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# Carol Ann Hampton Rasco Getting America's children to read is the focus of Carol Rasco's America Reads Challenge. She opened her first book in DeWitt.

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*By Felley Lawson Special to the Democrat-Gazette September 27, 1998 Publication:  
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See Carol.

See Carol run.

See Carol Rasco run all across the country with a challenge for American children and the adults in their lives.

With a good-neighbor concern she learned growing up in DeWitt, Rasco travels the United States discussing the ABCs of the America Reads Challenge. Begun by President Clinton during his 1997 State of the Union address, the initiative "is not a specific program or strategy," Rasco explains. "It's a challenge by the president to have America read." Specifically, to have every child reading by the end of the third grade.

Surrounded by shelves of children's books in the Main Library of the Central Arkansas Library System, Rasco talked about the challenge during a recent visit to Little Rock. She makes the trip to Arkansas at least once a month from Washington, D.C., which has been Rasco's home since Clinton asked her in January 1993 to serve in the White House as assistant to the president for domestic policy.

She'll be in Arkansas again Oct. 17 to receive the 1998 Distinguished Alumnus award from President Win Thompson during homecoming festivities at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway.

An adviser to Clinton since his second term as governor of Arkansas, Rasco was ready for a different challenge after the '96 election. So she accepted an offer from Clinton and Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley to become senior adviser to Riley and director of the America Reads Challenge.

According to Riley, the job dovetailed perfectly with Rasco's career-long interest in educating children.

"Carol Rasco is one of the most dedicated, tireless advocates for children that I've ever worked with," he says. "I've known her since President Clinton and I served together as governors and am proud of her endless efforts to improve the lives of our nation's young people -- particularly her current focus on making sure children can read well and independently by the end of third grade. Her energy, enthusiasm and compassion continue to inspire."

Rasco would probably credit those attributes to the nurturing of her parents, Ruby and Barnes Hampton. She says she and her sisters, Martha Carle of Little Rock and Becki Cullipher of DeWitt, were reared in an atmosphere where big family gatherings were frequent -- and the definition of "family" often was stretched. Ruby Hampton once invited so many people to Easter dinner that the gathering had to be moved to the dining room at the Oak Hills Country Club. In the crowd there were old friends and new, some without family or acquaintances nearby.

By example, the Hamptons also encouraged their daughters to be involved in their town. "Mother was my Scout leader, and Dad was my Sunday school teacher," Rasco recalls. "He was the only daddy I knew who taught elementary Sunday school. I was so proud. I thought my daddy was one of the preachers, because if the doors were open, we went."

Besides hanging out with friends in her youth group, Rasco loved band -- she played B-flat clarinet, just like her dad before her. When Rasco and her sisters were small children, their parents also introduced them to reading. "I remember seeing them read a lot, whether it was newspapers, magazines or books," she says. "Visiting the library in DeWitt is one of my first memories of life; it was in the basement of the War Memorial Community Building."

After high school graduation, Rasco studied theater for a year at Hendrix College in Conway before transferring to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. The time she spent studying under professor Rosemary Henenberg at Hendrix prepared her for a stage

she didn't anticipate, giving invaluable insight on how to step into the shoes of another person. "It was some of the best education I had working with people," she recalls; it also reinforced her parents' instruction to always think about the circumstances of others.

She worked in her first political campaign at the university -- helping Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty get elected student body president.

Like chapters in a well-developed novel, Rasco's experiences in different phases of her life worked together to prepare her for the work she now finds so exciting and fulfilling. A bachelor's in elementary education from the university and a master's in elementary counseling from UCA took her into public schools and helped her relate to children and parents representing "a lot of different configurations of families," she says.

The vantage point from which she viewed educational issues shifted dramatically when her son, Hamp, was born in 1973, then was diagnosed with cerebral palsy a year later. "When he was born, I was told by well-meaning health officials I should start thinking about which institution to send him to."

