



CECILE RICHARDS INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Cecile Richards, President, Planned Parenthood (2006-2018)

June 17, 2022

Interviewed by Noah Remnick

Total Running Time: 29 minutes and 30 seconds

START TC:00:00:00:00

CECILE RICHARDS:

I do think that all of us. Are obligated to try to communicate with people who otherwise might just, you know, tune us out. And my mom really taught me that. I mean, she used to say, you know, if whatever you're saying can't be understood by your grandmother back in Waco, then no one's hearing it. And so I don't think it's so much about curating an image, but it's making things simple for people and being direct about what you believe and what you're trying to do.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories

Cecile Richards

President, Planned Parenthood (2006-2018)

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NOAH REMNICK:

So tell me a little bit more about your childhood and the kind of family and community that you were a part of.

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Well, I was born in Waco, Texas, and then my mother left as soon as she could get out of there. We moved to Dallas and my dad was a civil rights attorney, labor lawyer. My mother was what we called a housewife in those days when she was taking care of four kids. And we had sort of a traditional I guess it was a traditional fifties, sixties kind of household, except that my parents were really political. And Dallas was a very, very conservative city. We were kind of against everything that was going on. And my my parents were involved in campaigns and the farmworkers movement, in the women's movement of the civil rights movement. And so I think from a really early age, I found out that being an activist was important, but it was also fun. I mean, those were all of our friends and that eventually we moved to Austin, Texas, which was a much more hospitable place for my very progressive parents. And that's when I think we all got just sort of full swing into the movement again for women's rights to end the war in Vietnam. And where I really learned that maybe this is something I could do for the rest of my life.

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NOAH REMNICK:

What was your father like during your childhood? Can you just describe the civil rights work a little bit more and how he came to influence you?

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CECILE RICHARDS:



So my father was an only child. Both my parents were, and his mother was very independent. She was part of the League of Women Voters. I think she started the League of Women Voters in Texas. She was she was from the east. And so she just had a whole different point of view about what women could do than was sort of the traditional norm in Texas. And my dad became a labor lawyer. He represented unions, which in Dallas and, you know, worked with the farm workers. That was my upbringing was sort of fighting the powers that be. And my son, my dad had a huge influence on me. You know, I became a union organizer right out of college, even here at the age of 89. He's still filing lawsuits against the lieutenant governor of Texas. So he is one of those kind of unrepentant activists, very progressive, really out of step with the mainstream of Texas, but proudly so.

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NOAH REMNICK:

People obviously know your mother as a public servant and a political trailblazer. But what was your mother like as a mother growing up?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

I mean, it's funny. My mom was always trying to do what was expected of her. So she was the perfect housewife in Dallas, Texas, which is kind of funny. Now, if you look back and think, what was she thinking? I mean, she put on the perfect dinner parties. She threw the perfect holiday events, birthday parties, everything. She said if it was in the glossy magazine, she was trying to do it. And, you know, she was taking care of four kids, which was not that uncommon in Texas at the time. She had no career. And so she threw herself



into political campaigns and things that would keep her mind busy. And I think it wasn't until much, much later that she actually figure it out she could do something other than take care of kids. And of course, once she did, we moved to Austin. She ran a political campaign for a young woman lawyer who wanted to be in the state house. And that was actually very uncommon in the time we didn't have very many women in elective office. And actually all of us kids got involved in the campaign and we won. She won the race, which was really not expected. Her name was Sarah Weddington. And of course, she had argued the Roe versus Wade case. So she was already a trailblazer and a firebrand. Mom went to work for her in the Capitol. And then at some point, mom want the thought. Well, I guess if if these other women can run for office, I guess I can, too. And so she started her political career relatively late in life. I mean, her kids were we weren't all grown. But, you know, she had been doing that for many years. But man, once she got into it, she like she fell into it with a vengeance. It was clearly what she was meant to do. And of course, eventually, you know, ran for governor of Texas and in in almost a complete miracle, we won that race, too.

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NOAH REMNICK:

So then after four years in office, your mother was defeated in her bid for reelection by George W Bush. That campaign was notoriously dirty. What did your mother and you think of George W Bush?

