

[← Back to Document](#)

Dani Denise Miles Joy - Mayoral magnetism

By *FELLEY LAWSON* SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE November 28, 2010
Publication: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette: Northwest Edition (AR)* Page: 41 Word
Count: 2415

SELF

PORTRAIT

Date and place of birth: Jan. 10, 1958, Weatherford, Texas

Occupation: Mayor of Eureka Springs

My greatest strength is I've learned a lot of patience. If you're in politics, you better learn it.

People stop me in public to ask, "When are you going to fix the water on my street?" or "Can the police stop using radar on my road?" Daily-living things.

The item my family would identify with me is my piano.

My favorite item on the menu at Casa Colina is seafood crepes.

The best advice I ever received was from my dad: He always believed we girls were as good as any man; all we had to do was try. He'd say, "Don't ever accept you're not good enough just because you're a woman."

Behind my back they say: In this town? Everything!

One word to sum me up: Driven.

EUREKA SPRINGS - With barely two months left in her term as mayor of this quirky mountain hamlet, Dani Joy is playing Beat the Clock.

The clock should watch its back.

Joy is an expert at this game. For almost four years, she's crammed full-time workweeks into a part-time job, always with an eye toward strengthening Eureka Springs' status as one of the region's premier arts colonies and tourist destinations.

She's learned patience in the mayor's office but still struggles with the pace of government action. "I want everything to happen now. I want things to be better today," she says. "Government doesn't work that way. Government is slow, and it's hard to get used to that."

The job's had its challenges, but promoting her adopted hometown is a piece of cake.

It's just a matter of sharing the love.

"Texas is always in my heart, but Arkansas is my soul," says Joy, who grew up outside Fort Worth. "I knew from the first day I got here."

Joy's enthusiasm for Eureka Springs was born in 1978, when she and her first husband, the late John Petty, stopped here on their honeymoon. As the newlyweds navigated Spring Street, taking in the architecture and ambience, she predicted this town would someday be their home.

In 1988, the couple bought a vacation house in Eureka. A year later, they relocated from Fort Worth permanently with their daughters, and relaxed into the easy rhythm of life they'd come to appreciate here.

Eureka may be better known for its endearing eccentricities, but the charm of its slow pace and neighborly vibe is a throwback to an earlier time. For a town that pays most of its bills with tourism dollars, Joy believes this is a priceless asset.

"We're not Branson or Hot Springs. We don't have big theme parks. What we have is a feeling that people get when they're here," says Joy. "We're selling something intangible, but it's so incredibly important."

In Eureka, she says, community is family. "We have problems and issues, but we're connected to each other. The entire [town] is that way."

Joy believes the appeal of stepping into the past is strong; visitors sense the connection she's describing and want to be a part of it.

Listening to Joy reflect on the qualities that set Eureka Springs apart, two things become clear. She loves the town, and she has that special brand of charisma that makes it hard for those in her orbit to resist her enthusiasm.

Joy, 52, took office in January 2007, just a week into recovery from hip-replacement surgery to relieve the effects of rheumatoid arthritis. She inherited immediate challenges, including figuring out how to pay for completion of the last phase of construction on the city's \$3.5 million wastewater plant when the \$1.6 million allocated for it had already been spent. Also, the city Advertising and Promotion Commission was in critical need of leadership.

Soon after being sworn in, Joy asked Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism Executive Director Richard Davies for advice about how to improve the tourism industry in Eureka.

Eureka Springs had become disconnected from the cooperative networking that helps other Arkansas towns work together to draw tourists to their area and maximize advertising dollars.

Joy formed the Mayor's Task Force on Tourism to energize local business people who know the dynamics of the industry. She sought opportunities to reconnect with nearby

cities, such as Fayetteville, Springdale, Rogers and Bentonville, and to connect at the state level when, for example, she arranged for Eureka Springs to host the Governor's Conference on Tourism last year for the first time in 15 years.

The art of promotion requires recognizing what's important in the big picture, "and I think she's very good at that," says Davies.

