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“Our” Spouses Part VI — Conclusions and Insights

by M. H. Perry

This concludes our series on how the spouses of Gaithersburg’s city officials cope with the supportive role in politics and with the glare of public scrutiny. Bill Edens declined to be interviewed quoting our opening article:

During Margaret Thatcher’s dozen years at Number 10, we barely heard from him [Sir Denis Thatcher], and she was challenging enough to be attacked plenty. Adapting the words of Mark Twain, he once quipped, “it’s better to keep my mouth shut and be thought a fool rather than open it and remove all doubt.”

“I support Geri totally,” Bill said, “but I don’t need to support her verbally.” He felt that he should play the role that Sir Denis did. Although we understand his stance, we regret it since his position from a man’s point of view would add to our investigation of this subject—especially since he has a reputation for having a great sense of humor.

Joan Sesma, wife of the Council’s newest member, was not able to get back to us in time for this series.

Much of what we discovered was no surprise, but the degree of dedication was illuminating. The most important quality that “our” spouses shared was flexibility. On the day that we were to interview Sally Katz, she arrived home from work about an hour and a half prior to the scheduled time only to find that their dog had been ill. She had to take the dog to the vet and clean up the mess that had been created. She accomplished all of it without a visible trace of strain.

The only time we could meet with Ann Lynn Alster was the day before she and Stan were leaving for a very rare trip overseas. While her husband was upstairs packing his things, she kept the interview appointment approximately fourteen hours before departing on a three week trip out of

the country.

Henry and Donna Jean Marraffa had arrived back from a trip to see one of their children in North Carolina only one hour before the interview. Henry went off to a Council meeting, and Donna Jean, perfectly coiffed and pressed, met with the interviewer.

Eileen Schlichting had barely recovered from a particularly nasty summer cold and was scheduled to go out of town several days later.

There are many people who would not be able to tolerate that unsettled a schedule, and there are many who would not feel that the upheaval in their lives would be worth it. Donna Jean stated, "We very seldom have one thing to do in a day. It's always five."

Adapting to this level of involvement takes both flexibility and a high level of dedication to their husbands' positions. When Sally found that she needed to take the dog to an unexpected and urgent veterinary appointment, she discovered that she didn't have the phone number of the interviewer with whom she was to meet shortly. "I panicked," she stated. It's telling that what would cause this very collected individual panic is the possibility of being unable to fulfill a commitment. None of these women have intentions of running for office themselves, with Donna Jean replying, "Never!" and Eileen, "Not now."

Each of the women interviewed feels that her husband is making an important contribution to the city. While it may seem that that would be a given, it isn't necessarily so. Most people don't choose to run for public office because of all the difficulties, disagreements, and criticism encountered. In all probability, most people would not want to have their spouse run for office: it presents a disruption to their lives over which they have less control than if they were in office themselves.

In recent years, we have seen national news which has demonstrated the problems and upheaval that occur when politicians don't have their personal lives in order [Mark Foley, David Vitter, Larry Craig, and horrifyingly diabolical, Gary Condit].

It's a distinct advantage to the citizenry when politicians and their families relate well to each other. The four councilmember's wives we spoke with all felt strongly that it is their duty to be supportive. As Sally expressed it, "It's a joint commitment.... When you don't have that joint commitment,... I would think that might create all sorts of other challenges that would be distracting."

Or as Donna Jean put it, "First of all, if a man goes into a political career, he needs the support of his wife, and it's going to make it very tough if you're not there for him, no matter what. You have to be behind your man—totally." She related, "...I hate politics, and I hate elections, but I always, always am there, and I would never not be there for him."

In the case of those we interviewed, the officials make it more likely that their wives can be supportive by their clear appreciation of them. The Marraffas have their children and grandchildren over to dinner once a week; Henry makes dinner for all of them. The mayor doesn't miss an opportunity to state that he could not have accomplished what he has if his wife were not supportive. When we asked Sally what she had done when a city emergency came up and the children were waiting for their father, she replied, "I never had that problem. If Sidney says he'll be there, he'll be there." Support, therefore, is a two-way street.

What we expected to find, but didn't, was a conscious coping strategy for dealing with the interruptions to family life that running a city of fifty thousand brings. Sally actually finds the constant demands on her husband to bring new dimensions to her life. Eileen pointed out that in the District area, many people have demanding jobs which require them to be more or less "on call" most of their 24/7.

There is only one woman on the city council, and we would have liked to get the perspective on the supportive role from the point of view of a husband. We suspect, however, that the supporting role, problematic as it can be for women, becomes trickier for men for the reasons we pointed out in the introductory article, and that may well be why Bill Edens politely declined the interview. It may also contribute to the fact that to date, a total of only 35 women have ever served in the U.S. Senate.

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