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CECILE RICHARDS:



There was a lot of feeling about him. I think the difficulty was really about the campaign. Obviously, Karl Rove really cut his teeth. I mean, he went on to become such a famous and infamous political strategist. It was the year that the Christian right became very involved in politics. And Texas was one of those places. It was the year that Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition became involved in electoral politics. So it was just it was a tough year. But she was tough. She really believed, particularly as she got older, you know, you have one life, you have one chance to make a difference in this world. And so you better take it. And I think she just sort of brought that, whether it to politics or to child rearing or to just enjoying life. That was that was sort of her that was her approach.

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NOAH REMNICK:

What were the expectations that she had for you that she was trying to cultivate in you?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

You know, I think she probably had the same expectations for me. I was the eldest daughter, eldest child. And I mean, she would say, you know, they had no idea how to raise kids. They were very young. And so I had to be perfect. And so there was a lot of expectations, I think, at a very early age. But eventually, I she really had the same expectations for me that she had for other women. She saw so many women, and I know this was a reflection on her own experience that, you know, women waited until they were perfect to do the next thing, right. They waited until they were asked whether it was to



run for office, whether it was to be in charge of something, even though she knew women were behind the scenes running everything. And. She was a big believer in not only pushing other women to do more, but linking arms with them and walking down the road together. I mean, it's funny, when she was governor of Texas, she was sort of like a unicorn. Like, I don't know if there were any other progressive women governors anywhere in the country. And some women I got to know later said, you know, when your mom was governor, she invited all any woman she could find in the country to come to the governor's mansion and go to what she called, you know, governor girls school. And as a result, women like Janet Napolitano, who went on to become governor of Arizona and Kathleen Sebelius, you know, Kathleen became governor of Kansas, They said what a big difference that made. Right, is that mom was, if I can do it, you can do it, too. And that was that was her attitude till the end of her life.

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NOAH REMNICK:

Did you ever butt heads with your parents growing up?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Oh, my God. Of course. I butted heads with my parents all the time. I mean, over what I was going to wear, where I was going to go. But I wouldn't say they were not helicopter parents, as we talk about now, you know, with kids. I mean, we had a lot of freedom. They were they had a lot of freedom. I mean, they had a whole big life. So they weren't like, you know, spending time with us all the time. And I don't think it's like I think every kid pushes boundaries.



It's funny, though, because I you know, I've spent so much time with young people in my career and so many young people that I know who have to, like, fight their parents over politics, over issues. That was never the deal with my parents. We saw eye to eye on most issues. So I think that the kinds of times we fought were over this silly things, not the really important things. And I think that's the role of teenagers to rebel. And I think my parents got that.

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NOAH REMNICK:

You've always prided yourself on making trouble, as you put it. When did you first begin questioning authority in the Texas of your youth, and where do you think that instinct came from?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Well, I mean, the whole idea of questioning why things were the way they were was absolutely born out of the dinner table. And my family and we were always supporting candidates who couldn't win. You know, progressive folk. My dad, you know, had already argued before the Supreme Court over folks, conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War, people who were fuzed. I remember like a professor in Dallas that refused to sign a loyalty oath. So he already was demonstrating what it looked like to challenge authority. So those to me are the memories of my childhood much more than anything else. And and then, of course, when we moved to Austin again, it's the height of the Vietnam War. My dad is working for labor unions, and he's working for conscientious objectors to the war. I wore a black armband to school in



seventh grade, called in the principal's office, who called my mother to, you know, narc me out. And of course, the only, you know, his good fortune when she wasn't at home. And then I remember or two in seventh grade, I believe it was the very first Earth Day, which is kind of interesting, the things you remember as a child. But I remember making the poster for Earth Day. We didn't know anything about Earth. I mean, this was like a whole new idea, but it completely made such an impression on me that I then in seventh grade, got some of my other girlfriends that we started a recycling club in Austin, Texas, which also I mean, now recycling is very common. At the time, my dad thought I was nuts. And but those those early experiences really taught me that if you see a problem, then you got to take a stand and do something, even if it's just your small part. I do think it sort of set me on the path for the way I spent the rest of my life.

