A First Lady for the People

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Barbara Flavin Richardson '69

by Kimberly Swick Slover

The Governor's Mansion in New Mexico is a low and long brick structure, stretched across a hilltop overlooking the high desert capital city of Santa Fe and its surrounding mountains. On a cool and brilliantly sunny day in February, the mansion staff is busy welcoming visitors and scurrying around to prepare for another public event. In a couple of hours, dozens of volunteers for the New Mexico Clean and Beautiful organization, local and state officials, and a flurry of reporters and photographers will descend on the mansion for an awards ceremony. For New Mexico's first lady, Barbara Flavin Richardson '69, it's a typical day in which she will open her home to the people of New Mexico.

PHOTO: MIKE STAUFFER

Barbara appears suddenly without fanfare, ushering a few guests into a quiet room for lunch and conversation before her public appearance. "I was not a political person, so it's been a long learning curve for me," says Barbara, a down-to-earth woman who laughs easily and often. For the last 33 years, she has been married to Bill Richardson, a popular politician and the current governor of New Mexico. Describing herself as "a very private person in a public position," Barbara has embraced an active role in public life since her husband took office in 2003.

"New Mexico has a small population, just 1.9 million people. I realized I can have an impact here," she says. "It's an opportunity for me to focus on issues I care about."

An Advocate and a Voice

In the early months as first lady, Barbara traveled around New Mexico to familiarize herself with the state and identify issues that needed attention. "I went searching for some causes and others found me," she says. "We're a culturally diverse and geographically large state, made up of both rural and urban areas. One of the things that struck me was the incidence of domestic violence, which is a very serious problem here. The issue of violence against women is of particular interest to me."

New Mexico's high incidence of domestic violence (more than 25,000 cases were reported in 2003) is tied in part to its large migrant populations and pervasive substance abuse and poverty, according to Barbara. "Domestic violence is all about control," she says. She pushed for the establishment of a domestic violence task force to study the issue, and soon after, the governor appointed her as chair of his Domestic Violence Advisory Board. The board has since escalated the issue of domestic violence prevention to the level of a statewide priority and has brought about tougher penalties and better treatment options for offenders, several new shelters for victims, and the appointment of a domestic violence "czar."

After learning that New Mexico ranked 50th in the country in childhood immunization, with just 61.5 percent of its chil-

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dren immunized, Barbara knew another critical issue had "found" her. With her husband's support, she became chair of the New Mexico Immunization Coalition in April 2003, which united the state's medical community and government officials in creating a statewide online registry that tracks children's immunizations. The registry alerts health care providers, as well as families, about which immunizations children have had and which they still require. The effort has already boosted New Mexico's immunization rates to 77 percent, according to Richardson, and the coalition hopes the state can reach 90 percent by 2010. "We've made a lot of progress," she says. "Sometimes it just takes bringing people together to focus on a problem and create greater awareness."

While Governor Bill Richardson has launched numerous initiatives to strengthen education and the economy, the first lady has taken on the closely related issue of the state's high rate of illiteracy. In her most visible role, she has traveled around the state to read with schoolchildren and talk with their teachers about reading programs. As New Mexico's chair of Read Across America, she has met with literacy volunteers and businesses to organize book drives for schools and libraries. She worked closely with the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy to create a partnership with the University of New Mexico and the Department of Health. Through her influence, the governor has pushed for the expansion of preschool and reading programs for young children.

"Literacy is an issue that has a great impact on New Mexico's workforce and economy," she says. "It's one of the first things that businesses look at when they consider coming to New Mexico."

Barbara maintains an office at the statehouse, where she will hold meetings this week on funding for specific programs under her purview, such as teen court (a peer-run judicial program), library programs and cultural affairs. "I want to make sure these programs are well funded," she says. "I'm an advocate and a voice for them."

A Life in Politics

Barbara grew up in Concord, Mass., the eldest of five children in a middle-class family. She attended a large public high school, during which time she met Bill Richardson, who was attending nearby Middlesex School. When it came time for college, Barbara wanted something smaller and more intimate than her high school. Colby Junior College had a strong reputation, and she thought it might be the right place for her.

"The faculty was very good and it was a very close community. We got to know the professors and the deans very well. I also made some terrific friends," she says, "some of whom I'm still in touch with."

Following her graduation from Colby Junior, Barbara went on to Wheaton College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in psychology in 1971. She began working in outpatient services at Massachusetts General Hospital and, soon after, married Bill Richardson.

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Opposite page: *Barbara Flavin Richardson '69 and her husband, Bill Richardson, at the Democratic Convention in Boston, Mass., in July 2004. Bill served as the convention's chair.* ***Top:*** *Bill and Barbara (at right) hosted Mexican President Vincente Fox and his wife, Marta, at their home in Santa Fe, New Mexico.* ***Above:*** *During an awards ceremony for New Mexico Clean and Beautiful, First Lady Barbara Richardson (far right) poses with Cabinet Secretary of the New Mexico Tourism Department J. Michael Cerletti and one of the award recipients, Nancy Taylor, a board member of Keep Carlsbad Beautiful.*

Although her husband has been involved in public service and politics since 1972, Barbara maintained a low profile through most of his career. From his first stint in Washington, D.C., in which he worked for the U.S. Department of State and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to his appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, his election to the U.S. House of Representatives, and his tenure as President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Energy, Barbara remained quietly by his side, pursuing her interests in gardening and antiquing and playing the role of supportive spouse. "I did my own thing," she says. "Washington is run by government, and New York by Wall Street. There's so much going on that no one paid much attention."

