed *Roe v. Wade*, their views on the issue of abortion changed dramatically. They eventually became vocal pro-life advocates and encountered God's forgiveness in a powerful way.

Just one year after *Roe*, in a 1974 *New England Journal of Medicine* article titled "Deeper into Abortion," Nathanson

expressed doubts that abortion was simply the removal of an "undifferentiated mass of cells." He further wrote, "I am deeply troubled by my own increasing certainty that I had in fact presided over 60,000 deaths."

As ultrasound technology emerged, Nathanson soon found it impossible to deny the humanity of the unborn child.

In 1979, he wrote *Aborting America*, which exposed what

he called "the dishonest beginnings of the abortion movement." He even admitted to personally fabricating statistics about the number of women who died each year from illegal abortion — in order to convince the Supreme Court that legal abortion would save lives.

In cooperation with the National Right to Life Committee in 1984, he narrated a documentary film titled *The Silent Scream*, which showed the abortion of a 12-week unborn baby via ultrasound.

A self-identified Jewish atheist, he then began a spiritual journey after befriending Father John McCloskey, a priest of Opus Dei. He later converted to Catholicism and was baptized by Cardinal John O'Connor, archbishop of New York, in St. Patrick's Cathedral Dec. 8, 1996.

By this time, McCorvey had begun her own path of conversion. In 1995, her life changed when a pro-life organization moved into an office next to the Dallas abortion clinic where she was working. Just a year earlier, she had published a book



Dr. Bernard Nathanson and Norma McCorvey, aka "Jane Roe," are pictured in 1985 and 1998, respectively, following their renunciation of abortion rights.

LEFT: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite — RIGHT: AP Photo/Eric Gay

titled *I Am Roe: My Life, Roe v. Wade, and Freedom of Choice*, in which she chronicled her troubled childhood, substance abuse, three pregnancies and support of *Roe v. Wade*.

Within months of meeting her pro-life neighbors, including Rev. Philip Benham, McCorvey left the abortion industry forever and became an evangelical Christian. She was later received into the Catholic Church in 1998 by Father Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life. She also published a second book, *Won by Love*, earlier the same year — a story of repentance, mercy, conversion and hope.

In a supplement to the book, she wrote, “There is not a day that I do not thank God for the men and women who, by their personal contact with me or simply by their prayers, have helped me on my journey. His mercy is limitless.”

In his own 1998 memoir, *Hand of God*, Nathanson echoed these sentiments: “I can’t tell you how grateful I am to those

who prayed for me all those years when I was publicly announcing my atheism and lack of faith. They stubbornly, lovingly prayed for me. I am convinced beyond a doubt that those prayers were heard.”

Nathanson also confessed in the book to being “one of those who helped usher in this barbaric age.” McCorvey made a similar confession in a public service announcement: “My case, which legalized abortion on demand, was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Despite their regret, when Nathanson died Feb. 21, 2011, at age 84, and McCorvey died Feb. 18, 2017, at age 69, they left this world in peace, as powerful witnesses of the Gospel of Life. ✦

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Leaving the Abortion Industry

BERNARD NATHANSON and Norma McCorvey are far from the only promoters of abortion who have experienced powerful conversions through reflection, friendships and pro-life witness. Dr. John Bruchalski’s conversion came after working as an abortionist during his OB/GYN residency in the late 1980s. Now a member of Padre Pio Council 10754 in Great Falls, Va., he founded the Tepeyac Family Center, one the largest freestanding pro-life medical practices in the United States, in 1994. In the case of Abby Johnson, a former director of a Planned Parenthood facility in Bryan/College Station, Texas, her conversion in 2009 was prompted in part by those organizing the 40 Days for Life campaign. She subsequently established And Then There Were None, an organization that has helped some 400 abortion workers and 7 abortion doctors leave the industry. • abortionworker.com

“I stand in front of you today, a woman who spent eight years of her life working and running a Planned Parenthood facility. Because of the power of conversion, because of the power of Christ, I stand in front of you as a woman who has been redeemed from her past.” — *Abby Johnson, founder of And Then There Were None, March for Life Rally 2017*