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On the Campaign Trail —

*First woman mayoral candidate
has vision for the city's future*
by Julie Sturgeon



Secretary of State Sue Anne Gilroy makes it a point to greet each of the 26 Optimist Club members gathered for breakfast on a summer morning. They're there to hear her discuss the future. She makes her way around the tables, extending her hand in welcome. She knows the group is weighing her merits for another office.

It is de rigueur in any election campaign that the candidate shake hands with as many voters as humanly possible. It's equally mandatory to make appearances and/or speeches at breakfasts, coffees, luncheons, cocktail parties, dinners and meetings.

In these respects, Gilroy's run for Indianapolis' mayoral job is totally typical. The difference is Gilroy is the first woman in the city's history to seek this highest government office.

At the Optimist gathering, she invites a couple's young grandson to the head table to sit with her during the business meeting. When it's her turn, she addresses the group — sans microphone or notes — about her vision for Indianapolis' future.

The locations and the small talk vary, but her message is similar: crime prevention, education, spousal abuse, and business expansion issues. She may adjust the presentation to fit the audience, but always she speaks off the cuff.

For all her speaking skills, though, Gilroy can't escape every candidate's challenge: penetrating the public's apathy in order for the message to sink in. And it's especially frustrating when the fact that she's a woman seems to make more of an impression than her ideas for better government.

She's covering the county, and campaigning long hours, to share the serious issues at the heart of her candidacy with those of voting age. But she can find it in her heart to be diplomatic when a child in the crowd yawns audibly. It gives her opportunity to point out that she's trudging this campaign trail for our youth's future.

She acknowledges that many of the city's constituents are unconcerned with tough issues and hard stances, caring more about personalities. In a Midwestern city like Indianapolis, "People . . . want to know who their mayor is, how she's lived her life, what her plans are. It's very personal," she admits.

Youthful Glances

It's ironic Gilroy even stuck around long enough to throw her hat in the mayoral ring after she moved to "IndiaNoPlace" from Crawfordsville in 1970. Back then, "If you drove a Volkswagen and fell in a chuckhole, you'd never be seen again, for starters. You ate dinner downtown and were the only person on the street when you left the restaurant. You'd hustle to your car, looking behind your back. And the people who lived here joked about the city — there was no sense of pride, no vision of what we could become."

But Sue Anne Starnes, fresh from earning a degree in speech and education at DePauw University, had won a place as a project associate in Mayor Richard Lugar's administration, thanks to Crawfordsville connections. She saw her new boss as an optimistic, can-do visionary who welcomed her youthful ideas and energy. "He invested in me, and stood by me. It was a great lesson," she says simply. Her employer also introduced her to youth corps and minority liaison Dick Gilroy, whom she wed in 1973 just after he began his law practice in the private sector.

She stayed six years in Lugar's administration, eventually giving up her own start at law school to serve as the city's parks director at the tender age of 26 — a controversial call for those days. (She's still the record holder when it comes to opening park pools on time; she quietly checks out that statistic each Memorial Day.)

But Lugar didn't exactly take a huge gamble on hiring his protégé, as the fairy tale scenario suggests. Gilroy took an early interest in politics. As the middle child and only daughter in the Starnes family, she recalls listening to her parents debate candidate platforms at the dinner table. Her father was a high-school English teacher who owned a convenience store on the side, her mother a housewife who clerked at J.C. Penney's. On election days, all five family members helped out at the polls, an event Gilroy never missed.

Always a high achiever, she graduated from Crawfordsville High School in 1966 with the title Outstanding Senior Woman. The mayor of her town asked her to establish a youth commission to determine ways to tune in the city to teens' needs, and wound up hiring her to help out in his office during her high school and college days.

Today, Gilroy continues to single out youth as a focus both in her mayoral plans and on her current election staff — a partial tribute to Lugar's initial faith in her. "They have that energy, that optimism to get up every day and fill the gap between what is and what ought to be. That's what a campaign is for — to get people like that involved so they understand your vision, your work ethic and where you're headed."

The Mother Load

After the stint in the Lugar administration, Gilroy turned her talents to the private sector, working as an assistant to the president of Indiana Central University (now the University of Indianapolis) on the Southside, where she administered all external programs, public-relations-style. She also took advantage of the chance to earn a master's degree in public administration at IUPUI, and gave birth to daughter Emily in the middle of that two-year commitment. But Emily's infant smiles and coos sealed her decision: Her life path would allow her to fill the wife and mother roles as she thought necessary. Son Grant came along three years later, in 1980.

