

Politics, Homophobia and her Big Brother

By Beth Harrison

Candace Gingrich says she didn't expect nearly the media attention she's gotten since her half-brother Newt was installed as the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives in January. She concedes, though, that there may be some genetic factor in both siblings' apparent ease with the press.

That seems to be a very good thing since the younger Gingrich has been propelled to the public forefront following her admission to a reporter that she is a lesbian. From TV talk shows to lobbying visits to her newest job as the Human Rights Campaign Fund's National Coming Out Project spokesperson and public policy intern, Gingrich has been caught up in the whirlwind of what she calls a "very busy" several months. She has divided her time lately between being on the road for HRCF, and working in the organization's headquarters in Washington, DC, learning about the details of public policy and lobbying.

Soon she'll be relocating from Harrisburg, PA, which she admits has its pros and cons. While she'll be closer to the action—and to her big brother Newt, 51—in Washington, she'll be farther from home. Her parents still reside in Harrisburg, where they settled after her father retired from the military. Gingrich has two sisters—Susan, 47, and Roberta, 46—in the Harrisburg area as well.

Of the age difference between herself and her siblings, Gingrich laughingly refers to herself as her parents' postscript.

She describes her family as fairly close, and says she sees them often, but admits that because she's so much younger than her siblings, she doesn't really know them very well. She has described her relationship with Newt as more of an uncle-niece relationship than that of brother and sister, which isn't surprising given that her brother was married and had a daughter of his own when Candace was born.

In between meeting the press and schmoozing on behalf of HRCF, the House Speaker's baby sister is an avid rugby player who until recently was a computer programmer by day and a package handler for the United Postal Service at night.

Now on the road for a 35-city tour with HRCF, Gingrich is still adjusting to her role as a public entity. So far, she's found the process fairly smooth. From Seattle, site of her first town meeting appearance, she talked with *The Front Page* about her experiences and her hopes for the future.

FP: When did you officially start working for HRCF?

CG: Well, my first day was Tuesday, April 18th.

FP: Less than two weeks ago? And they've thrown you on the road already?

CG: (laughs) Well, I've kind of already been on the road for them. I've done some dinners and some other functions for them, plus lobbying Congress. But that's the whole point. That's part of my position so I kind of expected it.

FP: Was HRCF's job offer completely unexpected or had you approached HRCF first?

CG: They approached me. Initially, it was as a spokesperson for National Coming Out Day. They had been discussing changing that into the National Coming Out Project and I guess maybe they saw a good fit with myself and the project.

I never expected any of this. It's one of those things that I'd always dreamed about but didn't think it was possible. By that I mean doing what I'm doing, and working for the rights of gays and lesbians and bisexuals, and being able to call it a job.

FP: How did you react when HRCF approached you about the job?

CG: Initially, I was floored. I mean, I was familiar with National Coming Out Day. I knew what it was, I was aware of some of the people

who have been spokespeople in the past, you know, Amanda Bearse, Melissa Etheridge. Initially, I thought to myself, "Oh, my gosh."

So I was floored and personally, there was just no way I could turn that opportunity down.

FP: Besides traveling and speaking, what does the spokesperson for the National Coming Out Project do?

CG: Speaking. That's pretty much what my position as spokesperson is. We're doing the thirty-five city tour, we're doing the town meetings in the cities, so it consists of that, and occasionally when I'm in the different cities or traveling, I'll do an HRCF dinner. They have things like regional fundraising dinners, so I will probably be going and speaking at those kinds of things. But the main part of it will be the town meetings.

FP: What kinds of things do you tell your audiences during those meetings?

CG: Well, this is the first one, so we're going to learn from it and grow as we do more and more.

One of the things I want to do is issue a kind of call to action. I'm going to be encouraging people to come out. I think everyone should come out, but at their own pace, with whomever it feels comfortable for them to come out to. I know I can't imagine not being out, and I want other people to feel the empowerment and freedom that I feel now as an out person. So I will be encouraging people to come out.

The reason for that is that we need people right now to start taking an active part in gaining the rights that we don't have, such as the right to work and not be discriminated against in the workplace, the right to not be denied housing because of who we are. Those are the things that seem right now to be, at least for me, the most important issues.

FP: Had you been at all politically active in the gay rights movement before?

CG: I would have to say no. I was at the 1993 March on Washington and in Harrisburg, PA, where I was living, I had gone to the Pride Festivals, but beyond that, no.

FP: I understand you came out about eight years ago. Is that right?

CG: Yeah. I was in college and I had a group of friends that I got to know and started hanging out with. A good number of them were lesbians. They were very open about it. They didn't shy away from showing affection for each other or talking about things. I finally was in an atmosphere where I could recognize and acknowledge those feelings that I'd been having for so long. All through growing up, it was like I was not getting something, you know, like "Wait a minute, something's missing here, there's something



A Front Page Interview with Candace Gingrich

different. What am I missing?" It finally all clicked when I was in college.