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NOAH REMNICK:

What was your sex and reproductive education like growing up in Texas? Did your parents ever talk to you about sex or birth control?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

I would say my my experience in Texas growing up with sex education was de minimis. I think we all remember as any girl growing up at that time in Texas, we got a something from Kotex, which was about sanitary napkins. That was like that was something there was a big assembly that the boys didn't come to. And there were some little Disney film, but there was no conversation about birth control or sex. And really, with my parents, not till much, much



later. I think they, frankly, like other Texas parents and probably parents of that era, they were totally ill equipped. But it's interesting, my my good friend in junior high. Her mother was a big volunteer at Planned Parenthood. And so we always knew that Planned Parenthood existed. If anyone, you know, needed birth control or kind of got into trouble. But I wouldn't say that my parents played a big role in this. And it's I mean, I know that's true today is just parents feel really unprepared and not supported. It's why it was a big part of what we try to do at Planned Parenthood is give people the tools and frankly, young people information, particularly if they couldn't get it from their parents.

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NOAH REMNICK:

Were you always pro-choice?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Always. I mean, really becoming a mom, I think, is the thing that made me the most adamantly pro-choice. I have a daughter and eldest daughter and then I had twins. I got pregnant on the campaign mom's campaign for governor, and we had twins, which was wild at the time. And then later I got pregnant. I was on birth control and my husband, I decided not to have another child. So I had an abortion after being a mom and all of those experiences, really, I mean, they just confirmed and reaffirmed for me that this is a decision nobody can make except the person who's pregnant, because no one has any idea what your life is like. And it's why I have so much empathy. Now, majority of women in this country who have an abortion are already moms. And so they

they do that with full recognition of the responsibility, the joy, the obligations of being a parent.

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NOAH REMNICK:

After college, you worked for years as a labor organizer. I'm wondering what lessons you learned in that role that you carried with you for the rest of your career?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

You know, when I was in college, I as I said, I went away to school. I was went to Rhode Island. I never even I'd never even been to Ireland. It just like it sounded like fun. And so I was definitely a fish out of water there. There were very few kids from Texas, and I immediately got involved in a janitor strike on campus, and it made a huge influence on me. It was because I was sort of thinking, Oh my God, I met this like really fabulous college and it's progressive and all that. And then I realized immediately that I was taking the side of the janitors, not the university. And as I when I decided, you know, when I graduated from from school, I became a union organizer. First I worked with garment workers on the Rio Grande border. Then eventually I moved to New Orleans, organize hotel workers. That's how I met my husband. We were union organizers together, organized mainly women working for minimum wage, you know, in nursing homes and hotels as janitors, as garment workers. And it was a huge education for me. I mean, it probably was the most influential job I've ever had in my lifetime because I spent my days in living rooms and on street corners talking to people who,



despite having very few options in terms of their employment, were willing to risk everything to try to make things better. And they knew probably it wasn't going to get that much better for them. But they had kids, they had coworkers, they lived in communities where they thought it's worth fighting for something. And that, I guess, that courage and that determination. And and having the chance to actually never live the lives that they lived but really see it for years is probably yeah. Made the most difference on how I approach work and how I approach my activism, particularly once we moved to California and I was organizing janitors, These are folks who had actually fought their way, whether it was from Guatemala or Mexico or El Salvador. Honduras had risked so much. Many had left their families behind to get to California, where they could work as a janitor. And most of them were working, of course, two jobs there, working at night as janitors. And then they had whatever daytime hustle they could get. And yet they were willing to risk all of that, everything they had done to fight for a living wage, for janitors, knowing that they could get fired. And many of them did. But that kind of that kind of courage, I mean, people used to always say to me, well, your job it was particularly when I worked at Planned Parenthood. Your job must be so hard, you know? And it's like, listen, there is nothing harder than cleaning 13 hotel rooms a day for minimum wage in New Orleans or working in a nursing home in East Texas with no benefits and no job guarantee. That's what hard work is. And I feel like I tried to spend the rest of my life figuring out ways to make life better for the community, people that I that I worked with.

