

How Media Coverage Affects the Lives of Politicians' Family Members

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Luke Rankin Jr. had an unforgettable experience during his father's campaign. It was at his local voting precinct where Rankin Jr. volunteered as a poll watcher and greeted people while his father was running for reelection as State Senator, representing South Carolina's 33rd District. Not everyone whom he encountered planned to vote for his dad and, without hesitation, strangers threatened the twenty-two-year-old to, "go die," three times.

People read about politicians and their families, but it is rare for a story to encapsulate the emotional distress news coverage can cause for those closest to the situation. Of course the media reports on politicians, but recently and more so than ever before, they have reported on politicians' personal lives. Today, consequently, the families of politicians are affected in both positive and negative ways. Here is a first-hand perspective on what it is like to be the son, daughter, or spouse of a politician.

When Rankin was young, the community where he grew up, Myrtle Beach, was largely family-oriented, but as his father maintained his political seat election after election and the campaigns became more competitive and spiteful. Now, Luke A. Rankin's son believes the most recent campaign in 2020 was by far the nastiest.

His father encouraged him to actively participate in politics, and as such, Rankin represented the University of South Carolina as student body president during the 2019-2020 school year. This position provided him with experience and opportunities, but he grew concerned when his father's honesty was questioned by outside groups. In fact, he had never read so many lies published about his father.

Rankin loved Myrtle Beach and he remembers his childhood as one that was family-oriented and not influenced by politics in anyway. His father was always in the stands for his sports events, sitting next to him during Sunday morning church services, and joined his family for annual ski trips. Since he could remember, Rankin remembers his father as "an honest, funny, and supportive father who happened to be a politician." He moved back to Myrtle Beach temporarily after graduating from the University of South Carolina, but the town where he remembers growing up had changed.

A couple of weeks after returning to Myrtle Beach was when he volunteered at the local YMCA as a poll watcher, where he was the target of the political attacks.

Voters were waiting in line to enter the building while innocent children waited outside for their parents to pick them up from swim camp. After strangers began yelling, bystanders got their phones out and began recording and multiple people approached the politician's son telling him to, "go die," three times.

Keeping his composure, Rankin Jr. did not want the young children to fear the place that he once loved when he was their age. Turning to this group of the children, he said “some people just aren’t nice in the world, you know? You just have to keep your head up and keep going.”

For this reason, Rankin Jr. is still choosing to see the positive in every situation, and perhaps not reacting to all of the negativity is his way of continuing to love his hometown.

Since it was not until recently when his father’s career challenged his perception of the city where he once grew up, he still loves Myrtle Beach. From one politician’s child to another, Rankin Jr. provided words of advice for anyone in a similar position. As an older brother and son of a politician, he reminds us that, “You’re going to see things. People are going to say things that aren’t nice or, that aren’t true or, try to break you and come at you.” He emphasizes the importance that others cannot break you as long as you are confident, know who you are as a person, and hold strong to the values that you have.

For Rankin Jr., his ways of responding to the negativity portrayed by media and people are a reflection of his values. He stays positive every day, but a few things were significant factors that reflected on his character during and after his experience at the YMCA polls, as he states, “by and large, having your faith to lean back on, a strong family unit, for me, was important, great friends who I was able to, at that time, laugh off some of the crazy things that were said.”

Kristine Zilonka, a small-business owner from Myrtle Beach, the daughter of Brenda Bethune, who was elected Myrtle Beach Mayor in 2018, chose to stay away from social media soon after. The unwanted and unexpected negativity from some people even drove Zilonka to decide to delete social media apps from her phone.

A common platform for communication, social media is often used by politicians to keep the public informed; however, people are also welcome to share their thoughts on their own personal accounts. In his novel, *Intimate Politics: Publicity, Privacy and the Personal Lives of Politicians in Media-Saturated Democracies*, James Stayner states “Once personal information enters the public sphere, what a politician, especially a leading politician, does in his or her personal life has the potential to be criticized by opponents and to become a topic for wider public debate.”

Even though all symbols of urban life may feel suffocating to some, Zilonka has found ways to enjoy the comforting aspect of a close-knit community.

Reflecting on the beginning of her mother’s career, she states “My mom was never in politics until she ran for mayor, so it was strange to see such negative comments start to pop up on social media. It wasn’t often, but if she posted something, this is when negative comments could pop up.”

In fact, she feels her face-to-face confrontations with others seem far different than how they represent themselves on social media, stating “Anytime I have been in public, people have nothing but kind things to say, but behind a computer, they get balls!”

