

Sarah Weddington: Legal education teaches critical skills

Students who dedicate themselves to the study of law leave school equipped not only to become attorneys but also to become leaders. Honing the ability to write, to make a rational argument and to excel at preparation, all pave the way for lawyers to step into leadership roles that help bring about change and shape history, according to Sarah Weddington, the winning attorney in the historic U.S. Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*. Weddington delivered this message as the speaker at the 24th Edith House Lecture in March.

“While not everyone who has an important role in history is a lawyer, I do think that the abilities and the techniques that you learn in law school give you a critical advantage in the kind of skills that are needed for leadership,” Weddington said.

She also recounted how her involvement in the landmark abortion case began when she tried to answer a simple question for a group of women in Austin, Texas. The women asked if they would be prosecuted if they gave information to those who wanted to know where and how to get an abortion. Weddington agreed to conduct some research for the women, never contemplating their question would lead to her arguing and winning a case before the U.S. Supreme Court at the age of 26. She is still the youngest woman to ever do so.

“At that point, I had done not one contested case. I had done uncontested divorces, wills for people with no money and one adoption for my uncle. That was my complete legal experience,” she said.

Worried that she might lose the case, Weddington ran for the state legislature in Texas so she could attempt the change “from within” if necessary. Only days after being sworn into the position, Weddington learned that she had won *Roe* when she received a phone call from a reporter in her new office at the Texas Capitol building.

Weddington then went on to become the first woman to serve as general counsel for the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the first woman director of the Texas Office of State-Federal Relations. She also worked

for the Carter administration as assistant to the president of the United States addressing national gender issues.

She offered three tips to becoming a strong leader. First, Weddington suggested that students practice leadership. She explained that small leadership roles early in her life – such as serving as president of the Future Homemakers of America in high school and working in student government in college – prepared her for the larger leadership roles she stepped into later in her career. “I’m urging you to try some things that you are not sure that you can do. It’s not that you have to be perfect to be a leader,” she stated.

Second, Weddington encouraged students to use a critical eye in observing others. “Watch other leaders and learn from the best of what they do and learn to avoid what doesn’t seem right to you,” she said.

Finally, Weddington stressed that students should look for issues they respond to and feel passionate about.

Weddington said she is encouraged when she visits law schools and speaks to students about stepping into leadership roles. “I look out and I see what I think of as reinforce-

ments – people who will have the skills, people who will have the talents [and] people who will have the knowledge of how to work within our legal system and who can in a very genuine way leave their thumbprint,” she said.

Weddington is an accomplished lawyer, author and supporter of women’s rights. She currently practices law in Austin and is an adjunct professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Weddington’s leadership as a women’s rights advocate continues today. She is a founding member of the Foundation for Women’s Resources and the creator of The Women’s Museum in Dallas.

The Edith House Lecture series is sponsored by the Women’s Law Student Association in honor of Edith Elizabeth House, one of the first female graduates of the University of Georgia School of Law. She graduated in 1925 and was co-*vaedictorian* of her class. House became an assistant U.S. attorney in the Southern District of Florida in 1929, where she served for more than 30 years.

- By rising third-year student Allison Pruitt

