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GRACE NOTES



Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the renowned sex therapist who became enormously popular through her frank discussions and advice, turns 90 on Monday.

By James Barron

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Dr. Ruth Westheimer was talking about [the recent royal wedding](#) — not about Prince Harry or Meghan Markle, but about the woman in the lime-green dress, Queen Elizabeth II.

“I was going to say she’s old, but I am older,” Dr. Westheimer said. Actually, no. The queen is two years, one month and 15 days older than

Dr. Westheimer, who turns 90 on Monday and is in talks for a return to television. But the point she wanted to make did not hinge on exactness.

“I didn’t see her smile,” Dr. Westheimer said. Always the therapist, she offered advice: “Somebody should have talked to the queen — look happy so others can rejoice even if you disagree.” Of course Dr. Westheimer would have been happy to have been that somebody. “If I were there, I’d have made her smile,” she said. “How wonderful is this — how wonderful that she is still alive to experience change in the British Empire, when a divorced biracial woman can marry a prince.”

Dr. Westheimer is still the 4-foot-7-inch dynamo who published her autobiography 30 years ago, when she was only 59 — one review was headlined “The Long Life of a Short Woman.” She has just published another autobiography, this one illustrated, like a graphic novel. So 90 seemed an appropriate moment to ask: What have you learned along the way?

“Oooh, how much time do you have?” she chirped in the idiosyncratic voice that a long-ago listener described as “Grandma Freud.” She continued: “How fast do I have to talk? It’s an important question.”

For a moment, before the conversation turned into a whirlwind account of what she is up to these days, she took stock. “Not only was I one of the first to talk about matters of sexuality, but the timing,” she said. “When I started the radio program in 1981, not many people were talking about sexuality. Not many people were talking about AIDS or HIV. I said you have to use condoms and know with whom you go to bed.”

That was not all she said on the air, of course. “Words like ‘erectile dysfunction’ and ‘vagina’ don’t exactly slip off the tongue,” [Vanity Fair said in 2009](#), when it named her one of “12 women who changed the way we look at sex,” but Dr. Westheimer “had a way of talking about them that felt natural even soothing.” Vanity Fair also said she used her clinical training and “sassy attitude to create the first widespread outlet for anonymous, prompt, trustworthy sex advice.”

This was in the early 1980s, before Viagra — and before commercials for Viagra and its competitors. Dr. Westheimer preached stimulation and satisfaction, and soon she was a celebrity.

But now there is a problem. “There is an age that does not know me,” she said last week.

So, another television show, for another generation. She said the format would be to go to college campuses and tape episodes with a younger co-host. She would not say where the program would be carried because the contract had not been signed. She did say the producers had initially wanted a woman as the co-host. “I said, ‘No, give me a man,’” she said. “I will let him talk, too — I will discipline myself.”

She has other travel plans besides the colleges: a cruise on the [Queen Mary 2](#), to Canada, giving lectures to other passengers. She has done cruises before, and has always insisted on a behind-the-scenes session with the crew.

“Usually when I go on the boat, I ask the captain to read questions to me,” she said. “The last time, the captain was British, very tall, and had to say ‘orgasm’ and ‘erection.’ Never did they think they would hear the captain talk about the things we were talking about.” This time around, she said, she hoped the captain would have time. “If not, I will take the second-in-command.”

Then there are the new books, both written with Pierre A. Lehu, a friend who has been an adviser since 1981. (“She gave me a title long ago: minister of communications,” he said.) Besides the illustrated autobiography, there is “Stay or Go: Dr. Ruth’s Rules for Real Relationships.”

“Anybody who’s in a good relationship, don’t buy this book,” she said.

That does not sound like a marketing plan that would go over well with the publisher, Amazon Books. She is not worried. “I don’t check with them,” she said.

A documentary is also in the works. The film crew will attend her birthday party on Monday night, taping reminiscences from the 400 friends she has invited. It will be held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in Lower Manhattan. She is a board member, and when she raises money for the museum, she has a unique pitch. She tells donors, “You get good sex for the rest of your life.”

The humor is disarming, as her humor has always been, but not disarming enough to mask a basic fact of her identity: Before she was “Dr. Ruth,” she was a German-Jewish refugee. She describes herself as “an orphan of the Holocaust, not a victim.”

“I do not call myself a survivor,” she said. “My parents sent me to Switzerland on a Kindertransport.” Her father had been taken away by the Gestapo; after World War II, she learned that her parents had been killed in the Holocaust, possibly at Auschwitz. She emigrated to Palestine, joined the paramilitary group Haganah and was wounded in an explosion.

She retraced her life there a couple of weeks ago with the documentary crew in tow. The cameras were rolling as she assembled a rifle like the one she learned to shoot. But there is a difference now. “Because of Columbine, I would never touch a gun again,” she said.

The cameras also followed her to Haifa, where she visited her first boyfriend. She had known him in Switzerland.

“He was smarter than me,” she said. “Because he was a boy, he was allowed to study in high school.”

This is described in the illustrated autobiography. She said the dormitories in Switzerland had a strict lights-out policy. “But there was light in the stairwell,” she said, so he would pass his books to her. She would sneak into the stairwell and read.

She was in Israel last month when the United States Embassy in Jerusalem was dedicated. “I decided not to go,” she said. “I am not doing politics. I talk about sex from morning till night. People like me have to stay away from politics.”

So, for a moment, let us return to stocktaking at 90.

“I saved some lives by saying don’t have one-night stands,” she said. “I’m the same. I’m old-fashioned. I’m still talking about relationships. I’m still saying be careful. Young people don’t see anybody die nowadays, but I say the same to them. They think they can have one-night stands.”

And there was one more thing about the royal wedding, about the bride and groom.

“I’m sure they’re having a good sex life,” she said. “She has had sex before, she found Prince Charming and captured him. They don’t need Dr. Ruth.”