

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### TEXAS UNDER SIEGE: DOBBS, DEMOCRACY & BODILY AUTONOMY IN THE CROSSHAIRS

**LAURA FLANDERS:** A year after the Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade in a decision known as Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health, restrictions on abortion have expanded in more than half the states and driven by many of the same forces as we know, anti-queer and anti-trans bills have flooded state legislatures. In this context, many movements have been recalculating their strategies and we have been thinking about Texas. Yes, Texas. A year ago on this program, we talked with organizers in that state who pointed out that while abortion bans were new in some places after Dobbs, almost all abortions had been banned in Texas for almost a year already. Thoroughly gerrymandered state power in Texas was already in the hands of an anti-abortion, anti-trans, and anti-immigrant minority. In sum, Texas was a battlefield. One that had been for a while, both a testing ground for regressive anti-democratic policies and ideologies and also a place where progressives, by necessity, had been forced to get very creative and smart. So a year on we are reconvening that very same panel to find out how all that creative smart thinking is going. Returning to the show, I am happy to welcome Eesha Pandit, co-founder of the Center for Advancing Innovative Policy where she focuses on developing intersectional approaches to policy change. And Emmett Schelling, the director of the Transgender Education Network of Texas or TENT, which is an organization that's dedicated to gender-diverse equality in Texas. Also joining us, a newbie, Caroline Duble, the political director of Avow which did join us last time around. Avow focuses on abortion access, reproductive health rights, and justice. What do Texans know that the rest of the country might do well to learn? I welcome you all back for that conversation, the next chapter thereof, but I think we have to start with where things stand right now. Let's start with you, our newbie. Caroline, welcome. How would you describe the changes that have happened in the last year?

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** Right, so since the Dobbs decision, 12 more states have joined Texas with having total or near total bans on abortion, and another 11 states have 6 to 15 week bans right now. So I think just a year later, we've adapted the strategy. Abortion is now completely banned in Texas and providing abortions is actually a first-degree felony. But despite this unjust law, people in Texas and across the country and the state are still having abortions. Texans who can, are scraping together thousands of dollars to travel out of state. Some Texans are safely self-managing their abortions at home with pills, and tragically countless Texans are being forced to carry pregnancies against their will. So we're in a public health crisis and we're experiencing a pretty devastating blow to our rights.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Coming to you, Emmett. It's been a crummy year. Talk about what has happened at the local level, at the legislative level, just to begin, when it comes to trans equality, liberation, and rights.

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** The medical healthcare ban on youth, which ended up being SB 14, was jammed through at the last minute. Despite the second heaviest resistance that we know of, of turnout, of constituency from all over Texas coming into the capitol. They weren't just families that were affected. They weren't just people that were directly impacted. Where we're at is just a complete undermining and decimation of the will of the people as we watched a nonsensical trans sports ban for NCAA, even though we didn't know of any out trans collegiate athletes. So here we are again in a predicament where what do you see? The leadership completely ignoring the problems that are very visible in our state.

**EESHA PANDIT:** Particularly the politicians who told us that yes, they're overturning Roe, but they really care about families. They really care about how now they're going to double down on supporting families. There's lots of ways one could support family, but we don't have paid family leave, we haven't expanded Medicaid, and none of the states that have passed abortion bans, including Texas, have done those things to actually support families. So there's some really important sort of hypocrisy to call attention to here that when you take away people's access to reproductive rights and then you say you're doing that because you care about families, but then of course no policies that actually support families are... Not only are they not passed, they're actually actively fought against. So, I feel as though in this moment, we have to really push back on the idea that these laws were really to protect anyone at all and make them sort of account for the hypocrisy in the statement that they are in fact pro-family.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Coming back to you, Caroline. I would love to hear what stands out for you for this year, whether it's a story of what doctors are going through, or healthcare providers, more broadly.

