

## Clinton's fan base got off to early start Women say they relate to senator

The Boston Globe

By Marcella Bombardieri, Globe Staff | August 4, 2007

CONCORD, N.H. -- Sylvia Larsen recalls using the line "two for the price of one" to describe Bill and Hillary Clinton long before Bill himself joked that voters could "buy one, get one free."

Larsen, who was juggling her nascent political career as a Concord city councilor with raising two children, saw something special in the wife of the little-known Arkansas governor when she threw the first New Hampshire house party for her in 1991 at the outset of his presidential campaign.

"It was obvious that she would be a great candidate herself," Larsen recalled.

Today, Larsen is New Hampshire's Senate president, one of two dozen women in the New Hampshire Legislature backing Hillary Clinton's bid for the White House. She is also part of a much larger group of politically active women who were first introduced to Hillary Clinton during her husband's presidential run and are now playing important roles in her own bid for the White House -- endorsing, volunteering, and raising money for her, many with enthusiasm bordering on the fanatical.

Clinton's part in her husband's White House bid is remembered mostly as that of a lightning rod. Some voters saw her as too assertive or too radical, and she didn't help by saying dismissively that "I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas."

Less noticed at the time, however, were legions of professional women whose reaction was exactly the opposite. They identified with her struggle to balance her own career with her husband's ambitions, and took the Republican attacks on her personally. They had a feeling, perhaps more visceral than rational, that as the wife of a president Hillary Clinton could alter the status of women in American political life.

They retained their loyalty -- and strong personal identification with Clinton -- through her many woes during her husband's administration and as she developed her own voice through her Senate career. Meanwhile, many of them were rising to prominence in politics, law, philanthropy, and other fields.

Today, Clinton owes her top-tier candidate status to support from female voters, and her campaign is wooing women more aggressively than any presidential campaign ever has. A New York Times/CBS News poll last month indicated that 46 percent of women have a favorable view of her, compared with 34 percent of men. And in a hypothetical matchup with Rudy Giuliani, she led among women 54 percent to 35 percent, according to a Zogby poll.

The Times poll suggested that a third of women viewed Clinton unfavorably. And other candidates are competing fiercely for women's support. Elizabeth Edwards, wife of former senator John Edwards, attacked Clinton, saying she should advocate more forcefully for women's rights. Bill Richardson, governor of New Mexico, has touted himself as the only candidate to promise that his Supreme Court nominees would support abortion rights.

But Clinton is helped enormously by her reservoir of avid supporters who have been devoted to her since she struck a chord with them in the 1992 race.

"She was a huge force in attracting women -- professional women, homemakers, mothers, single women, women of every background and life experience," said Eldie Acheson, a Wellesley classmate of Clinton's who was a cochairwoman on the 1992 Clinton-Gore campaign in New England. "Yeah, there were some people she turned off completely, but there were many more, no matter how you slice it, who were compelled to that campaign at least in part by Hillary Clinton."

Clinton's reaching out to women in 1992 was an extension of a longer record. From her days working for the Children's Defense Fund after graduating from Yale Law School, she had been involved in women's issues and was already known among feminists across the country.

The loyalty of her heavily female staff, known to insiders as "Hillaryland," is also striking. Clinton's campaign manager, Patti Solis Doyle, who started off as her scheduler in 1991, and top adviser Ann Lewis, who is leading Clinton's outreach to female voters, are just two of the many aides who have been with her for more than a decade.

As a professional woman and political player, Clinton was destined to be a new kind of president's wife -- a threat to some women, a role model for others.

Early in the 1992 campaign, the Clintons appeared on CBS's "60 Minutes" to try to neutralize the damage done by allegations that Bill had an affair with Gennifer Flowers. Hillary struck an off-note, saying "I'm not sitting here, some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette." She made the cookie-baking comment a couple of months later.

But at the same time, Clinton was winning female fans on the campaign trail who found her articulate and knowledgeable, whether at a policy forum in Boston with Margaret Marshall, now chief justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court or at a meeting of the National Breast Cancer Coalition in Virginia, where her 45-minute visit stretched to two hours.

At the Republican National Convention in August 1992, Pat Buchanan thunderously condemned her "radical feminism," saying she supported allowing children to sue their parents and viewed marriage as akin to slavery.

That galvanized women who saw themselves in her. A crowd of donors, many of them women, packed the Park Plaza ballroom the following week. They received Clinton so raucously that Acheson, who planned the lunch, compared the scene to a rave. "You wouldn't be surprised to see a body being pushed around," she said. "People were just screaming and yelling their heads off."

Across the country in Colorado, oil heiress and philanthropist Swanee Hunt was also watching Buchanan's speech. Hunt had struggled all her life between her desire to change the world and expectations that she be a "dutiful woman."

"That's when I knew it wasn't just about her," Hunt recalled. "It was about me, it was about a lot of other women. I felt, 'that's my story.' That's what drew me to her in a very personal way."

Hunt and a friend quickly threw together a fund-raiser with Hillary Clinton and Tipper Gore called "Serious Women, Serious Issues, Serious Money."

Her passion was for Hillary, not Bill (whose alleged affair irked Hunt considerably). When someone said she could have drawn the candidate himself to the \$1 million fund-raiser, Hunt responded sarcastically: "Darn, I knew we were forgetting something. We didn't invite him."

Hunt, who now directs the Women and Public Policy program at Harvard's Kennedy School, became good friends with Hillary Clinton and served as ambassador to Austria.

Larsen, the New Hampshire Senate President, never got to know Clinton as well, although she attended her share of White House Christmas parties. When the candidate called to ask for her support in the primary, Larsen wasn't ready. As Senate president, she didn't want to endorse too early, and she wanted to make sure the White House and Senate hadn't gone to Clinton's head.

But she increasingly felt that Clinton still had her feet on her ground and had the best experience of the pack.

"It was the combination of the idea of a woman setting the pace for young women in this country and the understanding she has, as a woman, of family life in this country," said Larsen, whose daughter recently graduated from college. "It felt disingenuous to keep telling people I hadn't decided."

Marcella Bombardieri can be reached at [bombardieri@ globe.com](mailto:bombardieri@globe.com). ■