

Barbara Weller – She Fought for Terri

When she followed the Lord to law school at age 50, Barbara Weller could not have imagined the role she was being prepared to play in the history of the American legal system.

Attorney Barbara Weller isn't one for making big plans. In fact, the 65-year-old pastor's wife and grandmother says, "I just want to do whatever God wants me to. I really have no plans of my own. I wake up every morning and say, 'Okay, what's on the docket for today?'"

Although she knows to some this sounds strange, it's always been her approach. And so far, it's served her well.

Weller was one of the legal professionals who fought for the life of Terri Schiavo, the 41-year-old woman whose tragedy held the nation's attention as it played out in the courts and the media.

Like many, she will never forget the images of Schiavo's face and the family's daily pleas for help. Nor will she forget how valiantly the Christian Law Association's (CLA) team of attorneys fought to protect Schiavo. Sadly, the team of "legal missionaries," as they are called, would not prevail, and Terri Schiavo died on March 31, 2005.

For Weller, the outcome was hard to process as a lawyer, but even more difficult to resolve as a believer.

SOLID SPIRITUAL FOUNDATIONS Weller was reared in a Christian home in Boyertown, Pennsylvania. Her husband of 43 years, Armand, pastors the Church by the Sea in Madeira Beach, Florida. The two grew up in the same church, knowing each other nearly all their lives.

Weller says: "I was saved five times, which is kind of a joke in the office when we give our testimonies. I went to a children's club across the street from my school when I was in the second grade, and accepted the Lord the first time there." After three more "conversions," she finally settled the issue of having come to faith in Christ after attending a 1973 Bill Gothard seminar.

Later she experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit at a home prayer group. She remembers: "I wanted everything I could have of God. I thought that if there is something that's out there that I don't have, I want to get it."

Weller's full life included enjoying her growing family (which includes three daughters). Having a bachelor's degree in history and French, she taught school, mentored women in the church and served alongside her husband.

Despite these accomplishments, she says, "I have never done anything on my own. I just try to follow the Lord and hang on, and I am always amazed at what happens. I just pray every day for direction, and whatever comes, comes."

When their denomination, the United Church of Christ, embraced a liberal interpretation of the Bible in the 1970s, the Wellers got involved. Armand became a leader in the Charismatic Renewal movement, while Barbara began making her case for renewal among evangelicals.

Sent as a delegate to the denomination's national gathering in 1974, she recalls, "This gay study was going to be discussed. So I spent a lot of time praying before I went to the meeting, asking God that some pastor would be at the meeting, lead a challenge to the whole gay theology agenda, and I was going to be there to help."

Instead, Weller took on the assignment, and the Biblical Witness Fellowship was born. She says: "God would guide me from place to place, things would happen, and at the end of

that meeting, I had actually started a movement against the gay theology in the church with 300 people.”

She served as the Fellowship’s director until 1984, debating seminary professors on the encroachment of gay theology into the church, abortion and, interestingly enough, euthanasia.

Believing that she needed academic credentials in order to be heard, Weller earned a master’s degree in Old Testament Studies from Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania. After graduating in 1989, she asked God to give her more to do.

One day while watching the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings, she heard God say: “I want you to be a lawyer and defend the rights of my people.”

BACK TO SCHOOL Responding to God’s command, Weller consulted a friend, who recommended Regent University School of Law because it was Christ-centered.

Vaguely aware of the school, Weller knew it was in Virginia and associated with The 700 Club.

Her husband, having left his pastorate to work full-time for the Charismatic Renewal group, wasn’t tied to a specific location. But she knew he would laugh when she told him she had been advised to go to a law school that would necessitate a move.

However, instead of laughing, he reasoned, “As long as I’m near an airport, it doesn’t matter where I live. We could move there.”

Everything kicked into high gear. “Not only did the doors open; it was like God was dragging me through them by the hair,” she says.

God’s timing was perfect for the empty nesters. Weller remembers, “My children were all out of college. My oldest got

married in the meantime and wound up in Richmond, Virginia. My grandson was born in 1991, and by going to Virginia Beach, we got to see a lot more of him.”

In praise of her husband, she says he is “the most supportive man in the world.” Weller adds, “He’s a really godly man, and always encouraged me to do whatever God wanted me to do. He was 150 percent supportive of all this.”