Hamp's pediatrician, Dr. Frazier Kennedy, introduced Rasco and her then-husband, Terry, to North Hills Services for the Handicapped Inc., where Thea Spatz of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock directed a parent-child intervention program. On alternating weeks, Rasco and her son attended sessions with other parents and children, counselors and therapists. Then a therapist would visit them at home, giving advice about how to stimulate Hamp and help him learn.

Seeing after Hamp's development consumed most of her energy, but Rasco stayed involved as a volunteer on the boards of the Friends of the Arkansas Repertory Theatre and the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra Society. She also was chairman of the first Bargain Barn fund-raiser for the Junior League of Little Rock and was active in her church, First United Methodist. And it was through her work with Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families that Rasco became friends with Hillary Rodham Clinton -- having first met the Clintons during Bill Clinton's campaign for attorney general.

While Hamp was a child, Rasco lobbied frequently for state laws that would ensure equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities. She also was a member for four years of the Arkansas Developmental Services Board. In 1980, in the middle of her term on the board, her daughter Mary-Margaret was born.

When Mary-Margaret was 18 months old, Rasco got a call from Betsey Wright offering her the chance to coordinate Clinton's Pulaski County gubernatorial campaign. Rasco told Wright she wasn't sure she knew enough to direct the campaign, "But she said, 'I can teach you.' And she did," Rasco remembers. "Within two days I had a sitter and, as my children say, 'Mother's been working for Bill Clinton ever since.' "

After the '82 campaign, "I thought I'd go back home," Rasco says. But Clinton asked her to be his liaison to the Departments of Health and Human Services. When Clinton became active in the National Governor's Association, he wanted Rasco to be his staff representative there, too. That meant weekly trips to Washington working on issues that affected the state, such as child care, health care and welfare reform.

From 1983-89, one of Rasco's colleagues in the governor's office was Sam Bratton, a fellow clarinet player from Dixie Band Camp days and classmate at Hendrix. Now commissioner of the Public Service Commission, Bratton remembers that Rasco "was always a very bright and hard-working person -- and goal-oriented -- even when I knew her in band camp."

Besides her work as liaison to the NGA and Health and Human Services, Rasco also served as Clinton's executive assistant for governmental operations from 1985-91. Bratton says, "It was always amazing how well she balanced her personal and professional life and managed to get it all done. She had a great deal of responsibility in the governor's office and worked long, hard days, and also was by all appearances a good and successful mother -- and was as good a mother as she was a staffer for the governor."

When Clinton tossed his hat into the race for president, Rasco opted to stay in the governor's office rather than join the campaign. "I think it's important for someone who's going to work on policy to experience what a campaign is like. It does help you understand the process better. But I've done my one," she says, smiling. So when the campaign crew hit the trail, Rasco helped keep things running at the state Capitol. Daily conference calls at 8:30 a.m. kept the governor's schedule synchronized.

Late in the summer of 1992, Clinton asked Rasco to think about joining his White House staff if he were to win the election. Hamp was a senior in high school, and Mary-Margaret was entering junior high. "Ten days after the election, [Clinton] called me in and told me he'd like me to consider being domestic policy adviser. I agreed to do it."

Hamp continued to live in Arkansas, but Mary-Margaret joined her mother in Washington, D.C., to begin eighth grade. The Rascos divorced in the fall of 1993.

In some ways the pace of Washington was very different from life in Arkansas, but Rasco says her new job didn't seem particularly daunting. "I think I was more nervous about whether I would know what to do at all those inaugural events," she jokes. "I knew [Clinton] wanted us to look at things we'd looked at all along." Working in the White House "was very exciting, very high pressure -- not very different, though, than what I experienced here" in terms of the workload.

She says she and her daughter shared an awestruck feeling about the place itself. Mary-Margaret often started completing her homework assignments in her mom's office after school. "Sometimes she'd just stop and say, 'Can you believe I'm doing my homework in the White House?' " Rasco recalls, laughing. "I kind of felt that way about working there. Every morning as I drove or walked through the gates, it hit me that way. If you ever lost that sense of history about what this place is, you ought to turn around and leave."

