



# Legatus<sup>®</sup> MAGAZINE

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## *Living legends*

Pro-life pioneers  
*Dr. Jack & Barbara Willke*

*second annual  
pro-life issue*

The pro-life movement's **9/11**

*Life & death in D.C.*  
2009 Legatus  
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# living legends

*by Sabrina Arena Ferrisi*

## Dr. Jack and Barbara Willke: Pro-life pioneers

Bradley Mattes will never forget how he first heard about Dr. Jack Willke and his wife Barbara.

“I did a report on the right to life my senior year in public high school in 1975,” said Mattes, executive director of Life Issues Institute. “During my research, I came across a presentation created by Dr. Willke with slides on fetal development.”

Willke’s presentation was the first of its kind in the nation. He had made it available for public use.

Prior to Mattes’ presentation, he polled his senior class: half were pro-life. After the presentation, the vote was unanimous: 100% of the class raised their hands for life.

## Humble beginnings

Jack and Barbara Willke, Legatus members from Cincinnati, are known to almost everyone in the U.S. right-to-life movement. Married for 61 years, the couple didn't purposely set out to become pro-life leaders and educators. When they met, their greatest dreams were to become a family doctor and a nurse, respectively.

Jack, 84, and Barbara, 86, were married in 1948. They had six children — one of whom is adopted. Jack became a family doctor, and Barbara left a nursing career to take care of the children.

In the late 1950s, the Willkes began speaking on the issue of parenthood at local pre-Cana conferences. Audiences responded well to them, and they were soon asked to speak on all aspects of marriage — including sexuality and how to speak to children about sex.

“We were basically stumbling through this area ourselves, but we decided to research the topic and give a talk in a church hall,” Jack recalled. “We thought it would only be a few people. When we got there, the place was packed.”

The Willkes became expert public speakers as a husband-and-wife team. They developed a style which worked well: one stand-up microphone and no notes. One would start a thought and let the other finish. There was a constant back-and-forth between the two, and audiences loved them.

Before long they were asked to write a book on sex education for children. They had stopped at a restaurant to get a bite to eat. While there, Jack turned over his placemat and wrote a rough outline of the book. They self-published the book and sent copies to Catholic and evangelical magazines. It sold 250,000 copies.

“We were able to pay off our mortgage with that book!” quipped Jack.

## The abortion issue

During a 1970 speaking engagement on sex education, the couple met Fr. Paul Marx who asked them, “What are you doing on abortion?”

Jack and Barbara froze.

“Well, nothing,” they answered.

Father Marx encouraged them to protect the unborn or the values they were fighting for would be swallowed up. Father Marx went on to found Human Life International, the Population Research Institute and the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute.

Though the Willkes initially declined Fr. Marx's suggestion, they began to see that things were changing rapidly. Colorado had already passed a law back in 1967 allowing abortion under narrow circumstances. New York passed a law in 1970 that made abortion available on demand. Alaska, Hawaii, Washington and Florida soon followed.



When the Willkes saw groups in Ohio pressing for the legalization of abortion in 1970, they realized the urgency of protecting the unborn. They began to speak in as many local Catholic high schools as they could. They urged students to write letters to their state representatives — and the students responded with 12,000 letters.

At the insistence of their daughters, the Willkes wrote *Handbook on Abortion* in a question-and-answer format in 1971.

“They were coming home from Notre Dame University, and telling us how their professors did not know how to answer questions on abortion,” Barbara explained. “We knew more than the professors did at that point.”

The *Handbook* would become the unofficial “bible” of the pro-life movement for decades. Then in 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion throughout the nation with *Roe v. Wade*.

“We were dumbfounded,” said Barbara. “It was a shock to us.”

The ruling galvanized the Willkes' efforts.

Jack served as the head of Ohio Right to Life from 1975-1980 before becoming head of National Right to Life, which he led from 1980-1991. He founded the International Right to Life Federation. Through the IRLF, Jack and Barbara have lectured in 83 countries. Jack is also president of Life Issues Institute, an educational foundation headquartered in Cincinnati.

Over the years, the Willkes co-authored 14 books and contributed to 16 others. Their works have been published in 32 languages. They are writing a new volume — a history of the U.S. pro-life movement.

“Dr. Willke has been a mentor for me — especially when it comes to dealing with the press,” said Peggy Hartshorn, president of Heartbeat International and member of Legatus' Board of Governors. “He told me, ‘They will try to twist whatever you say, so keep it to one message: Human life begins at conception, and abortion takes a human life.’ This was a very valuable lesson for me.”