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NOAH REMNICK:

How did the job at Planned Parenthood get on your radar in the first place, and what were you thinking about when you were finally offered it?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

So I was I was living in Washington, D.C., and I was already deeply into progressive politics. I had started an organization called America Votes, which was this effort to bring together all the progressive groups that were doing voter education, registration, voter turnout, everything from Planned Parenthood to the Sierra Club to the Human Rights Campaign, to Emily's List. And so I knew all all the folks. It was a great job. It was a great organization. It continues on to this day. And so I was very familiar with the current leadership of Planned Parenthood at the time. And so when the job when she left, I mean, I knew the job was open, but it never occurred to me that that was a job that I could do. And the search firm called me. And as I said, I was like, I mean, I was so incredibly honored that I would even be, you know, kind of on the list. And but I almost didn't show up because I just felt like, you know, I don't know how to do that. I've never had a job that big. You know, all the things fill in the blank. And so I stopped in a coffee shop and I called my mother and I said, you know, I just I just don't think I can do that. The kids are this, you know, I've got to get the kids through all these things. And she just said, Cecile, get it together. This is this is the most important job you could ever have in your lifetime. Planned Parenthood is the most important health care provider to women in this country. You will never forgive yourself if you don't try. And what's the worst thing that could happen? And honestly, as a result, I went to the interview and they chose me as as we say, and we moved to New York. I had no idea what I was getting into. I think that's how a lot of

women just you know, we just kind of do the next thing that seems it needs doing. And it was the most extraordinary experience of my lifetime, an enormous honor, incredibly hard. But, you know, the people that work for Planned Parenthood, they do so out of a commitment. So you meet the most amazing people. And we went through some tough years. We went through some years where we were able to get amazing things done for women's health care, for reproductive health care, particularly with President Obama.

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NOAH REMNICK:

What did you see as your mission as the head of Planned Parenthood? What was your larger project?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

You know, when I came to Planned Parenthood, I think one of the reasons they hired me is we were doing a fabulous job providing health care. You know, millions of patients every year. We were in every single state. But politics were getting in the way of our ability to care for the patients who were turning to us. More restrictive laws were being passed. I mean, it was harder in, you know, more Republican states, red states. And it was clear we kind of needed to re build our movement side, you know, that we you know, Planned Parenthood, a very interesting organization because it has these two parts. A health care provider, trusted health care provider to millions of folks. But also we a movement to advance and really make sure that reproductive health care is available to everybody, whether they're a Planned Parenthood patient or not. So I really was hired, I think, to help on the movement side.

And we did. I mean, we we dramatically increased the membership of Planned Parenthood. We invested in young people. I mean, millions of young people joined Planned Parenthood as activists, as leaders. Some of them have gone on to both lead Planned Parenthood but also gone and ran for public office. You know, so it was really, to me, important that we kind of build this whole new generation of activists. And then, of course, we had the chance as a movement to influence the Affordable Care Act, which was frankly, the most dramatic change in access to health care in our lifetime. And if we hadn't been at the table, if we had not had millions of supporters around the country that were pushing forward, we would not have made the progress for particularly for reproductive health care that we did. So that, to me, was incredibly important. And we elected a lot of good folks, including President Barack Obama or I would say we helped elect.

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NOAH REMNICK:

When did you realize it was time to step down from your role there? And why did you choose to take that step?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Well, I guess I always felt like ten years seemed like a good amount of time. You know, I came up in the progressive movement and I saw a lot of people who stayed, I think, beyond their their sell date, if you will. You know, these are big, important jobs and they're also amazing jobs. So that was sort of my horizon. I had this dream that we would elect Hillary Clinton president and then it could sort of like ride off into the sunset. And, you know, I felt the



