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Changing the Tone

The Roberts family makes immediate impact.

Well before Senate Judiciary Committee hearings even begin on the nomination of John Roberts to sit on the Supreme Court, one thing is clear about his impact on abortion in America. And it has little to do with the president's nominee himself — at least with anything he has done in his professional life.

As the D.C. chattering class tries to latch on to any and all evidence they can find as to what John Roberts's position on abortion may be, his nomination has raised the profile of a group called Feminists for Life (FFL). And that's a healthy thing for everyone.

The Supreme Court nominee's wife, Jane Sullivan Roberts, has served as a legal counsel to the group and as its executive vice president.

Debates over abortion — whether in the Senate or at your house tonight — are infamously impossible. When you're cautioned against not talking about religion or politics at the dinner table, your hosts probably mean abortion especially, which, of course, fits in both categories — religion and politics — *guaranteeing* indigestion.

But rather than have the same old conversations, using the tried and often failed strategies, Feminists for Life starts at a point that jars you because it's so different than the usual.

Feminists for Life's mantra is "Women Deserve Better." Is pregnancy always ideal? Does it always come at the right time? In the right way? Of course not. But that doesn't mean that abortion is good — and they'll say that. It also doesn't mean that abortion is a woman's (or girl's) only option — and FFL will get the word out about alternatives to every scared or stressed parent they can. These are FFL's messages. No aborted-fetus placards. No yelling. They go the stylin' t-shirt and caring counseling routes instead. They even have a bumper sticker that says "Peace Begins in the Womb." It gets your attention, in a thoughtful, clever kind of way.

These are no small things, especially when even liberal feminist Hillary Clinton has to concede — to the cringes of her base — that reducing abortions should be a goal. August's *Glamour* magazine reports on "the mysterious disappearance of young pro-choice women." It's not so mysterious, really. *Glamour's* piece concludes that the decrease in 20-somethings' support for abortion comes down to "young women don't know how good they have it." Last year's crass, rabid abortion-advocacy march on Washington aside, I'd rather like to think that gals can think for themselves and know enough about the world to realize that abortion isn't a great thing — and that there are other options. And I'd bet a lot of all our conversations — the real heart-to-hearts — reflect that. Feminists for Life is a group that will make a whole lot of sense to the people Hillary is hoping to reach (her voting record aside) — because Feminists for Life just makes sense.

The group has been around since 1972, and have gotten some press time here and there in large part thanks to the efforts on college campuses and in Washington from the group's energetic head Serrin Foster (she makes the feminist case against abortion at the likes of Berkeley, Harvard, and Wellesley) and its celebrity boosters Patricia Heaton (Deborah on *Everybody Loves Raymond*) and Margaret Colin (Jeff Goldblum's ex in *Independence Day*). But until now, their message has been largely under the mainstream radar.

When Heaton won her first "Outstanding Lead Actress In A Comedy Series" Emmy in 2000 for *Everybody Loves Raymond*, she thanked her mother for "letting me out because life is really amazing." That's the kind of honest, happy enthusiasm FFL brings to the "pro-life" cause and the abortion debate in America. Just a genuine love for life and desire to get us all protecting it. One of Heaton's FFL sound bites is: "women who experience an unplanned pregnancy also deserve unplanned joy." FFL's attitude is that women — especially frightened, anxious women — deserve to know that. The ad I see most from Feminists for Life reads: "Abortion is a reflection that we have not met the needs of women. Women deserve better than abortion." Every life involved in an abortion, including the baby, the mother and the father, is precious — and Feminists for Life is working toward a more complete conversation about abortion and its inhumanity.

In the summer of 2005 — the "Summer of Justice" some of us Bush supporters are hoping it will turn out to be — Feminists for Life is suddenly everywhere. Whether John Roberts is confirmed (he will be confirmed) or ever rules on an abortion decision (expect it), he would have still made a positive impact on the abortion debate in America simply by his association with his wife.

While abortion-advocacy groups will spend the coming weeks trying to strike fear in the hearts of Americans over the prospect of a plausibly pro-life judge on the Supreme Court, the not-so-sidebar story is that Feminists for Life now has a higher profile — a calm and caring one — one that has real potential to resonate with Americans who have no interest in screaming about abortion. Feminists for Life has the civil, compassionate alternative to dead-end debates. The Roberts family has already made history.

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— Kathryn Jean Lopez is the editor of National Review Online. Full disclosure: She got a nod from Feminists for Life in 2003.