“In the early years, they had such authority because he was a doctor and she a nurse,” said Hartshorn. “They lectured on the complete picture regarding abortion. The solution to the whole situation rests with living out human sexuality within the context of marriage. Women today misunderstand the connection between sexual intimacy, child-rearing and marriage.”

She noted that the Willkes have been an inspiration not just for their work, but also for their family life.

“They did not just talk the talk. They walked the walk, and they have done it as a couple.”

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) — a pro-life champion in Congress — and his wife Marie met while doing pro-life work in college. They, too, used the Willkes' presentation while giving talks to high schools students.

“The issue of abortion was the No. 1 issue which brought Chris into politics,” said Marie Smith, director of the Parliamentary Network for Critical Issues, a pro-life organization. “We have often turned to Dr. Willke for advice through the years. He and Barbara have always been a source of solid information.”

“They have given much to the movement,” Smith said, “and they have saved many lives.” **LM**

*Sabrina Arena Ferrisi is a staff writer for Legatus Magazine.*



# in. their own words

When Dr. Jack Willke and his wife Barbara look back through nearly four decades of pro-life activism, they see how the movement and the message have matured.

**Cardinal  
John J.  
O'Connor  
Pro-Life  
Award**

**2008**  
Dr. John Haas  
Molly Kelly  
Janet Morana

**2007**  
Chris & Joan Bell  
Denise Cocciolone  
Sisters of Life  
Sr. Paula Vandegaer

**2006**  
Joan Byrum  
Peggy Hartshorn  
Thomas W. Hilgers, MD  
Jerry Horn  
James Hughes  
Dr. Bernard Nathanson

**2005**  
James Bopp Jr.  
Fr. Thomas Euteneuer  
Karen Garnett  
Magaly Llaguno  
Barbara Lyons  
Germaine Wensley

“In the 1970s, it was our job to show and tell people that this is a baby, abortion kills a baby and, therefore, you should oppose abortion,” he said. “In the late ’80s and ’90s, the message became: There are two people involved in an abortion. Why can’t we love them both? In the late ’90s and 2000s, we began to see thousands of women coming forward to testify that abortion hurt them and that they regretted it. This strikes at the propaganda that abortion helps women.”

With regard to the role of the Church, the Willkes believe it should be even stronger on the right to life.

“The Church did not come down hard in the beginning, but it has gotten clearer in recent years,” Jack explained. “In the recent election, 100 bishops stood up and said that this was the most important issue. We now have bishops who will not give communion to pro-abortion politicians, but others are on the fence. If every bishop would stand up and say, ‘I will talk to you personally, but I will not give you communion,’ it would be a revolution.”

The Willkes bemoan the fact that some priests are reluctant to speak about abortion from the pulpit.

“Part of the reasoning is because they feel like it is condemning women,” Barbara said. “But they must speak about the forgiveness of God. It is a real shame that women do not know about this. They need to hear it. They need to hear from other post-abortive women, too.”

The secular media has never been reliable when it comes to the pro-life movement. The Willkes noted that this is especially evident on the embryonic stem cell debate.

“The media has so distorted it,” Jack explained. “Anytime that progress has been made, they never clarify that it is adult stem cells. Embryonic stem cell research has been with us for 10 years. There have been no cures, only tumors. Adult stem cells have yielded 70 treatments. The day will come when the embryonic stem cell research debate is just history.”

When asked whether abortion will ever end, the Willkes look to some hopeful signs.

“Abortion contains the seeds of its own destruction,” Barbara said. “When a teenager tells her mother, ‘I want to have an abortion,’ she may hear her mom say, ‘I had one 20 years ago. Don’t do it. I went through hell.’ Or her friends may tell her that their experience was bad. Abortion is now down 60% among teenagers.”

“Another change is demographic,” Jack said. “Nowadays, pro-abortion couples have one child. Pro-life couples have at least two or three. We see more and more pro-life student groups on secular campuses. There has been a turn-around.”

As for the future, they hope abortion will go the way of slavery.

“The way ahead is not easy,” he said. “Abortion is so evil that it can’t continue forever. Will our nation live long enough to see a change? We hope so. We probably won’t see it in our lifetime, but we think our children will.” **LM**

—Sabrina Arena Ferrisi



**2004**  
Dr. Theresa Burke  
Mark Crutcher  
Nellie Gray  
Fr. Frank Pavone  
Austin Ruse

**2003**  
Sal Bando  
Bishop Victor Galeone  
Sen. Rick Santorum  
Joseph Scheidler  
Phyllis Schlafly  
**Dr. & Mrs.  
John Willke**

**2002**  
Judie Brown  
Sam Brownback  
Greg Cunningham  
Fr. Paul Marx  
Colleen Parro  
Deby Schlappizzi

**2001**  
Rep. Henry Hyde