organization was in good shape for so many reasons. And then, of course, that didn't happen. And so I stayed because we had to fight really what was an existential crisis, which was President Trump. And at that point, Speaker Paul Ryan had pledged to completely defund Planned Parenthood, to end all federal funding for the basic care that we provided to Medicaid patients primarily. I mean, this was affordable birth control, pap smears, breast breast exams. Well, women checkups for many women with low incomes. Planned Parenthood was the only place in their community they could go. And so I stayed for that fight. We won that fight. But then after I finished that, I knew it was time for a new leader. I was deeply invested in young leaders of color, not only as part of the organization and a part of my staff, but leading the organization. And so. So that was it. It was not like, look, I could have stayed another ten, 20 years. I love that. I love that job. But I didn't want to overstay my welcome. And look, at some point you go, you know, I set out to do certain things. We did them. I felt really good about what we had done. And it was you can you can begin to believe your own press too much. Right. And think you're the only one who could do it. And I never I never wanted to be in that situation. So I think I left after 12 years and it was good.

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NOAH REMNICK:

You spent a lot of your time since stepping down from Planned Parenthood, working to get more women elected to public office. Beyond Demographic equity, what do you see as the importance of having more women win public office? Is there something distinct about women's leadership?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Yeah, I think women, they just bring a different perspective. You know, once you've had kids, you have a totally different perspective on the world. I mean, it's like one of my things I always felt like is, you know, when half of Congress can get pregnant, we're going to finally quit fighting about access to safe and legal abortion, birth control, Planned Parenthood. But, you know, all the studies show and it may be because we've never been actually we've never had equity in office, that women are more likely to introduce legislation and pass legislation successfully. They're more likely to work across the aisle with other people of another party or point of view. They're more likely to work with each other as women across party lines. Most women, particularly now, if they're running for office, they're running for office because they're something they want to get done because there was no one that just tapped them on the shoulder and said, Oh, wow, you would be great. Has a member of Congress. The burdens are still so big then unless you're really committed to doing something in office, it's hard for women to run. Now, at some point, maybe the world becomes more equal. But I do think that the women I know, and particularly young women, as they're coming up, as they're, you know, running for school board, running for city council, they're doing it because there's something they want to achieve. And more likely than not, they do.

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NOAH REMNICK:

Our series of interviews attempts to convey what moral leadership looks like. I'm wondering how you define moral leadership and why there's such a need for it now.

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CECILE RICHARDS:

I mean, I think that as. A person growing up where you are have the opportunity and or are kind of forced to witness injustice, whether it's racial or economic or gender. I think moral leadership is doing something about it. And with all humility, and it may be something tiny and maybe something big, but I feel like we were put on this earth to make a difference. And particularly people like myself who grew up with enormous privilege, I could do anything I wanted to with my life. Right. To me. I mean, the gift to me was able was being able to choose to be an organizer, to choose to be a troublemaker. And so I take that privilege seriously. And so I guess for me, moral leadership is taking the gifts that you were given and doing something with them to make the world better.

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NOAH REMNICK:

So a lot of progressives take comfort in the edict that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. It's not a notion that you believe in.

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CECILE RICHARDS:

I mean, I guess we all believe or we wouldn't be progressives, that we wouldn't be activists, that the arc does bend towards justice, but it needs a lot of help getting there. And anyone right now in the United States who's a progressive activist. AM has to be wondering how we need to shift and change and adjust in what is becoming an increasingly undemocratic, autocratic, almost totalitarian environment. And so whether it's the attacks

on voting rights, which are just so core to our democracy, whether it's attacks on even just the electoral process, the effort to end access to safe and legal abortion, a right that we've had for 50 years, the thought of we're going backwards in all of these areas, I think are causing everyone to try to rethink what more do we need to do because the rules don't exist anymore like they did for all of our lifetime. And this is the first time I have felt that so deeply. So, yeah, I believe in progress. I believe in progressive change. I also believe it's harder now than ever before.

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NOAH REMNICK:

Do you ever think about your your own legacy? How would you like to be remembered?

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CECILE RICHARDS:

Hmm. Well, I don't think about my own legacy, but I guess if I had to, I would think about. I would hope to be remembered as someone who like to organize, like to build community and had a good time doing it. I think one of the things that we forget is that life has to be joyful. And I think organizing and hell raising and. Even working in electoral politics can be really fun and hard. But you got to bring joy to this to this lifetime, because that's the only way you get other people to come along with you. And when you do, you make the most amazing friends, people that you will know forever.

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