Zilonka, however, believes the media serves her mother in most positive than negative ways. In her own words, she explains her experience with news coverage, “The media does cover a lot of great things she has done, it isn’t all bad! She does get so much love from many local media outlets and individuals... she is doing amazing things and many people see that.” With both an appreciation of her mother’s hard work and the necessity of media coverage, she maintains a positive mindset and enjoys being a part of the Myrtle Beach community.

Just like most close-knit communities, people feel strongly about whom is making decisions for the town and openly speak on these opinions. As for the close friends and family of a politician, some may struggle with ignoring the negative comments, especially in a small town. However, Zilonka has taken actions and learned how to cope with the rumors and news coverage. She provides advice for those who may be in a similar position as herself, stating “My best advice, don’t look for the negativity. Stay away from social media that trigger you, block people who trigger you and don’t think twice about it.” Furthermore, she accredits her decision to delete social media with the following statement, “It has helped me stay at peace rather than bring out anxiety and anger. People will always find something they don’t like; I just don’t need to know about it!”

Regardless of being the child of a politician, it is possible to remain positive amidst the negativity, and that is exactly what Luke Rankin Jr. and Kristine Zilonka are focused on. Perhaps, every family has unique dynamics and conversations at the dinner table similar to those being held in your home.

Sidebar:

How the Exposure of Politicians’ Personal Lives Began

In 1958, Gary Hart, married Oletha Lee Ludwig. A few decades later, Hart, a U.S. Senator of Colorado, withdrew from the 1988 presidential campaign after major news outlets revealed the candidate’s personal affair. Consequently, Hart’s wife and daughter quickly became similar subjects of interest for tabloid journalists. Happily married for decades, the press never exposed this fact, just as reporters turned a blind eye to the even more flagrant and numerous liaisons of President John F. Kennedy. But Hart’s affair with Donna Rice elicited outrage among large sections of the public and doomed his presidential ambitions. As a Republican Party official explained at the time, “our country doesn’t like broken homes.”

In those days, the image you presented in public was what counted, not how you behaved in private. Since then, the public has become more tolerant of politicians’ departures from the standard family script, but also more insistent on the right to know their personal lives and family dynamics.

The *Miami Herald* was one of the first major news outlets to reveal Hart’s extramarital affairs. As reporters swarmed and surrounded his family home, Erik Calonius was in the car and sitting between the presidential candidate and his wife. Calonius fulfilled the role of a journalist as he followed and travelled with the Hart family. At the time, it was rare for reporters to cover stories exposing personal affairs of politicians.

He recently recalled, “Covering the personal issues and lives of a politician is something I did not mind doing, but initially felt that it was something that would be on the cover of a tabloid...nowadays, politicians give up their rights to privacy when they choose to represent the American people.”

For most people today, a politician’s divorce is no longer a deal breaker. Infidelity is trickier, especially when accompanied by hypocrisy, since Americans are actually more disapproving of male infidelity than they used to be. In fact, former President Bill Clinton’s affair dominated the news in 1998, just ten years after Hart’s affair came to light.

Former First Lady Hillary Clinton, recalling the sex scandal that led to her husband’s impeachment in 1998, says in a new documentary series that his extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky affected their daughter as well. She recalls telling him “Well, you’ve got to go tell your daughter, that’s worse than me.”

Mr. Clinton says he is a different person now. Still, most of the public seems willing to live with that as well, as long as the offender asks for forgiveness and the spouse extends it. “You know, we all bring our baggage to life and sometimes we do things we shouldn’t do,” he says. “It was awful what I did.”

But after so many years of exposes, apologies and rehabilitation campaigns, we have may have reached the point where scandals about a politician’s personal misbehavior have simply become a new form of reality TV, with the miscreants temporarily expelled from the tribe and sent to Redemption Island to compete for who gets to make the first comeback. Today even Newt Gingrich, now on his third marriage and having been involved in an extramarital affair while lambasting President Clinton for the same behavior, thinks he has a shot at the presidency.

As for Erik Calonius, “I felt that he [Gary Hart] was to blame for his own problems. He was trying to represent the United States...there should be some ethical standard that you would meet. As far as me being a journalist, I thought this was a story that I would never be doing. I thought there were more things that mattered.”

Perhaps those who did not experience the beginning of news coverage on personal issues, back in the 1980’s, may not agree with Calonius’ thoughts on revealing a sensitive and personal topic. Better yet, many news media outlets targeted the candidate’s wife and daughter. However, if the public felt that there was a right to this information, then Calonius was one of the few reporters who had direct access with those being directly affected, and therefore, wrote stories not based on his own opinion, rather he informed the public of what he thought was most important after having a week-long, one-on-one encounter, with the political family.

Maybe it’s time to pay a little more attention to judging the politician by their policies, leadership qualities, and prior achievements. Is it time to focus less on who fudges statistics, misrepresents data, lies about opponents, and caters to special interests and lobbyists?