She never disappeared off the career radar screen altogether, however, as she established a home business — known simply as Sue Anne Gilroy — to consult not-for-profit organizations on fund-raising issues. Gilroy's assistance helped the Julian Center win its first financial grant, and her church, Tabernacle Presbyterian, run a capital campaign fund.

Then in 1982, Emily was diagnosed with Wilm's tumor, a childhood cancer of the kidney, and Gilroy phased out her business. "To do anything where people other than my immediate family depended upon me was very stressful," she says. Tabernacle Presbyterian did succeed in convincing her to act as its business administrator, but Gilroy insisted on flexibility as part of the bargain. Nothing

would interfere with her being at Emily's beck and call through painful surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

Answering the Call

Still, public service is a calling, as Gilroy is fond of saying — and it

memorized her number. She couldn't resist accepting now Sen. Lugar's invitation to serve as state director in charge of his regional offices at the beginning of this decade. Nor could she turn down Mayor Steve Goldsmith's offer to chair the transition team for his administration. Gilroy even sowed the seed for her own foray into elected officialdom; the petite blonde founded Lugar's Excellence in Public Service Series, a leadership program to encourage women who excel in community work or business to prepare to run for office.

"While the Republican Party has been open to women candidates, many held back because they felt they didn't know enough," she explains. That wasn't her situation, though. "Personally, I was raising my family, and that was of utmost importance to me." Eventually, she did jump in and the rest is history: Gilroy was elected secretary of state in 1994 and '98. She also captured public attention when she raised her hand to be considered for her party's lieutenant governor ticket in 1996 and briefly considered a U.S. Senate seat run. Her opponent's attack on her motivation aside, the almost constant public limelight has wizened her to the challenges this time 'round. She admits she's let herself in for a tough race.

Of all the clichés she gets weary of hearing, " 'You must be tired' is a big one. Or 'This must be so hard,' " says Gilroy. "It would be — if I weren't so certain this is exactly what I should do in my life at this point. And it's no harder than thousands of families who juggle work, family and their volunteer work."

Indeed, her baby, Grant, enters Purdue University's engineering school this fall, escaping the heat of the campaign in Lafayette's shade. The move officially stamps the Gilroys as empty nesters. "I'm sure I'll grieve, but not to the extent I would if I had lots of time to dwell on it," she says.

Meanwhile, following her own father's advice that half of solving a problem is talking about it, this mom consciously addresses family relationships during the long campaign days when cooperation easily could splinter. Rather than drag a reluctant teen to every public event in the name of Gilroy togetherness, she allows Grant to live normally and choose his favorites. She enjoyed his company often at Indiana Pacers games, golf outings — anywhere young people gather. As partial payback, he ensured that his buddies registered to vote on Nov. 2, and plans to spend that entire day by her side in the family tradition of working the polls.

Gilroy shares with her family the famous listening skills her co-workers praise — and she doesn't spare them her no-nonsense answers, either. When Grant arrived home lower than low from his first day at a new job, he expected Mom to sympathize with his plight. He forgot his lunch, so spent the day hungry and thirsty; left his watch on the dresser and didn't know the time; and was allergic to some chemicals involved. To top it off, management insulted the college-bound boy's dignity by handing him a broom.

"He thought it would be easier to join the Army Reserves, because that would be only six weeks of hell instead of an entire summer," his mother recounts. "I have business owners telling me we need to instill basic values in our kids because most of their workers don't bother to show up that first day. So I know it's important to have parents and grandparents there to help them make the right choices." Consequently, she flat-out refused to let Grant quit his responsibility. By the end of the summer, he expressed pride in his work — and grumbled about the amount of taxes withheld from his paycheck.

Gilroy practices that same sense of responsibility and never-say-die thoroughness in her own work. She diligently researches issues until she completely grasps them.

Deb Peters is president of Quality Environmental Professionals Inc., which prepared an environmental white paper on the city at Gilroy's request. "She gets the information she needs on issues, reviews it and asks questions until she truly understands it," Peters says. "If I need advice, I can give her a call; she'll treat me the same. Frankly, (speaking as) another woman in a man's field, I'd like to see her win."

Battle Tough

Yet Gilroy understands the dark side of her modern version of the American Dream too well. She stood by helplessly watching daughter Emily battle her cancer for seven years. Finally, in 1989, Gilroy could do nothing more than sit by her bedside, whispering, "I love you, it's OK to go on," when Emily took her last breath at Riley Hospital for Children.