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** Really, the word that stands out to me is just confusing and absolutely unmanageable for patients who are seeking care. When every day you hear on the news a different headline or a different lawsuit has been filed or a new law has been filed in another state, you don't know what care is available to you. So when people are seeking care in Texas, they are met with misinformation. We also have these things called "crisis pregnancy centers" which we call anti-abortion centers in Texas, which are fake clinics that are designed to manipulate and trick pregnant people out of seeking abortion care. Sometimes that means that they outright lie to them about what stage of pregnancy that they're at so they cannot access care at all. The thing that some of these laws do as well is target the support network of the pregnant person. So you're looking at parents, family members, friends, neighbors. When you create this bounty hunter system where anyone can report to anyone for violating anti-abortion laws, then

you create a system where regular everyday people are policing their neighbors and that makes it scary to ask for help, that makes people feel afraid in their own communities and makes it a very isolating experience to seek care.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Emmett, coming to you. What stands out for you from this year? A story? A person? A situation?

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** What sticks out to me is the resilience, the forced resilience, let's just name that. The forced resilience of Black trans folks, Indigenous trans folks, trans people of color, trans people in general, families with kids that they're just trying to protect and raise. And the trauma, if anything sticks out to me right now, it's the trauma, and really looking and examining the reality of what is reality? What are facts? When the same people say 'law and order' and uphold that, what is law and order when we're instating vigilante justice? When we are encouraging Texans to think of their neighbors as enemies, to think of each other as characterizations of things we just simply aren't. As a trans person, being called a pedophile because of who I am, because of the struggle that I've gone through, to be who I am and exist in this world. And we talk about freedom and liberty and the ability of self-agency? What a joke.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I'm coming to you, Eesha. Clearly there are legislative responses, there are electoral responses, there are legal responses, there are corporate activism responses. Which of any of those have been involved in? Do you see hope in?

**EESHA PANDIT:** We are making the best of what we can. We're trying to protect people's rights as much as possible and that often looks like stemming a legislative tide rather than enacting proactive things that will actually protect us and our families and our vision for our state. I also think it's really important to pay attention right now to, you know, all these things that we're talking about the way that they're enforced, the way that the anti-trans bills are enforced, the way that the anti-choice bills are enforced, is through an increased criminalization of people who participate in these things. People are being targeted, and that's something that we know is often the way that the arms of the state enact and pressure people into submission, right? So this is a moment I think for us to pay close attention to what's being criminalized but also who's being criminalized. For us to not tie a racial justice, anti-criminalization strategy onto our movement work, which for too long many organizations did not do, I think is a major gap for us.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How does that look for you at Avow, Caroline?

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** So yeah, in order for these bans on healthcare to be enforced, they require policing and surveillance and criminalization. So we really need to look to the leadership of Black advocates, of people who have been fighting the carceral state for decades because they

were warning us about the dangers of criminalization and over policing and surveillance long before this abortion ban existed.

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** This is affecting everybody, no matter if you are a cisgender man, a transgender man, a trans woman, it is affecting everyone. Not just cisgender women with abortion access and care, not just cisgender heterosexual families. When we talk about big government literally penetrating in and breaking the sacred relationship that a physician has historically always had with a patient or a parent who is trying to just get their kid healthcare.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How do we do this? Caroline, I saw some reporting on your organization, Avow, doing canvassing in the Dallas area, having those conversations on the doorstep that perhaps could get beyond the rhetoric.

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** Yeah, so Avow really, you know, after the Dobbs decision came down, we sat down as a staff together and thought, "What needs to happen?" You know, we're sick of playing their game, going to their capitol building, and responding to their fascist legislative attacks against our bodily autonomy. So what do we want to do to counter this? And a big thing that came out of those conversations was culture change work. So we really have started just going door to door in a suburb of Dallas to talk to moderate voters and ask them about abortion. Sometimes these conversations range from 45 minutes to two hours. We usually have people at the doors who have had abortions, who live in that community, can speak to their own community members about what their experience was like. And this just helps start to unravel some of the stigma, the deep-seated stigma that people have about this thing, which is completely normal. I always tell people abortion has existed as long as pregnancy has existed because people have always needed to terminate pregnancies for health or personal reasons. And so we're trying to get people to stop thinking about this as pro-choice versus pro-life, to stop thinking about this as a political issue that politicians should have any say in and just start thinking about it for what it is, which is a natural and normal part of the reproductive healthcare spectrum.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** You talked last time we spoke, Eesha, about the need for a long-term strategy in a gerrymandered state. How do you keep people engaged in the democratic process and underscore that it is still important for them to cast a vote?

