

Want to know about a political candidate? Talk to the spouse

In this era of news spin and press manipulation, a good way for a reporter to gain insight into the real workings of a candidate is to talk informally with the spouse.

It's still a good method, even today when we've heard far more psychobabble than we ever wanted about the marital dynamics between Bill and Hillary.

So last week I dropped in at the Ann Arbor Jewish Community Center to listen to presidential candidate Bill Bradley's wife, Ernestine Schlant Bradley. A professor of German and comparative literature at Montclair State University in New Jersey, Dr. Ernestine Schlant, as she is professionally known, is the author of a recently published book, "The Language of Silence: West German Literature and the Holocaust."

Not surprisingly, the crowd was rapt when I sidled in about half way through her presentation. It was just what you might expect from a professor of comparative literature: Literate, detailed, knowledgeable, academic. "You cannot deconstruct the Holocaust," she argued at one point,

Her answer consumed five minutes, concluding with the thought that Sen. Bradley had learned from her that reading a country's literature often turned out to be far more useful to a visitor than a briefing from the state department.

launching into a review of 40 years of German literature.

"What's going on here?" I wrote on my reporter's pad, "Here is a mature, perceptive, intelligent, civilized person implausibly engaged in a political process that is none of these things!"

At the end of her talk, Mrs. Bradley took questions, which she answered carefully and in detail. Only one dealt with her husband's campaign. Her answer consumed five minutes, concluding with the thought that Sen. Bradley had learned from her that reading a country's literature often turned out to be far more useful to a visitor than a briefing from the state



PHILIP POWER

department. "No sound bites here," I thought.

So when we sat down for a visit, I wondered how a wife, German-born and a full-blown academic, relates to a husband, a former professional basketball player and now a professional politician. "It's not that difficult," she responded, "because it's very liberating when you know for certain what the most important thing is. In my case and at this time in my life, it's my husband's campaign."

"But how," I asked, "can you manage in two entirely different worlds? One, academia - where intelligence is used to illuminate and words are used to clarify - and the other, politics - where intelligence is used to confuse

and words are used to conceal."

"For me, it's not a problem," she said, pointing out she that had participated in each of Bradley's three past campaigns for the Senate. "I know Bill's position on the issues, but I express them in my own way and in my own language. I won't read the position papers from the campaign; I speak about Bill, not for Bill."

But the contradiction between the two worlds? In her mind, the resolution is that, "Bill really believes that he is running a different kind of campaign, one intended to reconstitute respect for the political process in this country. He wants to talk seriously to the voters, to present himself as an authentic, serious and non-politically driven candidate." The purpose: To give voters now frustrated and alienated with the political process some hope that the system can change.

At the end of our talk, I asked Mrs. Bradley about the story that her husband decided not to run for president in order to be by her side in 1992 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in June of that year. "What a lovely anecdote," I thought, "perfectly

illustrating the contrast between the Bradley family and some other political families we know about."

"Not true," she declined to mythologize. "By the time I was diagnosed in June, the campaign for president was long under way. Bill was a rock during my illness, but it had nothing to do with his not running for president."

Hmm. I've never met Sen. Bradley. I have no idea whether he'll win the nomination, or be elected, or make a good president. That's what campaigns are designed to explicate.

But I do know that Professor Ernestine Schlant Bradley is a mature, perceptive, intelligent and civilized woman whose adult presence in the burly-burly of a political campaign gives me comfort and, perhaps, a bit of hope.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@homecomm.net.

Warning to parents: Talk to your children, especially about drugs

A recent national survey released by the Partnership for a Drug Free America appears to give added meaning to the concept: Parents say they're talking but are their kids listening? At least 88 percent of parents say they are talking to their teens about drugs, but only 27 percent of teens are learning about the risk of drugs at home.

The numbers clearly show a contradiction. I believe that parents are talking to their children, but it may be a one-time conversation or perhaps parents are not talking as persuasively as they can about the dangers of drug use.

Among teens who have learned much at home, 26 percent reported using marijuana. Among teens who learned nothing at home, 46 percent reported using marijuana. There's no question that there is a direct correlation between the percentage of teens



DARNELL JACKSON

who use drugs and communication at the home.

The study also found:
■ While virtually all parents say they've talked with their teenagers about drugs at least once, fewer teens

(85 percent) recall the conversation. Less than half of all parents of teenagers (48 percent) report talking with their teens about drugs regularly in the past year.

■ Among parents of children this age who have talked with their children about drugs at least once, only half said they felt they discussed the subject thoroughly, a significant decline from 1997 (67 percent).

■ As children pass from the fourth to the eighth grade, the percentage of kids who say they want more guidelines about drugs from their parents declines from 74 percent to 19 percent.

■ As children pass from the fourth to the eighth grade, with fewer and fewer wanting their parents' advice on drugs along the way, the number of children

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experimenting with marijuana increases significantly, from 3 to 31 percent.

The greatest obstacle parents face is denying that their own children are at risk. Only 14 percent of parents say it is possible that their teen may have used marijuana, yet 42 percent of the teens tried the drug.

Parents have got to talk to their kids more frequently about the dangers of drug use. The phrase "talk to

your kids" is not just a slogan on TV. It is a warning to parents that if they don't talk to their kids, their kids are more likely to go down a path of danger and the road back home is not an easy one.

For more information on how to help your child be drug-free, call (800) 826-4638 for a free parent's guide.

Darnell Jackson is the director of the Michigan Department of Health Office of Drug Control Policy.

Linda Barnes Flashpoint



Published by Hyperion

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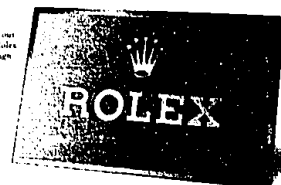
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