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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily Wilson is a radio and print reporter based in San Francisco. She has done stories for dozens of media outlets including NPR, KQED-FM, Agence France-Presse, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Edutopia* and *Alternet*. She also teaches English and math to adults working on getting a GED or high school diploma at City College of San Francisco.

WMC Exclusive

Congresswoman Barbara Lee—a Rebel Inside the House

by Emily Wilson

Now in her sixth full term in the House of Representatives, the congresswoman holds to her radical roots, explaining in her new book just how mainstream those revolutionary programs have become. Currently chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, she spoke to author Emily Wilson of her need to define herself.

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Barbara Lee, the Democratic Congresswoman who represents California's 9th district, which includes Oakland and Berkeley, gained national attention when she cast the only opposing vote to a resolution authorizing then President Bush to use "all necessary and appropriate force" against anyone associated with the terrorist attacks of September 11. This vote won her both praise and death threats.

In her new book, *Renegade for Peace and Justice: Congresswoman Barbara Lee Speaks For Me*, Lee writes about that vote and how many of her friends, including current Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, tried to talk her out of it. But the book doesn't just focus on her political life. She tells the story of growing up in segregated El Paso, moving to California, fighting to be the first African American cheerleader at San Fernando High School, her secret marriage after getting pregnant as a teenager, her miscarriage, an abortion in Mexico, and an abusive husband.



Many of these, particularly the abortion, were not easy to write about, Lee says. But she says she wanted to inspire others who are going through hard times, as well as to present her side after that controversial vote.

"One of the reasons to write this book is to define myself because I didn't know who the Rush Limbaughs of the world were talking about—they called me a traitor, unpatriotic, all kinds of horrible things."

Lee writes in her book that she knew nothing about sex growing up and she now champions comprehensive sex education because she wants teenagers to be more informed than she was.



“We have to get rid of this abstinence only policy,” Lee says. “The Bush Administration implemented a policy that said federal funds would not be allowed in our schools unless they were to teach abstinence only and we’ve seen that it just hasn’t worked.”

Lee has also pushed for legislation to help woman who have been abused by their husbands and boyfriends. In her book she writes about the cycle of abuse in her own family, where her mother and grandmother were battered wives. Children who grow up seeing women beaten grow comfortable with it, Lee says. Her second husband was a violent man whose abuse took bizarre forms such as forcing her to take LSD.

Lee writes fondly about Mills College, a women’s college in Oakland where she met her mentor Shirley Chisholm and worked on Chisholm’s 1972 presidential campaign. Lee attended Mills after leaving her abusive husband, when she was on public assistance and taking care of her two little boys from her first marriage. Lee thinks Mills gave her much more than an excellent academic education.

“They provided the support I needed to be able to raise my kids,” Lee says. “Sometimes I had to bring them to class with me. They should know statistics better than myself because they took the whole statistics course with me. A women’s college understood that. They knew I was struggling.”

While she was at Mills, Lee became very involved with the Black Panther Party, though she never became a member. She became friends with both of the founders of the party, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, and she writes about playing cards all night with Seale and talking about classical music with Newton. Both of them also worked on Chisholm’s presidential campaign. The Panthers’ commitment to social justice was what drew her to them, she says.

“That’s where free breakfast programs started and now it’s a national law,” she says. “There was nothing in our country with regards to sickle cell anemia and testing for African Americans. The Black Panther party with the George Jackson Clinic began that.”

Lee studied to be a social worker at Mills and accomplished a goal of opening a mental health clinic in Oakland called CHANGE. Working with people at the clinic is part of what led her to a political life.

“I saw many patients who were depressed, schizophrenic, paranoid—there were serious mental issues,” she says. “A lot of those issues had to do with economics. They had to do with policies. A lot of the women didn’t have day care. A lot of people didn’t have jobs.”

Now the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Lee says she is still focusing on economic issues among poor people.

“We’re looking at how the black community has the highest percentage of poverty rates, and we’re trying to close some of these what I call moral gaps,” she says. “It’s unethical and horrible that we have so many young African American males dropping out of school. It’s immoral that we have a prison system that incarcerates more African American men than [served by] an education system that lifts them up and provides the best education so they can stay out of jail and move forward with their lives.”

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