**EESHA PANDIT:** The strategies we've used are to create sort of coalitions that go beyond your traditional coalitions because our power has been diluted. We are required to collaborate and to think intersectionally. So that's one of the long-term strategies, is to be intentional about that. And then of course I think, you know, there was a lot of attention on Texas in the past year, and has been, over the reproductive justice issues and the trans justice issues that we've been seeing. And I think that there's a bit of... The misinformation, disinformation, and disenfranchisement

combination makes us feel disempowered and has made people around the country feel disempowered too. And that's why I'm always so glad that you bring activists who are working on the ground on because it reminds people that there's a very active resistance. And so I think I would also say to folks that don't live in a place where we feel like we're constantly stemming a tide, to find ways to be connected to local organizations and not just national organizations, because that's where you'll get your inspiration and your sort of like, jolts against despair. At least that's how we do it. You know, we have to do that. And so, not to say that there isn't important, big national work happening, but that if you're looking for places to really make an impact, it's our local organizations and our state-based organizations that are doing this very creative intersectional advocacy.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** There's an economics professor at Middlebury in Vermont who recently released a map of just what had changed in terms of abortion access around the country. And that map shows Texas having gone from having, you know, maybe a smidgen of access in the top northwest part where a few clinics survived to having zero, and talks about the number of miles people now have to travel to get needed- again, needed healthcare, abortion in this case. Caroline, coming to you, you said at the top of the program that Texans are still getting abortions. How? And is that in danger?

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** So, Texans are traveling out of state. There are practical support networks that are supporting people as they leave the state to access care, but that can be very expensive and costly and requires taking time off work and childcare that some people cannot afford. And so there are still people accessing, safely self-managing abortion with pills here in Texas in our state.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Although you have a judge right there in Texas who is seeking to assert his authority over that to the entire nation. That case, as I understand it, has been turned back at the district level, but it's clearly aimed for the Supreme Court. Are you worried?

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** Right, exactly. I mean that is a very frustrating case that targets Mifepristone, one of the pills used in a safe medication abortion. It actually, that pill, has a higher safety rating than Tylenol, and this judge is trying to make it so that the entire country cannot access it.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How are transgender youth getting the healthcare they need to the extent that they're getting it without understating the challenges that they and you face?

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** Well, what we're seeing right now is families having to flee. You're looking at parents that have to take days off work. You're looking at having to travel either by plane or long car rides because Texas, to get to a state that can care for your kid. Where is it that

you care about families that you're putting people in a situation, in a recession, where we're seeing record inflation and people are just struggling to put food on the table for their families. Especially within the communities of Black, Indigenous, and people of color. So what does that really look like when we talk about pro-family, pro-life? And I really think it's so just vastly important for people to understand this is medical care that has gone through science, that again and again comes back from reputable, collective, professional organizations of physicians that say this is the best practice care. And at the end of the day, we're talking about a very, very personal decision and relationship and conversation. I can't imagine being younger and literally having this conversation about the most intimate parts of my wellbeing be in the public square. And this is what we're talking about from leadership that claims that they are pro-family, that claims they hate big government intrusion, that claims all of these nonsensical things that they care about kids and they let our kids get massacred in schools. That's where we're at.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What is your message to people outside of Texas about what they need to learn from you all? I mean, let's just do a go-round. Caroline.

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** One thing I always wanna tell people to look to, I think there sometimes is a narrative that young Texans, young people, are not as concerned about maybe the original generation that fought for abortion rights, some of the feminists from the '70s. And I always like to flip that on the script, because like Emmett mentioned, our younger generation is inheriting this world where the cards are completely stacked against them. There's a threat of climate disaster looming. There's a total normalization of their constant safety being called into question with mass shootings. And again, they are facing and navigating some of these really cruel abortion bans. So we've seen young people in this state do so much in response to this, it maybe just doesn't look like traditional advocacy. But we've seen young people help their friends drive across state lines to access care. We saw Olivia Julianna, who's a teenager, calling out anti-abortion extremist Matt Gaetz on Twitter. And through that Twitter exchange, she raised \$700,000 for abortion funds in the process. We've had volunteers host knitting circles to raise money for us. We've seen online activists leave these horrible reviews of those fake crisis pregnancy centers online, so that people know not to go to them. And in Texas we have some amazing mutual aid and abortion fund organizations like Buckle Bunnies, who were founded by 20-year-olds and are completely run by people under 30. So there are just so many young people in this state who are organizing and sort of leading the way, showing other states how to organize against bans.

