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Alumni Profiles

BULLY PULPIT

Lisa Bloch Rodwin '85 sends a message on 'Oprah'

As chief of the Erie County district attorney's domestic violence bureau in Buffalo, Lisa Bloch Rodwin '85 is used to speaking in front of a courtroom. But in two highly rated *Oprah Winfrey Show* appearances in May and another in November, Rodwin found her biggest audience yet – and used it to help victims of domestic violence craft a plan to find safety.

Rodwin went on the May 8 show with Susan Still, a complainant whose case became one of the most-publicized domestic violence cases in America. Still was repeatedly victimized by husband Ulner Lee Still, and had his adolescent son videotape a 50-minute assault. Rodwin's prosecution led to a 36-year felony sentence for the perpetrator.

The television appearance was the opposite of the prosecutor's usual methodical case preparation. "Oprah wants spontaneity," Rodwin says. "Her producers told me the topic, but none of the questions – which makes it more nerve-wracking.

"Her whole focus was not on exploiting or sensationalizing one family's tragedy, but using Susan's experience to reach out to women and families across the country. The theme was, this is the day you plan your escape."

Susan Still told her story, and excerpts from the videotape were shown. Then Rodwin listed some points of information for viewers facing a similar situation. "I was told that I had three to five minutes to tell everything that needs to be known for victims of family violence," she says, "both before they leave and after they leave."

Things move quickly in television – and it is a different world from her utilitarian life as a county prosecutor. "We got the royal treatment," Rodwin says. "They made all the travel plans for both of us, as well as my husband and son, who were in the audience. They put us up in a five-star hotel

suite and picked us up in a limo."

And looking good, of course, is Job One. Before traveling to Chicago for the taping, Rodwin had "spent a small fortune on TV makeup" and got her hair cut and styled. On the morning of the taping, she got up early and did her own makeup – only to have the show's makeup artist wipe it off and start all over. The *Oprah* hairdresser, too, had other ideas; "She pulled out a flatiron and said to me, 'There are no curls on TV.'" Rodwin ended up with straight hair, uncharacteristic for her.

Then it was showtime, an experience like no other, Rodwin says. A warm-up person "gets the crowd in an almost frenzied state," she says, and the audience just exploded when the charismatic host took the stage. It is a small auditorium, maybe 150 seats, to encourage a feeling of intimacy, and Winfrey talks to the audience during commercial breaks. "She clearly, honestly cares about her viewers and her guests," Rodwin says. "But she is not warm and fuzzy. She is not a hugger. She is just totally in control of every moment."

Sometimes Winfrey surprises her studio audience with gifts, often placed under their seats. For this emotional show, everyone got tissues.

"It is a message that I have spent my career trying to get out there," Rodwin says. "I felt honored to be the one who was chosen to deliver this message, that there are choices and that the system is there to help. I loved it, and the producers were thrilled."

So much so that she and Still were invited back for a second show, which aired May 23. Separately, she also took part in

ABC News' *20/20* newsmagazine show with Diane Sawyer, a "much more structured" experience that involved film crews coming to Buffalo three times over the course of a year.

It was a month to remember – in between her two *Oprah* appearances, Rodwin was in Erie County Court, successfully prosecuting a highly emotional two-week case against a man accused of spousal rape. She had just arrived in Chicago for the second appearance when the call came that the accused was guilty – and the victim was on the phone to thank Rodwin for believing her story. "I am standing there in the middle of Midway Airport, crying," Rodwin says. "Other than studying for the bar, May was the most stressful month I have ever lived through."

Her Nov. 7 return to the show came in the context of that spousal rape conviction. Appearing after a series of women told Winfrey about their experiences of being raped by their husbands, Rodwin brought a prosecutor's viewpoint to the common misconception by victims, "Maybe I brought it on myself."

"The bottom line is, if someone is forcing you to have sex, it is rape. It does not matter if you are wearing a wedding ring," the prosecutor told Winfrey. She emphasized the importance of victims' finding a safe place, telling someone what has happened and going to a hospital for documentation of their injuries. The latter, she said, is to counter the usual defense in such cases, which is that the sex was consensual.

Every U.S. state, Rodwin said, now has on its books a statute acknowledging marital rape as a crime.



Oprah Winfrey



ONE-STOP JUSTICE

"A partnership unlike any other" is up and running in downtown Buffalo, serving families shattered by domestic violence and offering a way out for those who live in fear.

The Family Justice Center of Erie County has served more than 1,000 families since its opening last year, says Lisa Bloch Rodwin '85, who wrote the application which won a U.S. Department of Justice grant that made the project possible.

It is, she says, a triumph of community service over self-interest.

"Everybody had to get past all these turf issues and say, what can we do for people at risk?" Rodwin says. "This is the culmination of everything that all of us in this community have done."

Services at the Family Justice Center are free, and the center's client-friendly, client-centered focus ensures that those who come seeking help are treated with privacy and dignity. Rodwin says clients call the shots, choosing from an array of helpers: social workers, medical personnel, police and district attorney representatives, spiritual advisers, and advisers on work skills training, to name a few. The University at Buffalo is represented by its Law School and the School of Social Work.

A forensic medical unit on site at the center, 237 Main St., can provide some treatment and document injuries with high-resolution digital photos for use in criminal proceedings. There is even translation available for 110 languages.

Rodwin is proud that since the center opened, Erie County has not recorded a single family violence homicide.

Publicizing the center is an ongoing effort. One innovative initiative, sponsored by Zonta International, is called Behind Closed Doors. Posters are being put up inside the stalls in women's restrooms throughout the area, such as in grocery stores, health care clinics and movie theaters.

Lisa Bloch
Rodwin '85