Starting law school at age 50, Weller found the program challenging and recalls: “The academics were hard because it was not an area that I had even thought about before. So, I studied all the time.” Whenever she’d tell her husband she didn’t think she could finish, he would encourage her to persevere knowing it was God’s will.

And the sacrifice was worth it. She did well academically, served as editor of the Regent Law Review and worked for the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ).

CONTENDING FOR LIFE AND LIBERTY Weller believed her calling to be a religious liberty attorney would lead to a position with the ACLJ—the only firm she knew of that practiced this kind of law. But when her husband accepted a pastorate in Madeira Beach, Florida in 1994, she led her to wonder whether or not she’d ever practice law.

A fellow student told her about the Christian Law Association (CLA), which provides free legal services for churches and individuals encountering difficulties in exercising their religious freedoms. CLA was moving its main office from Cleveland, Ohio to Madeira Beach, Florida because they believed God told them to.

Weller recalls: “That was when I decided I was supposed to work for CLA.” She visited the firm, offering to work for free in order to fulfill a required six-week internship. During her first week, the head of the firm, David Gibbs III arrived from Ohio to find someone he’d never met who had already won three

cases working in his office. In time, CLA offered Weller a permanent position.

Weller handled freedom-of-speech cases pertinent to public schools and the workplace. But everything changed when the firm became involved with Terri Schiavo's case. For more than a decade, Schiavo's husband, Michael, and her parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, would be at odds over her care. At issue was whether or not Schiavo had been properly diagnosed as being in a "persistent vegetative state (PVS)," permanently unable to feed herself or respond to stimuli.

Although Terri's parents believed she needed re-evaluation and that her condition would improve with therapy, Michael Schiavo accepted the diagnosis of PVS. He argued that his wife would not want to be kept alive artificially, and that as her guardian, he should carry out her wishes.

The court ordered the removal of Schiavo's feeding tube for the second time on October 15, 2003. Around this time, attorney Gibbs told Weller that while praying about the case, God told him to get involved.

CLA, having no official role at first, researched ways to help. A team member drafted Terri's Law, passed by the Florida legislature, giving Governor Jeb Bush the power to order reinsertion of Schiavo's feeding tube on October 21, 2003.

"The parents didn't even know we were working on the case," says Weller. "It was just a thing that God had told us to do, and He was being faithful." Gibbs, sought out by the Schindler family, was named lead counsel in September 2004.

Motions were filed to have Schiavo's condition re-evaluated to determine whether or not she was in a persistent vegetative state. But the U.S. Supreme Court refused a final petition, and March 18, 2005 was set as the date for the third removal of her feeding tube.

Weller visited with Schiavo on that date. In an official court document, she recounted the details of this visit: "I begged her to try very hard to say, 'I want to live.' To my enormous shock and surprise, Terri's eyes opened wide, she looked me square in the face, and with a look of great concentration, she said, 'Ahhhhhhh.' Then, seeming to summon up all the strength she had, she virtually screamed, 'Waaaaaaaaa.'"

Weller said Schiavo, appearing extremely frustrated, began to cry. Around 2 p.m., visitors were told to leave. The court had cleared the way for removal of the feeding tube.

After the procedure, Weller visited Schiavo again that same afternoon. She remembers, "She gave me this look like, I thought you were going to help me. It was horrible."

Weller, apologizing to Schiavo for being unable to prevent the tube's removal and for having to leave her alone, reminded her that Jesus would never leave her. She prayed with her and kissed her before she left.

Although Weller understands the case's outcome on one level, she admits to being puzzled by a word God spoke to her during the early days of her involvement. She says, "God said to me, 'I need a Gideon's army to fight this battle, and I am going to get the glory.'"

The loss devastated her. After Terri died, Weller became depressed, couldn't concentrate, and considered quitting her job.

When her daughter gave birth to a baby girl in Washington, D.C., Weller took six weeks off to spend time helping her. It was the right prescription she needed to begin healing.

Although a doting grandmother, Weller was still a highly effective, passionate attorney, and was soon back in the fight. While she has not processed all the events of the Schiavo case, she is content with the fact that she was

faithful to God's request.

"I told God a long time ago I have no plans for my life," she says. "Whatever He wants me to do, I will do. It's been very interesting living like that. You just never know what's around the corner."

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