**EESHA PANDIT:** The thing I would add is like, the need, the moment of the rulings, those are flash points. And I think what people who don't live here can do, and even people who do live here can do is find ways to stay connected beyond those flashpoints. That's what we need. We need sort of boots on the ground, we need people showing up, we need people doing this sort of canvassing work. And then of course I think, you know, one of the things that we really have to

do is make sure that we're paying close attention to the voter suppression efforts that are going on in our state and in other states. I think that's really one of the things we, if you care about any of these issues, you have to pay attention to.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Where the democracy piece comes in.

**EESHA PANDIT:** That's where the democracy piece comes in. Because I think we have this idea that democracy is sort of a static thing and we are now having to reconfigure, and we have been doing this in our state for years, like having to configure that the policies that are passing are not democratically won here. Right? That there's a small minority of people who are making decisions for the majority of us. And our job now is to be really vigilant about our right to vote and make sure that that's part of all of our advocacy.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And Emmett, from you. Learnings from Texas.

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** For me, you know, getting to see young people find their power. Young trans folks like, actually dig their heels into understanding that they're powerful, they are worth listening to. They have great ideas and they understand more than anyone what a mess we are in because they've grown up always having access to information that can tell them what a hot mess they're in. You know, my 23-year-old, literally it's just a unending stream of very depressing information, of news around the world, from climate to student debt to inflation. And at the end of the day, I think that is the clincher, is that now they talk about like, how are they going to continue to interrupt injustice? How are they going to continue to apply their collective effort to wholly rejecting the mess that they're set up to inherit right now? And I think that is one benefit in a very thin sort of like, maybe positive view that you have lit a fire like I've never seen under the asses of these kids. And let me tell you, they will keep coming. Because they got energy like I don't have.

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** Yep.

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** None of us do. We're old.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Yeah. So I'm going to close, I think you've taken us there, Emmett, but with the question we always ask at the end of the program, which is what do you think the story will be that the future tells of now? I think last time we said the story will be that a lot of people wake up to why they should pay more attention to Texas. I don't know, you can't use that answer again, but Eesha, what do you think the story of the future will tell of this moment?

**EESHA PANDIT:** I think it's going to be that young people don't need the argument that intersectionality is the way, they know it. They're living it, they're living it, they're breathing it and they're showing us how to put it into practice.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Emmett?

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** I think in the future when we look back on this, it's going to be shame. It's going to be shame upon the people that are driving this, that are harming children, all while saying out of the side of their mouth they care about children.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And Caroline.

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** I think when people look back on this moment in history, they will see that we were in this late-stage, white, Christian nationalist agenda. That it was homegrown and it's really ours to tackle. Our country bred this, our state, so many things in our state have bred this, and so if we're not making these connections between the book bans, public education, trans rights, abortion, the environment, we're not doing it right. So I think we need to name it now before it's too late because I think when they look back, they're going to be calling it what it is.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** All right. Emphasis on "last stage". Doesn't guarantee that it's not a long stage, but a last stage, I'm with you on that. I appreciate it so much, all of you, thank you so much for being with us once again, and Caroline for joining us for the first time. Let's not make it the last.

**EESHA PANDIT:** Thank you.

**EMMETT SCHELLING:** Thank you.

**CAROLINE DUBLE:** Thanks so much, Laura.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** While our money media, and apparently our human hunt-or-be-hunted brains are more drawn to bad news than to good, there was some good news coming out of state legislatures this session. Take Minnesota. There a Democratic super majority was finally able to codify abortion rights into law and pass legislation improving lives for trans people, voters, tenants and workers, and Michigan's not far behind. At the US Supreme Court in Washington, a majority struck down a fringe legal theory that would've given some very gerrymandered state legislatures entire unfettered control over how election maps are drawn and how elections are held. We are wondering now what happens in North Carolina, the source of the case in question, where we've been following the gerrymander question. And you can find that episode in our archives. Meanwhile, what I'm hearing from Texas is even as fortune favors a prepared mind, so

too does progress, and they, progressives in Texas, are preparing the ground for changes that may be happening underneath. For my full uncut conversation with today's guests, subscribe to our free podcast and stay in touch with us through our website for those full follow-up reports. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious. For the Laura Flanders Show, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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