

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

By Terri White

Politics flowed freely through my dad's veins. In one of my earliest memories with him, we participated in a July 4th parade in Buffalo, Minnesota. I rode with him in a convertible while he called "vote for Adlai Stevenson" through a megaphone. He began on the precinct level and worked his way up. By the time I was 20-years old, he was nationally known. Dad's determination to right wrongs through his political activism indelibly shaped my life.

Career-wise Dad excelled in sales and eventually became the vice-president of a family owned company. In his spare time, he let no grass grow under his feet with his passion for politics.

When we moved to Aberdeen, South Dakota, in 1957, he immersed himself in local politics. By 1962, he was hob-knobbing with statewide politicians. Asked to run George McGovern's bid for the senate, Dad quit his job – much to Mom's dismay – and hit the campaign trail. He officed 200 miles south in Sioux Falls while the rest of our family held down the fort back home. Highly organized, Dad effectively thwarting McGovern's opponent. George won his senatorial bid and whizzed off to D.C.

Without a job now, Dad submitted resumes across the country. By March 1963, he landed a sales job in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Off we tramped once again crossing state lines to our new home. With only two months left in the school year, my older brother was a junior in high school, I a high school freshman, my sister a 7th grader, and youngest brother a 4th grader. Moving was not new to any of us, but the new-kid-in-school was never an easy transition. Nevertheless, we managed it. Even thrived. In fact, we grew to love our new city and even now consider it home.

Dad, of course, dove into local politics. Soon he ran for the school board, became active in the county Democratic Party, and even volunteered to superintendent our church's Sunday school – anything to scratch that political itch. It was the 1960's – a time of great upheaval, and he threw himself into it wholeheartedly.

Joining other Democrat politicians nationwide, he helped establish Americans for Democratic Action to combat social injustices. During the late 1960's, Dad emerged as a Wisconsin leader opposing U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War resulting in the formation of the National Conference of Concerned Democrats. It was my dad's influence that caused Eugene McCarthy, an economics professor from Minnesota, to enter the 1968 Democratic presidential primaries as the "dove" candidate against another Minnesotan, Hubert Humphrey, the "hawk". And so it began. A political whirlwind that thrust Dad into the national limelight.

As McCarthy's Wisconsin state campaign manager, Dad juggled his job with his campaign demands. Fortunately, his boss was sympathetic to the cause. By then, my brother and I were in college, my sister graduated from high school in '68 while our younger brother remained in high school. Mom, who hated the public attention, continued her job as the administrator of the lab in our local hospital.

It was a volatile campaign in which passions heated the campaign trail. Student demonstrations clashed with the National Guard, leading to even more violence. Meanwhile, stir in the Civil Rights Movement, calling for social justice for our black citizens, and the political environment in the U.S. was an exploding volcano. It climaxed at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago when Dad spoke out on the floor against the actions of the Chicago police in regards to the peace demonstrations, requesting to move the convention to St. Louis. When his request was denied, he led a dramatic march of delegates protesting the police brutality.

Even though McCarthy lost the nomination, others encouraged Dad to place his name in the bid for the vice-presidency. He declined. Soon after, he was asked to run for Wisconsin lieutenant governor. He declined. Instead, he traveled the country serving in various organizations like the O'Hara Commission. A man in demand, he pursued his passion for social justice and a reduced military presence across the globe.

Meanwhile, the rest of the family members continued our normal routines in school and work. Until 1970. Dad ran for governor in the Wisconsin Democratic primary, thrusting our whole family on the campaign trail. My mom, an introvert, hated it. Most tolerated it. I love it and even worked in the Milwaukee campaign office. Life in the fast lane. But he lost and retreated for a season, exhausted. We all were.

Eventually, Dad recuperated and remained politically active for the rest of his life. When my parents retired in 1988, they moved from Wisconsin to Nashville. There Dad worked as a lobbyist for AARP and belonged to several political organizations, always advocating for the underdog. Mom refused to join him in anymore political events. Her words, “I’ve done my duty.”

“Wow, Terri, what a wild ride your dad gave your family!” Maybe. To us, though, it was normal. How did it shape us? My older brother detested politics – still does. My sister and younger brother remained uninterested. I, on the other hand, loved it. And, oh boy, that delighted Dad. Finally, one of his kids could follow in his footsteps.

Like Dad, passionate about the Civil Rights Movement, I participated in a cultural exchange program in my junior year of college. Grambling College in Louisiana sent students to three northern universities in Wisconsin, Ohio, and North Dakota. They, in turn, sent students to Grambling. For a semester, we twelve exchange students lived in the dorms, attended classes, and participated in social events to experience life as a minority in a small, southern black college. Cultural shock? Indeed. Life changing? No doubt. Worth it? Absolutely. Although I was raised to respect all people, that experience moved me from sympathy for those struggling for civil rights to empathy. This was the type of passion that drove my dad.

A year later in 1972, I actively campaigned for George McGovern’s bid for the presidency against Richard Nixon. While in my senior year of college, I worked in the Eau Claire campaign office. Then, instead of attending my graduation ceremony, I hitchhiked with a friend to Portland to join dozens of other college-age young people to man the phones for the campaign. I even became an alternate delegate to the Democratic Convention in Miami. After my Portland adventure, I moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, for my first right-out-of-college job as a school librarian. Somehow the locals found me and invited me to run their local McGovern campaign. To this day, I think they must have been desperate to want a 23-year old managing their campaign! No doubt, Dad put them on my trail. After all, I was Don Peterson’s daughter. What could go wrong?

After I returned to Wisconsin a year later, Dad encouraged me to run for office in the Wisconsin legislature. I declined. I did not feel mature enough for that arduous responsibility. Good thing. I wasn’t.

Soon my life spiraled into a quagmire. Emotionally, I was a mess. Granted, most young people in their twenties lead messy lives, so don't be too hard on me. Even then, though, I managed a Milwaukee neighborhood campaign office for Morris Udall in the 1976 Democratic presidential primary. Eventually, I pulled myself together, moved to Fort Worth, married a Cleburne boy, and began a life that I have loved.

That girl who loved politics converted her passion into family life. Just like my dad, I thrust myself against the current to live the life I thought best for my family – whether others understood or not. Homebirth. Stay-at-home mom. Homeschool. I passionately blazed a trail. Now those choices I made 43 years ago are the social norm. Thanks, Dad. Your legacy continues. Now that's a good feeling.