Meanwhile, Joy addressed the construction financing shortfall by working with Stephens Inc. to structure a bond issue, then began untangling a series of crises that had developed in the absence of a city finance director. She also brought together the heads of each department in city government for weekly meetings.

She's become very attached to this group and says the hardest thing about leaving office "is to walk away from the best set of department heads any mayor could ask for. They don't just do the job; they really care."

Joy forged a connection between the town and Bentonville's Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. When the museum opens in 2011, a daily shuttle will transport visitors to and from Eureka Springs.

She formed the Mayor's Arts Council as part of her mission to cultivate a true arts colony in Eureka. On her watch, the city earned four of its six appearances on American Style Magazine's annual list of the Top 25 arts destinations in the country.

This year, she's proud to see Spring Street named one of the American Planning Association's "10 Great Streets for 2010" as part of its Great Places in America program.

Joyce Zeller, owner of the Spa Shop, has served on the city council under Joy's leadership. From Joy's first days in office, she "assembled a team of people who were willing to work day and night to do what needed to be done," Zeller says.

"If you have that quality that makes people like you and want to please you, then you've got it made. And she's got it in spades. You like her when you meet her, and you want to do whatever she wants you to do. That's pure gold for a leader."

OFTEN CHALLENGED

James DeVito has also served on the city council during Joy's tenure. They met in 1990 when Joy first got into the restaurant business, opening a diner three doors down from his eatery, DeVito's. Over the years, he's observed, "She's dedicated a large part of her life to the betterment of Eureka Springs. I've had the good fortune to sit on the council with her, and even though we haven't agreed on 100 percent of the issues, I've found her to be fair, equitable, gracious, strong, forthright."

Charisma is a valuable gift, especially for a politician, but it's not a superpower. Joy has encountered stiff opposition over issues, including the city's management of an outdoor art exhibit called The Artery, the establishment of a registry that recognizes "domestic partnerships" and the installation of new parking meters to increase revenue, much to the chagrin of preservationists who think the meters spoil the historic feel of downtown.

"You can only do the best you possibly can, what you know is right. Somebody is always upset," Joy says. "People usually are focused on the one thing that's important to them. In

reality, it's all important."

Joy balances enthusiastic civic involvement with devotion to the priorities in her personal life. First comes her family - husband Joe Joy, her now grown daughters Jennifer Dransfield and Rachal Hyatt and their families, and her 10-year-old son, Alex Wilson, who has Down's syndrome.

Running a close second is the Joys' restaurant, Casa Colina. The mayor often spends her lunch hour there cooking, then returns after work at the mayor's office in time to prepare for dinner service.

On her journey toward making a life for herself and her family in Eureka, Joy has often found herself at the intersection of public and private life. Her work ethic recalls the example of her late father, Alvie Miles, a lineman for the former Southwestern Bell Telephone Co. in Weatherford, Texas, who refused to let his rheumatoid arthritis keep him from climbing telephone poles every day.

Her experiences parenting a special-needs child inspired her first venture into politics in 2002, when she ran for a seat in the state House of Representatives.

With proposals to cut several Medicaid programs, "the Legislature was balancing the budget off the backs of children with disabilities and the elderly, and that was unacceptable to me," says Joy, adding that she wanted to give a voice to Arkansas families with disabled children because she knew their struggles so personally.

"I really believe we are sent into this life to do something," says Joy. "It's not all about us."

A FIERCE ADVOCATE

Joy didn't know Alex had Down's syndrome until the day he was born. "At the hospital, I was told, 'You need to forget you had him and start over,' and I was sent home. Nobody from [the Department of Human Services] ever came to my room to tell me how to get to people who would help him," she says, recalling the anguish of those first weeks of Alex's life. "You're grieving the child you thought was coming, you're going to the doctor two or three times a week, you're not sleeping - the entire family is in a state of upheaval, and there's nobody to help."

Joy credits her friend Beverly Beard of Eureka Springs with helping her find her way. Over time, Joy learned about programs and benefits available to Arkansas families like hers.

