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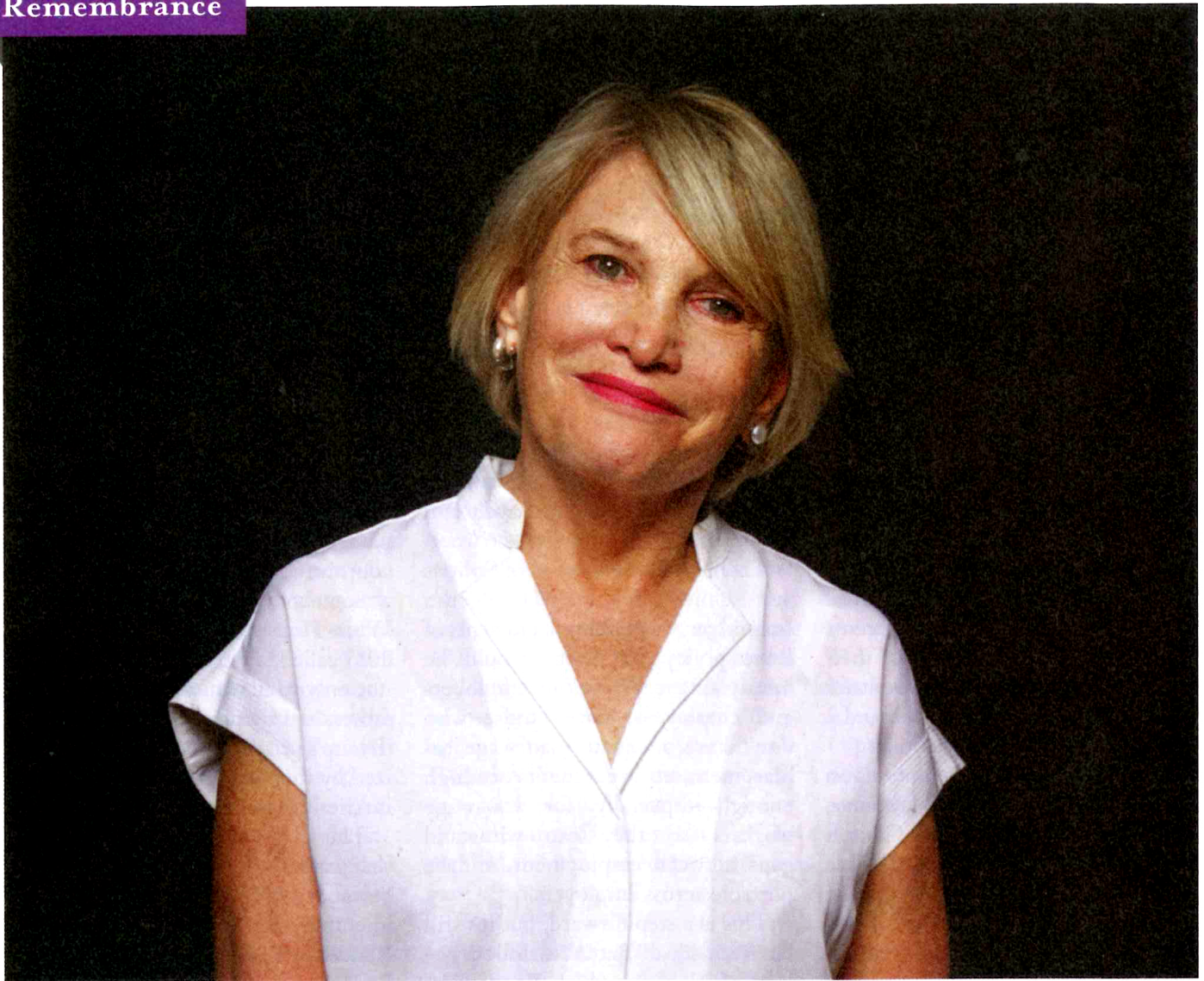
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DISPLAY UNTIL JUNE 27



Janet Benshoof

Brilliant and funny, creative and daring, Benshoof was a women's rights pioneer who changed how the law is used to protect women

BY AKILA RADHAKRISHNAN AND KRISTINA KALLAS

LEGALIZING EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION. Establishing legal protections for abortion under the U.S. Constitution. Securing justice for women raped by the Saddam Hussein regime. Getting abortion recognized as a legal right under international law. These significant advancements were the life's work of one woman: Janet Lee Benshoof, a talented human rights lawyer who died on Dec. 18. In her 70 years, she used her brilliant legal mind to fundamentally change how the law is used to protect women's rights around the world.