FP: How long after you came out to yourself did you come out to your family?

CG: It was probably a few months later. Mom did the old "I was cleaning your room and found this" trick with a lesbian newspaper that I had. She wanted to know if I was trying to tell her something. It was like, "Well, if I was trying to tell you something, I would left it someplace obvious where you could have found it easily instead of where you would have had to search for it." That type of thing.

That was just a few months after I had come out. Her

reaction was what I consider a stereotypical kind of reaction. "Where did we go wrong? What did I do? Maybe you just haven't met the right man." Those kind of things. But she realized that it wasn't just a phase that I was going through fairly soon.

FP: Was soon measured in months or in years?

CG: Probably weeks.

FP: What's your family's reaction been since then?

CG: My family's been very supportive ever since.

FP: You've said your mom told your brother Newt. Why?

CG: Well, she probably thought that he should know. She was probably concerned that in some way it was going to damage his political career. Whether she voiced that thought to him or not, she told me his response to her was, "That's Candace's life, and she has the right to live it the way that she wants to, and I don't have any say in that."

FP: Did your mom or anyone else in the family ever suggest that you should stay in the closet so that you didn't damage Newt's career?

CG: There was never anything actually said to me. There may have been some implications, some subtle flags out to me to kind of keep it quiet. I'm concerned about the family balance, so there's a good possibility that I kind of succumbed to that, and did put asserting my rights on the back burner. But I was always just kind of waiting for somebody to ask.

I know that sounds strange, but I knew that eventually at some point in Newt's career that people would be interested in his family, and that at some point, someone was going to ask me. I knew all along that I was going to tell the truth. And eventually they did. It wasn't until he became House Speaker that I was asked, but I didn't hesitate to answer.

FP: In what context did they ask, and in what context did you answer?

CG: Well, as the story goes, it started with an

Associated Press reporter who was at my mother's house gathering background information. She was asking what Newt was like growing up, what kind of a child was he, that kind of stuff. Mom was showing her pictures of the rest of the family. Saying things like "Here's a photo of my oldest daughter, this my middle daughter, these are my grandchildren."

And then she showed the reported a photo of me, which was from high school. I had a perm and long hair. Mom said to the reporter, "This is my youngest daughter Candace. Now this isn't a very recent picture of her, but that's because I don't like to show people the one of her in college." Then she took out the photo of me in college—in which I have a crewcut—and showed it to the reporter.

I guess that little light went off in [the reporter's] head and she said, "I think I need to talk to Candace." She called me for an interview that afternoon, and we spoke for about 45 minutes about some things. Politics. My views politically, what did I think about Newt's. That kind of stuff. Then I had to be somewhere else, so I said, "Is that about it?" and she said, "Yeah, those were about all the questions I wanted to ask." But when I started to get up from the table, she said, "But, oh Candace, there was one more question I wanted to ask you, and I think you know what it is."

FP: Did you?

CG: Yeah, I knew. And that's when she asked me, "Are you gay?" And I said, "Yes, I am." And she put it on the old AP wire and the rest we all know. And that was pretty soon after he was elected, so it was like the middle of November.

FP: What was your family's reaction to having your sexual orientation become public?

CG: I'm not sure. I think they were concerned that it was finally—gasp!—public knowledge. And I think they've since been surprised at the events that have happened. As far as my being accepted in the workplace where I worked with my one sister, I'm sure she was concerned. I'm sure my family expected the worst from my coming out. But they didn't really express that to me. It's not like they called me up and said, "Oh, my God, I can't believe you told!" I'm sure they had their thoughts, though.

FP: Have you had any negative public fallout?

CG: Not really, not yet. They're not exactly booking me on Rush Limbaugh, though. They're not having me out there interviewing with hostile people, so I haven't really faced any kind of animosity in that sense.

As far as people in general...they keep surprising me every day. I'll be at the mall and somebody will come up to me and say, "Candace, you don't know me, but I've seen you on television and I really respect your ability to talk about such an important subject."

The other day I was leaving the building and the guy in front of me held the door as I walked through. As I walked past him, he said, "Keep givin' em hell!"

Stuff like that, it's very reassuring, because I know that what I'm doing is the right thing and it's good to know that other people who don't have the same emotional and personal ties to the issue of gay rights see that I'm doing the right thing, too.

FP: What's it been like to go from not being at all in the public eye to suddenly being very much there?

CG: Well, it's been very busy. I haven't had any trepidation or any problem with the press aspect of it. I'm not sure if maybe we need to do research as to whether or not that's genetic, too. (Laughs) But I feel comfortable and safe talking to the media, so that's been pleasingly easy. Surprisingly easy.

FP: Given your fairly public prominence because of your brother's position as Speaker of the House, it would not have been very hard for somebody to out you. How do you feel about outing people?

CG: One of my favorite quotes from Adrienne Rich is, "When a woman tells the truth, she

continued on page 9.

"Politics are very important to me, but when I say that, I mean politics in the sense of what is affecting me right now and what can I do to change it."