"Then comes this edict from the Legislature, saying, 'We're cutting funding because we have to balance our budget,'" she says. "I think they forget a lot of times that they're set up to protect people who can't protect themselves."

Facing the challenges that came with meeting Alex's needs inspired Joy to enter public service and motivated her daughter, Rachal Hyatt, to pursue a career helping kids with disabilities. Hyatt was 16 when her little brother came along during her mom's second marriage, which ended in divorce. Now a mom herself to 7-year-old Preston, Hyatt is the counselor at Eureka Springs Elementary School. Her husband, Earl, is chief of police in Eureka.

Both of Joy's daughters say they learned how to process the ups and downs of public life from their mom. Jennifer, a staffing specialist who commutes to her job with WorkSource in Springdale, is the wife of Eureka paramedic Thomas Dransfield. The couple's daughter, Katy, is 13.

"The entire time we were growing up, she taught us to be strong and independent women," says Dransfield. "She's always had a strong understanding of who she is and what she's capable of doing, and she's taught her daughters how to find that as well. That's led to her success at not paying attention to public criticism, because she's very comfortable with who she is and what she has to offer.

"I'm so proud of her," Hyatt says. "My dad died when we were pretty young; I was 11. She spent part of my teenage years raising me alone, and she was very dedicated to all of that, then finally she did something for herself, something she was good at. She wanted to help people, so she took a chance."

Joe Joy, a Maine transplant who retired to Eureka in 2005 after a career in the hospitality industry, met his future wife when she was running for office.

"I said, 'Dani, you're going to win as mayor. And when you win, I want to serve somehow with your administration and make this town better,'" he recalls. It was almost a year before the two got to know each other, but as they did, "All of a sudden, boom! It became obvious how I was going to serve her, not as a commissioner, but as her husband. We fell in love pretty quick."

They married in September 2007.

"Dani is the most incredibly ethical person I've ever met in my life. She wouldn't let me make a copy with the city's copy machine without paying for it," he says. "So when she gets criticism from people, it's very upsetting for me."

He remembers the 70-and 80-hour workweeks she logged during her first couple of years in office. "I've got her down to maybe 40 or 50 a week."

When she needs a break from the stresses of her job, Dani Joy turns to her Kawai baby grand piano. She began taking lessons when she was a little girl to get out of housework, but soon discovered she had a passion for playing. She studied to be a concert pianist at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. Though her career took her down a business path instead, the piano is still a very important part of her life.

"She's a pretty open person, but as much as she's in that limelight, she loves to get home and sit behind her piano by herself and play," says Hyatt. "That was one of my favorite things growing up, hearing her play Rachmaninoff or Beethoven. I always loved that. The piano really is her calming mechanism."

So with all she's accomplished, is there anything she'd still like to do?

"Tons!" she says. "There's a lot I hate to walk away from. We need sidewalks on [U.S. highway] 62. There are none up there, and it's dangerous. We're also seeking federal funding to fix our 120-year-old underground tunnel. And we want to make more curb cuts in downtown sidewalks so they're more accessible to wheelchairs."

With less than two months left in her term, she was in front of the Municipal League of Arkansas lobbying on behalf of the city of Eureka Springs to extend health benefits to domestic partners. On Nov. 15, the Municipal League announced it would grant the request, making Eureka Springs the first city in Arkansas to offer health insurance to domestic partners of its employees.

Joy isn't likely to rest for long after she leaves office. Her husband says she's already looking for her next project. "We've got this old icehouse near the end of town that she'd love to turn into a children's museum."

There'll be more time to spend with her children and grandchildren, and more time to invest in her restaurant, says Dransfield. Whatever her mom decides to do, "I'm sure she will still find ways to fight for the underdog. She's not afraid to be that voice. Fighting for the underdog has always been a passion of hers, and she'll do it loudly and proudly."

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RYAN McGEENEY Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RYAN McGEENEY

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette: Northwest Edition (AR)

Date: November 28, 2010

Page: 41

Copyright 2010, 2012, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette: Northwest Edition.