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### Statement of Paxton Smith

I am honored to be here this weekend to celebrate Gloria's 80th birthday. I look up to Gloria as a role model for her pioneering in feminism and the fight for women's rights. It's difficult to challenge the rules, or more so, the roles put in place by society for people to follow, but the world is changing and growing. Gloria has been a leader in that growth. I first heard about Gloria when researching potential collaborators for a book I'm working on. I'm now very excited to say that Gloria, myself, and several other amazing women will be co-authoring that book: *A War on My Body; A War on My Rights*. The book will come out on January 22, 2022, on the 49th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling. All of the proceeds will go to The Afiya Center<sup>1</sup>. This book will share the stories of so many women who haven't been able to speak out or who feel like their voices haven't been heard. We hope that this book will be able to provide perspective on just how deeply affected the people of this nation will be by lack of access to their reproductive rights (reproductive justice).

Currently, women's health care is under threat across the nation. I used my valedictory address to confront one of the most recent and most restrictive abortion bans in the country. This ban, also known as the Heartbeat Bill in Texas, bans abortions after six weeks of pregnancy. Most women don't realize they are pregnant by six weeks, and so before a woman has the chance to decide if she is

willing or capable of having a child, the decision is made for her by politicians. The decision to carry out a full-term pregnancy will impact the rest of a pregnant person's life and like any other life-changing decision, the only person who should have the final say is the person it affects. It is incredibly dehumanizing that the government is working to take that choice away from the millions of women in this country. What we choose to do with our bodies, and furthermore what we choose to do with our lives should be solely up to us. My heart breaks that Texas and other state governments have decided to ignore the 60% majority support of abortion in America, and actively attempt to restrict or ban access to the procedure.

I could not in good conscience, give up my platform as valedictorian to address anything other than that, and I will continue to speak out until abortion is not only legal but accessible to everyone, regardless of a person's skin color or income bracket. I hope to continue to speak across the nation, testify in front of legislatures, and bring this topic to the forefront of public opinion.

I am a human being and I deserve human rights.

PAXTON SMITH

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<sup>1</sup> Serves Black women and girls by transforming their relationship with their sexual and reproductive health through addressing the consequences of reproduction oppression.

- <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/overview-abortion-laws>
- <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/05/06/about-six-in-ten-americans-say-abortion-should-be-legal-in-all-or-most-cases/>