"It is absolutely your worst fear as a parent. It's the one prayer, even for people who don't pray: Do not take my child," she says as she struggles to maintain her composure. "It is the most difficult thing I have ever done or ever will do. But loss is a part of every family's situation. It's how you deal with it that determines your character." Gilroy reacted by refusing to wallow in her grief at Grant's and Dick's expense. She also stifled the urge to smother Grant in her fear of an unknown future.

"We cannot totally protect our children," she explains. "I could not save Emily, as much as we tried; the whole life and death story is so much bigger. So you can only do your best while you have them, then you must let them go." Yet her first waking thought every morning is of Emily.

Gilroy officially joined the ranks of the "sandwich generation" only a few years ago. She had a son to raise, then her father's death left her with an aging mother to care for long distance. Although her brothers still reside in Crawfordsville not far from their mother, the mother-daughter bond was special, so Gilroy called her mother nightly and racked up thousands of miles on her car driving to Montgomery County for frequent visits. In turn, Mrs. Starnes offered a practical hand at supporting her daughter's dreams by sending handwritten thank-you notes to campaign contributors of as little as \$25 during that first secretary of state run.

This June 28, Gilroy spent her 51st birthday kneeling at her mother's bedside when she passed away. "I now know how important it is to have someone with you as you make the transition from life to death. I've been fortunate to be there for two of the strongest women I'll ever know. My life experiences help me every day," Gilroy adds. Life's trials can provide a sense of understanding and compassion for others. In her roles as wife, mother and daughter, Gilroy has encountered unbearable sorrow and boundless joy. She recognizes that a broad spectrum of experiences helps create a universal forum drawing people from all walks of life together. "Because if we truly are to grapple with issues of youth isolation and crime, family abuse, it will take all of us coming together to build consensus."

"So yes, my being a woman will be a factor in the campaign but not an issue," she continues. "In this city, voters are sophisticated enough to look beyond token votes." She continues to tout her ability to balance budgets and keep an eye on the bottom line as part of the official message, to steer her candidacy from veering into a "woman's" platform in the public eye.

Her vision of the next millennium throws back to our idyllic childhood visions: a city of respect where the streets are safer, inner city housing conditions are more livable, and where youth are expected to demonstrate certain values in their lives. She loves to relay one illustrative experience about riding with an Indianapolis Police Department patrolman. Their first run involved a domestic violence call, where Gilroy jumped out of the squad car, careful to lag a few steps behind the officer. They encountered a 16-year-old platinum blonde decked out in black lipstick and a tight skirt, yelling to be heard over her uncle and grandmother, who were also shouting their view of events. Suddenly, all eyes riveted on Gilroy. The next verbal fight broke out over her identity.

"That's Al Gore's wife!" the teen finally blurted. The celebrity guessing game gave the officer time to physically separate the warring factions and restore calm. Gilroy sympathetically approached the girl with a listening ear. "I just can't control myself," the girl confessed to the politician.

Gilroy, as she did with her son, refused to cut the girl any slack. "Yes, you can," she insisted firmly. Similarly, Gilroy tells her campaign trail audiences, "Government can't solve all our problems. But citizens can, with God's help."

He Said, She Said

She frets over the possibility of negative campaigning during this mayoral race, claiming that such tactics not only add to voters' cynicism but also make it difficult for the elected winner to govern. Although political experts say candidates must respond to attacks within 48 hours or suffer the damage, she refused to dignify the slurs during her primary. She captured 63 percent of

Republican registered voters, confirming in her mind that she'd made the right choice.

"The fall campaign is a different deal," she says with a sigh. "You cannot have a one-sided picture put out about you, and I cannot allow somebody to tear down me or this city." Dick scans the newspapers and television newscasts first at the Gilroy house these days, weeding out details that could eat away at her naturally positive outlook. "I just have to do my best and be true to who I am. Or, as Dick says, to never lose your soul in the middle." Not that she has even flirted with that danger, she claims, thanks to her daughter's example. "Emily's death puts things in great perspective, especially in the heat of a campaign. Most things are not a life-and-death situation. And she motivates me: I now more passionately realize that one life lost is one too many."

To allow her to stay focused, Dick takes charge of seeing dinner is on the table every night. She calls him her "rock." His supportive position encourages her to hang around after her speeches, answering every question, shaking every hand. Sometimes, while she's doing that, her young driver is growing ever more frantic. He's under the gun to get her to her next appointment: After all, she wants to shake hands with each of Marion County's 800,000 voters before Nov. 2.

"I have a bad habit of being the last to leave a room," she admits. "I don't care about being the first woman mayor in our city but I do want to be its best."

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