These days, Hamp lives in a group home setting directed by the Arkansas Easter Seal Society and works in the mail room at the Arkansas Department of Health. "And there is no prouder state employee than Hamp Rasco," his mom says. After graduating as valedictorian of her class from Mount St. Mary Academy, Mary-Margaret has begun her first year at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

For Rasco, one of Washington's biggest lessons has been that "there aren't enough people in decision-making positions who understand service ... and what it's like to be on the front lines, and that bothers me."

She adds, "We can sit at a table in Washington, D.C., and talk about writing policy, and if we're going to demand X, Y or Z if a grant is to be given, and very often people ... don't have a sense of how difficult that is to carry out at the local level. People can often have good initiatives and good ideas, but often they have no grass-roots experience."

No matter what the issue, she believes, "You cannot be a policy maker and stay in an office five to seven days a week if you're working on proposals to make progress." With the America Reads Challenge, for instance: "You've got to go out and sit with a low-income parent who doesn't know where her next meal is coming from. For starters, that mother may not be able to read herself. So what are the real-world implications of things?"

At the end of Clinton's first term, Rasco says, "I'd had 14 years of covering policy, A to Z. My staff worked on immigration, crime and safety, health care, education, welfare -- the

gamut. I was ready to do something a bit more focused. That's when Secretary Riley and the president asked me to consider leading the America Reads Challenge."

The idea for the challenge was developed after Clinton read results of the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress; he was troubled to find that 40 percent of fourth-graders across the country were not reading at the basic level. "From birth to the end of third grade, we say children learn to read," says Rasco. "At fourth grade, we switch the words: We say they're reading to learn. So if a child is not reading well and independently by fourth grade, he's going to fall behind."

Rasco explains there are five keys to meeting the president's challenge. From their headquarters in the Department of Education, Rasco and her staff work with private and public partners to promote these strategies.

The emphasis first is on early childhood, starting within families and in settings such as child-care centers and Head Start programs. They also look at what Rasco calls "in-class initiatives: How are teachers trained? What kind of in-service is provided?"

Then there's an effort to provide extended learning time for children. Tutors, volunteers, federal work-study students and retired teachers are recruited to read in schools and early-childhood settings. A program called "Reach Out and Read" enlists pediatricians to talk with parents about how to encourage their children to read. Collecting dependable research on literacy is the fourth goal, and stepping into a bully pulpit is the last.

"As you can tell, I have no trouble talking about this," she says. "We're looking for ways we can help educate the public. Children's literacy is everybody's concern. A lot of times when I'm going to visit a program, I ask if I could meet several of the parents." Rasco has also been known to chat with parents in libraries or medical centers. "I try to help them see that whether parents think they're capable or not, they really are the first teacher a child is going to look to. Even if a parent cannot read, they do not need to feel like their child is going to be behind."

Telling stories to children or just talking with them are excellent ways to stimulate children to think, Rasco says. "This goes back to my son. I would do a running conversation. 'We've stopped the car because the light is red. And now we turn left ...' I learned with my son to be constantly describing what we were doing."

She adds, "The grocery store is a wonderful place to talk with children. If you can talk,

you can be giving this input to your child."

Other government agencies have accepted the challenge, too, she adds. "The Department of Housing and Urban Development is beginning to put computer centers and learning centers into housing developments. We're working with groups to get volunteers to go in and work with children on reading and homework. We try to bring different services together to present a whole package of services to children and their parents."

According to Rasco, one of the beauties of the America Reads Challenge is that there's a place in it for everyone. "I desire that we all look at what we can do to help families grow their children. I don't think government should be sitting in the middle of the dinner table with the family, but at some point there may be things they'll need." Like affordable health care for children, she says, and literacy education.

Even with an exciting and challenging new responsibility under way, Rasco says her main focus hasn't strayed since her career began practice teaching in a classroom in Springdale. "This is what I've been about from the time I started teaching school. I'm really dedicated to looking at what we can do to help families be everything they can be as they raise their children."

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