While serving as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson earned an international reputation as a skilled diplomat. He has been called to negotiate with leaders in some of the most volatile parts of the world, including Iraq, North Korea and Bosnia. But when asked about her husband's diplomatic skills, Barbara chuckles. "I wouldn't describe him as diplomatic," she says, looking over at one of his staff members to see if she concurs. The assistant wisely declines comment. "But he has incredible energy; he's driven. He, too, feels very strongly that he can make a difference in people's lives through

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No Boundaries

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since 1997. Having grown up on Mt. Sunapee, Chris always knew about NEHSA. "I got involved because, honestly, I just wanted to see what it was like," says Chris. "Once I received a big smile and a hug from a student because I helped her do something she didn't think she could ever do, I was hooked."

Kathi Kirk Brown '75 recently completed her first ski season as a NEHSA volunteer. She learned about NEHSA through Chris, and from the moment she became involved, she's been inspired by the dedication of Amanda, her fellow volunteers, and most of all, the athletes.

Barbara Johnston Rodgers '53 has been volunteering for NEHSA for three years. She had always enjoyed volunteer work, and she became involved because she and her husband, John, were looking for volunteer work they could do together. As avid skiers, they found that NEHSA was the perfect fit for them. "It's very rewarding, and I love the one-on-one contact with the students," says Barbara.

Hilary Platt Cole '73 began volunteering with NEHSA in March 2002, after learning about the program from an adaptive horseback riding student she worked with at Windrush Farm Therapeutic Equitation, Inc., in Boxford, Mass. That student was also a sit-down ski student at NEHSA, and invited Hilary to join her at a lesson. "Witnessing one of her lessons on snow, I was amazed at what was available for people with disabilities. I became hooked right away, and just three years later I became a member of the Board of Directors for NEHSA," recalls Hilary. As a member of the board, Hilary has a contagious desire to work toward expanding the public's knowledge of the NEHSA program and all it has to offer.

As Amanda credits her volunteers, they, in turn, are quick to offer their kudos to her as a leader. "Doing all of the coordination work that Amanda does on a daily basis is no easy feat," says Chris. She deals directly with our board, our athletes and all of the volunteers." Hilary finds Amanda's ability to "keep it all together" astounding. "Amanda juggles every detail, student and event remarkably well. She's always pleasant and greets each day with a passionate vigor and dedication I have rarely witnessed," Hilary explains.

All of these ladies will concur that, as volunteers, they walk away from each lesson with much more than they offer. They consider their reward the fact that they have given someone the opportunity to lead a more active and meaningful life. They also value the special bonds they form with the athletes and with each other. "It's truly a fun group to be with, and in no time at all, we've become a family," explains Kathi.

The efforts of Amanda and the others at NEHSA have helped to eradicate the misconceptions the general public has of the limitations of people with disabilities. The courage and tenacity of the athletes is astonishing, and the dedication and compassion of the staff and volunteers is extraordinary. Amanda sums it up best when she says, "It's awe-inspiring to witness an athlete discover how skiing can take them away from their disability, and it's a heart-warming feeling to know that we at NEHSA have helped them achieve that." It's evident that NEHSA's motto—Witness the Triumph of the Human Spirit—is a true testament, not only to the determination of the athletes, but also to the generosity of Amanda and her staff of volunteers.

To learn more about NEHSA and its activities, or to explore becoming a volunteer, please visit the NEHSA Web site at www.nehsa.org. ■

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public service. But he's the kind of person who wants everything done yesterday, and if not, then definitely by the end of the day. He sees everything as a puzzle. If he can't do it one way, he'll do it another."

Bill Richardson grew up in Mexico with a Mexican mother and an American father. His wife describes him as "totally bilingual and bicultural, which helps him relate to people of different cultures. He doesn't have a typical background for a politician."

Early in their marriage, the Richardsons vacationed in New Mexico, and both now view Santa Fe as their home base. They have come to love the city's lively blend of Native American, Mexican American and Spanish American cultures, its dynamic art scene and spectacular weather. While Bill Richardson has always thrived in the busy and demanding life of public service, his soft-spoken partner has only recently sought out the spotlight on her own and, to her surprise, she's enjoying it.

"Life takes some unexpected turns," she says, laughing. "Now that I'm back in New Mexico, I have a higher profile. It's been a positive experience for me. Here I am, hosting groups from all over New Mexico, visitors from North Korea, Prince Andrew, and Mexican President Vincente Fox and Mrs. Fox. We've had Prince Phillip and Princess Letitia of Spain here, and Ron Howard, Jane Fonda, Rob Reiner and Robert Redford. We have a rotating social circuit. By opening our doors, we get a chance to show off the governor's house. I like to be out there, to keep the mansion open and accessible. People enjoy seeing the governor and the first lady, and I see it as part of my responsibility."

A high profile in comfortable, casual New Mexico is one thing, the national arena quite another. When asked by a reporter in 2003 about media speculation that her husband might run for president in 2008, the first lady responded: "I'll tell you what I tell [my husband]. That's another life and another wife. Honest to God. Not my bag. It's just not something that I even want to contemplate." Barbara laughs at the reminder of her now infamous quote, and admits it didn't go over too well with her husband. "He said, 'Why did you have to say that?' she recalls with a smile. Then she adds, a bit mysteriously, "Who knows? In the past, I probably would have said the same thing about him running for governor."

She then excuses herself to take a few minutes to prepare for the afternoon's event, for which a large group has crowded into a heated tent on the mansion's lawn. Soon the boisterous crowd grows silent as Barbara Richardson enters the tent. After the chair of New Mexico Clean and Beautiful introduces her as a "person involved in many causes," the first lady steps up to the podium once again. ■