



Cecile Richards

President, Planned Parenthood (2006–18)

Championing Choice

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on June 17, 2022 by Noah Remnick

- Access *The Thread* episode of Cecile Richards on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access her long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Gain insight on balancing a high-profile career with motherhood
- Connect one life story to larger political and social issues in America – women’s health care and reproductive choice
- Understand the role of labor and other grassroots organizing in our democracy
- Analyze the role of women’s health within the Affordable Care Act
- Explore the role of gender in elected office

English Language Arts Focus

- Apply Cecile Richards’ life story as a memoir on activism
- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one civic leader and activist
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Cecile Richards’ episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Cecile Richards reflects on her upbringing in a politically active family in Texas. She discusses her journey into activism, her experience in labor organizing, and her time as the head of Planned Parenthood. Richards emphasizes the importance of simplifying communication to connect with people and the need for women’s leadership in politics.



Biography

Cecile Richards is a national leader for women’s rights and social and economic justice, and a co-founder of Supermajority – a new organization fighting for gender equity. She is the author of *New York Times* bestseller *Make Trouble*. As president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America and Planned Parenthood Action Fund for 12 years, Richards worked to increase affordable access to reproductive health care and to build a healthier and safer world for women and young people. After starting her career as a labor organizer, working with women earning minimum wage, she went on to start her own grassroots organizations and later served as deputy chief of staff to House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi. In 2011 and 2012, Richards was named one of *TIME Magazine’s* 100 Most Influential People in the World. She is a frequent speaker and commentator on politics and progressive issues.

Photos: Cecile as a young girl with her mother grandmother brother and father in Waco. (Cecile Richards) *left*; Cecile Richards speaking at the Rally for Womens Health at Foley Square in Manhattan. Feb 26, 2011. (Alamy) *right*



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

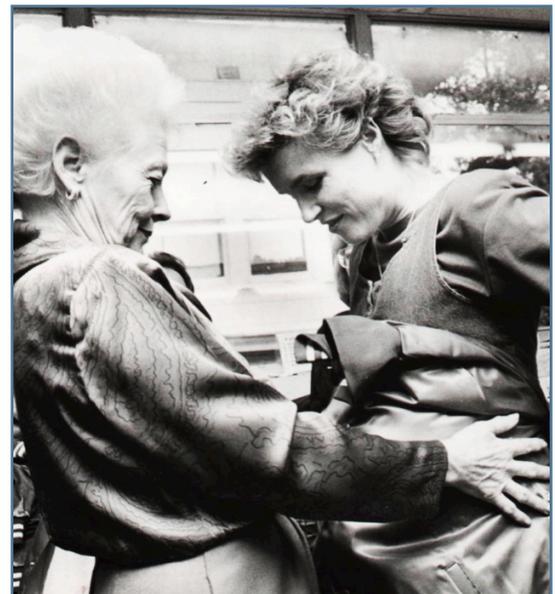
Suggested Steps

- Read the opening of Cecile Richards' episode aloud to students:

"I do think that all of us are obligated to try to communicate with people who otherwise might just tune us out. My mom really taught me and used to say if whatever you're saying can't be understood by your grandmother back in Waco, then no one's hearing it. So I don't think it's so much about curating an image, but it's making things simple for people and being direct about what you believe and what you're trying to do."



- Ask and Discuss:** What do you learn about Richards from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- Next,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.
- Last,** as a class discuss the reasons they think the filmmakers choose this opening for the episode?



Photos: Cecile Richards with her daughter and mom Ann getting ready for her keynote speech at the democratic convention in 1988 in Atlanta. (Cecile Richards) top; Cecile and her husband Kirk on their wedding day. (Cecile Richards) lower left; Cecile Richards pregnant with twins and her mom night she won race for Gov of Texas. (Cecile Richards) lower right



Teaching Tip:

THE THREAD Up Close

After watching the interview, have students debrief Richards' life story with these suggested questions:

- ▣ How do you understand the title "Championing Choice" after watching this episode?
- ▣ How did growing up in a state that was very different politically from her family shape Cecile Richards' character and her politics?
- ▣ Richards shared in her interview a belief that we are "put on this earth to make a difference." Do you also have this value? What other values are similar to this that would you like to add?
- ▣ Richards has dedicated her life to labor organizing and working for organizations that promote progressive issues. She finds joy and meaning in her work and feels privileged to have been able to spend her life working on behalf of her values.
 - When you imagine your professional life path, has your family influenced your decision? What other factors can you identify that have shaped your aspirations?

After discussing, have students return to **The Thread** episode and engage them in a close read and analysis of her interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning **The Thread** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of **A Thread** connection: If you are exploring the responsibilities of citizenship, you could excerpt Cecile Richards' definition of moral leadership as a point of departure: (Note: This excerpt has been edited for clarity and brevity.)

"People like myself who grew up with enormous privilege, I could do anything I wanted to with my life. The gift to me was being able to choose to be an organizer, to choose to be a troublemaker. And so I take that privilege seriously. So moral leadership is taking the gifts that you were given and doing something with them to make the world better."

Connections

- ▣ What are the many influences that have shaped your character?
- ▣ What responsibility do you feel to make a difference in the world?
- ▣ What political, social, environmental, religious, or economic issues are most interesting to you?
- ▣ Do you feel that you have received enough information on your own healthcare? What more would you like to learn?
- ▣ Do you understand the role of an organizer differently after learning from Cecile Richards? Why or why not?
- ▣ What new insights or life lessons did you gain about (yourself, your community, your world) from her story, her family's involvement in civil rights work, and her activism?



Cecile Richards

Activity: Championing Choice

The Ford Foundation interviewed Cecile Richards after she stepped down from Planned Parenthood. Read her answers to these two questions and then write your own answers to the same questions:

- ▣ What are your hopes for women and women's rights in the next decade?
- ▣ What does equality look like to you?

Be prepared to share your responses in a Socratic Circle in class.

What are your hopes for women and women's rights in the next decade?

"In the United States, we saw in the last election [2020] a historic number of women running for office and a historic number of women voting, and now the most women of color ever in the United States Congress – and they're making a difference, not just in the laws they pass and the points they make but the inspiration they're giving to a whole generation of young girls who are looking up and realizing that's what a member of Congress looks like. To me, that's so important, and I hope that in the next 10 years we continue to advance this so that women – and people of all persuasions and all walks of life – begin to run for office and get elected so that government actually represents everyone and we really do live out the dream of a true democracy."

What does equality look like to you?

"Equality is the opportunity for everyone to have a chance to get ahead and to live their lives free of discrimination, fear, and oppression. Unfortunately we're not there yet, but I think we will get equality when we actually have true democracy, and that means that everyone's at the table. We're getting there. Things are changing. People are standing up and saying, I want to be part of the process. But we have to keep investing in that. So we have to invest in young people. We have to invest in people of color, in women, in the people who've never been in the room where it happens. When we do, we'll have a government that looks like us and that represents everyone. That's true equality."



Additional Resources

- ▣ Learn more about [Planned Parenthood](#) and the work Cecile Richards tirelessly supports
- ▣ Explore the work of [Supermajority](#), Cecile Richards' current project
- ▣ Read [Make Trouble](#), Cecile Richards

