



Dr. Ruth Westheimer; original portrait by Rachel Joanis

## Remembering DR. RUTH

The iconic sex therapist who believed that no topic was off-limits.

By: Elizabeth Andrews \_\_\_\_\_

At our recent Minerva Summit, we gathered to address many challenging topics on the gap between the onset of declining health and the end of life. We believe that providing a space for these conversations truly makes all the difference, and through open discussions, we explored issues around long-term care, financial and philanthropic planning, and the importance of maintaining strong personal relationships. Throughout the day, we made room for these essential yet often uncomfortable conversations. In this spirit, we honour Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the iconic sex therapist who challenged the status quo. She firmly believed that, when approached properly and with grace, no topic is off-limits. In her 50s, when many women were expected to fade into the background, Westheimer stepped directly into the spotlight. For decades, she made her voice heard—through her groundbreaking radio and TV shows, countless television appearances, and the many books she authored.

In 1980, sex talk went mainstream in the United States thanks to a little-known, 52-year-old sex therapist with a blonde bouffant, a warm smile, and a diminutive 4'7" frame. That year, Ruth Westheimer launched her radio call-in show *Sexually Speaking* on WNBC in New York. What began as a 15-minute segment airing at midnight on Sundays became a sensation that captivated its audience for an entire decade.<sup>1</sup>

Listeners tuned in as Dr. Ruth gave candid, no-holds-barred advice on sex. Her approach-

able demeanour allowed her to discuss topics in a way that others could not—or dared not. Her casual discussions about sex and contraception were rare for the time, as these topics were seldom broached in public, let alone broadcast on the radio. With an affable delivery and German-accented voice—likened by one journalist as “a cross between Henry Kissinger and Minnie Mouse”—she kept her audience captivated. She continued to gain popularity in the ’80s, becoming a mononymous cultural icon.

### Shattering the Status Quo

Westheimer’s career was groundbreaking, particularly in how it challenged the prevailing norms of her time. In the late ’70s and early ’80s, female sexuality—especially for older women—was largely absent from the public discourse. Desirability was often linked to youthfulness, conformity, and physical perfection filtered through the male gaze. In her 1972 essay, “The Double Standard of Aging,” Susan Sontag paints a bleak picture of such limitations, writing that “women’s sexual validity depends, up to a certain point, on how well they conform to the youthful ideal.”<sup>2</sup> In mainstream media, sexuality was synonymous with young bombshells. In 1976, Farrah Fawcett may have been the epitome of beauty standards. With her red swimsuit poster—one of the best-selling of all time—plastered on walls across the United States and beyond, Fawcett embodied the “all-American” beauty ideals of the era: a woman in her 20s with big blonde hair, broad white teeth, and a slim figure.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, women like Westheimer—mothers, women in their 50s and beyond—were rarely depicted as sexual beings. They were often desexualized and relegated to the roles of mother or grandmother, where their sexuality was either ignored, played up for laughs, or portrayed as predatory. (Think of *The Graduate*: “Mrs. Robinson, you’re trying to seduce me. Aren’t you?”).

By openly discussing sexuality for women of all ages and challenging the outdated and restrictive idea that sexual vitality disappears with age, Westheimer fought convention, bringing a radical and refreshing perspective.

### “Everything can be talked about”

After her radio success, exciting new opportunities came Westheimer’s way, from the Tri-State airwaves to a much broader audience. In 1983, she applied her no-nonsense approach and playful humour to *Ruth’s Guide to Good Sex*, the first of dozens of books she would go on to write. She also became a staple on the late-night talk show circuit. During her first appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, after a few uncomfortable snickers from the audience, she leaned toward Carson and said: “If you do it in good taste and you do it properly, everything can be talked about. Everything.” With her candour came even greater visibility. She would go on to host her own TV show, *The Dr. Ruth Show*, which began airing in 1984. Dr. Ruth Westheimer’s openness was matched by her ability to connect and converse with anyone—from Joan Rivers and Burt Reynolds to Gene Simmons and Howard Stern. In a pre-sitcom-fame conversation with comedian Jerry Seinfeld, he told her, “You have changed sex in America.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Westheimer was her ability to overcome the unimaginable circumstances of her childhood. In 1939, at just 10 years old, she was sent from Germany to a children’s home in Switzerland to flee the war. She never saw her family again. Still, in a 2012 interview with *The Guardian*, she recalled the care and adoration she received in her early childhood: “I was in a household with two loving parents and an adoring grandmother who spoiled me.”<sup>5</sup> It seems that the seeds of her future career as a radio host were also planted during this time.

“My mother was a very quiet woman and people say that she didn’t get much of a chance to talk because my grandmother and I talked so much.”