As a young woman from humble beginnings in Detroit

Lakes, Minn., Benshoof made her way through Harvard Law School in the early '70s, paying her tuition with money from a summer job at an A&W Root Beer stand. After *Roe v. Wade*, when attacks on reproductive rights were nearly as fierce as they are today, Benshoof served as director of the ACLU's Reproductive Freedom Project, which now has representatives defending abortion rights in every state. In 1992 she founded the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, now the Center for Reproductive Rights, the first organization dedicated solely to litigation and policy for women's reproductive rights. Thirteen years later, she founded the Global Justice

Center, an organization that uses international law to promote human rights and gender equality around the world. Along the way, she received a literal genius award (a MacArthur Fellowship) and was named one the “100 Most Influential Lawyers in America” by the *National Law Journal*.

If her résumé sounds like a mouthful, it was. (And, at last count, it extended 19 pages long.) But her unique imprint on the world goes far beyond what can be listed on a job application. She epitomizes how impossible it is to put women into neat, clean boxes—or any box at all. Her sharp legal mind, her strength, her love of life, her sense of humor and her courage showed through in everything she did.

She was insanely smart and creative. As president of the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy, she researched and found a way to use an FDA administrative procedure to have emergency contraception legalized in the United States. In 1991, Utah passed a criminal law that made providing an abortion a capital crime. At the time, the punishment for capital crimes in Utah still included death by firing squad. In response, Benshoof, with the ACLU, took out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* that said, “In Utah, they know how to punish a woman who has an abortion. Shoot her.” The Utah Legislature later revoked the penalty.

She was fearless and daring. In 1990, she traveled to Guam to lobby against an abortion law that criminalized providing advice and information to women about abortion. Not long after, she called a press conference at the Guam Press Club and told women where they could get an abortion in Hawaii. She was arrested the next day. She went on to sue and ultimately win the case against the law.

She was stylish and beautiful. In the ’80s and ’90s, her colorful power suits were legend. When she strategically had herself arrested that time in Guam, she made sure to wear an orange suit, but one that was far more fashionable than a prison jumpsuit.

She was funny and mischievous. Once at a meeting in the British Parliament on the importance of classifying rape as an illegal tactic of war, a male member of Parliament wanted to know if what she was asking for would make penises illegal. Benshoof immediately, and in a perfect deadpan, replied, “No, penises can still be used for peaceful purposes.” Another time, in an op-ed written in 1998 criticizing the U.S. government for funding Viagra but not birth control, she wrote, “I defy anyone to tell me

that a limp penis is more of a catastrophe than an unwanted pregnancy.”

She was human and she struggled. She suffered from depression, which at times made her incredibly low. She lost two of her closest friends far too early. She took a break from her career to travel the world and discover more about herself before getting started on her final endeavor, the Global Justice Center. There, she pioneered the argument that abortion access is protected care under the Geneva Convention for women raped in war. It was an argument that was not well-received at first, but is now accepted by the United Nations, the European Union and multiple countries.

Most important, Benshoof was true to her values. She mentored and invested in women. The pursuit of women’s equality wasn’t merely an intellectual exercise for her; it was a personal one. Benshoof’s professional life wasn’t just full of legal successes; it was full of generations of women who learned from her and were inspired by her to go out and make the world a better place.

Her mentorship went much further than simply hiring women. It was about setting them up for success. When three of the attorneys at the Center for Reproductive Rights became pregnant at the same time, Benshoof facilitated their return to work, allowing them to convert an office into a nursery, hire a nanny and bring their babies to work with them.

Speaking personally, Benshoof fostered our growth as lawyers, molding us into good ones. She made us believe in our cause and in ourselves. It was fun. There was an incredible amount of laughter, outrage at the insanity of how this world treats women, and time off to swim in mountain creeks and drink white wine spritzers. She gave us free rein to think creatively and boldly. She gave us the tools we needed, then let us think up innovative ways to challenge abortion restrictions as violations of free speech. That freedom allowed us to do important work that reached the highest levels of the U.N., the White House and policymakers around the world.

She led her generation and trained ours. Her light dimmed out far too early, but we’ll follow by example. We are going to be in the trenches. We are going to carry each other. For Benshoof, ourselves and the next generation. ■

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