In the same interview, Westheimer shared the tragic experience of not knowing her parents’ fate as their letters stopped coming. She reflected on the strength she drew from being an orphan of the Holocaust: “I was left with a feeling that because I was not killed by the Nazis—because I survived—I had an obligation to make a dent in the world. What I didn’t know was that that dent would end up being me talking about sex from morning to night.”<sup>6</sup>

After escaping the Holocaust and earning a master’s in sociology and a degree in psychology, she took a research position at Planned Parenthood in 1960s Harlem. This experience would inspire her to study sexuality, using the data on the women she worked with for her doctorate dissertation.<sup>7</sup>

### Lifelong Advocacy

An advocate for safe sex and sexual health, Westheimer’s rise to stardom in the ’80s coincided with the early days of the AIDS epidemic, a time when many suffering from the complications of the illness were treated as social pariahs. Against this backdrop, the stakes for frank sexual discourse were raised tremendously. With government inaction, misinformation, and discrimination running rampant, her empathetic approach, rooted in practicality, education, and human decency was sorely needed. In the 2019 documentary *Ask Dr. Ruth*, she attributed her lineage and personal history to her need to speak out: “I took that very seriously because of my background as a German Jewish refugee. I certainly had sensitivity for the people who were really regarded as subhuman.” The director of the film, Ryan White, highlighted that Westheimer didn’t merely attach herself to causes once they became popular. Rather, because of her background, empathetic

“Westheimer was a pop culture icon who thrived in the world of taboos that shouldn’t be taboos, from speaking openly about women’s pleasure to debunking myths about sexuality to dismantling stereotypes about what it means to get older.”

nature, and education she was always an ardent supporter of the LGBTQ and a pro-choice advocate. As White put it, “She was at the forefront of both of those things throughout her entire life,” adding that meeting her friends from the orphanage confirmed her lifelong acceptance of the gay community: “She was always accepting of those people and always saying that people should be treated with respect.”<sup>8</sup>

### Living Many Lives

Westheimer was a pop culture icon who thrived in the world of taboos that shouldn’t be taboos, from speaking openly about women’s pleasure to debunking myths about sexuality to dismantling stereotypes about what it means to get older. And though she was passionate about destigmatizing sex between consenting adults, regardless of the gender of the partners, sex was not her only cause.

In a conversation with the *New York Times* in 2023, the then 95-year-old said that, though she was still willing to talk about sex and sexual dysfunction, she had done all that: “So, now I am going to say, let’s go and see how we can help people who don’t have a sexual problem,” adding, “I don’t want to be known only as a sex therapist. I want to be known as a therapist.”<sup>9</sup> In her twilight years, she sought to address the messy complications of loneliness, which

had escalated dramatically following the pandemic, when social isolation reached a fever pitch. As *Times* writer Allison Gilbert wrote, “[Westheimer] understood loneliness not just through the prisms of COVID-19 and adolescence.”<sup>10</sup> After being America’s most famous sex therapist for decades—and a widow for over 25 years—Dr. Ruth Westheimer took it upon herself to become New York State’s first “Ambassador to Loneliness,” a wish granted by New York Governor Kathy Hochul.<sup>11</sup> At the heart of her work, we find a deep desire to speak openly, address intimacy, and foster connection through empathy and without judgment. Westheimer’s influence endures even after her passing. Her final book, *The Joy of Connections: 100 Ways to Beat Loneliness and Live a Happier and More Meaningful Life*, was published on September 3, 2024, less than two months after her death at age 96. She was the embodiment of living many lives in one.

No matter how uncomfortable the subject, whether sex, loneliness, death, or finances, not talking about these things leads to far more discomfort down the road. It’s essential that we talk about the hard things and listen to the hard things that others tell us—ideally, with the same empathic approach that Westheimer championed for so many decades. This is how we take care of ourselves and those around us. **M**

## ENDNOTES

1. <https://www.capradio.org/news/npr/story?storyid=g-s1-12280>
2. “The Double Standard of Aging” By Susan Sontag (The Saturday Review, September 23, 1972, pp. 29-38)
3. <https://www.biography.com/actors/farrah-fawcett-swimsuit-poster>
4. **The Dr. Ruth Show (1986)** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmAx5oRjhSY>
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/nov/10/dr-ruth-westheimer-my-family-values>
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/nov/10/dr-ruth-westheimer-my-family-values>
7. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/168488453?storyId=168488453>
8. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/dr-ruth-westheimer-documentary-sex/>
9. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/nyregion/dr-ruth-loneliness-ambassador.html>
10. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/nyregion/dr-ruth-loneliness-ambassador.html>
11. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/10/health/loneliness-ambassador-new-york-ruth->

# BURGUNDY ASSET MANAGEMENT LTD.

## TORONTO

Bay Wellington Tower, Brookfield Place,  
181 Bay Street, Suite 4510,  
PO Box 778, Toronto ON M5J 2T3

## MONTREAL

1501 McGill College Avenue Suite 2090,  
Montreal QC H3A 3M8

## VANCOUVER

999 West Hastings Street, Suite 1810,  
PO Box 33, Vancouver BC V6C 2W2

This publication is presented for illustrative and discussion purposes only. It is not intended to provide investment advice and does not consider unique objectives, constraints or financial needs. It is not intended as an offer to invest in any Burgundy investment strategies. Under no circumstances does this publication suggest that you should time the market in any way, make investment decisions based on the content or borrow to invest. Select securities may be used as examples to illustrate Burgundy's investment philosophy. Research used to formulate opinions was obtained from various sources and Burgundy does not guarantee its accuracy. Forward-looking statements are based on historical events and trends and may differ from actual results. Any inclusion of third-party books, articles and opinions does not imply Burgundy's endorsement or affiliation. The information in this publication is as of the date of the publication and will not be revised or updated to reflect new events or circumstances.



FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT [MINERVA@BURGUNDYASSET.COM](mailto:MINERVA@BURGUNDYASSET.COM) | [WWW.BURGUNDYASSET.COM/WOMEN](http://WWW.BURGUNDYASSET.COM/WOMEN)