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Janet McCain Huckabee

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Caption:Photos by STEPHEN B. THORNTON, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

I think it's so important to be yourself.'

"To me, home is where you are. If You're not happy in a small, wood-frame house in a small town, you're not going to be happy in this brick mansion."

With eyes wide open to new experiences, Janet Huckabee is comfortable as Arkansas' first lady. But don't call her ma'am.

Sometimes when motorists touring Little Rock's Quapaw Quarter slow to get a look at the stately Governor's Mansion, they see a tall, slender, athletic-looking woman poking around in the gardens or out in the swing on the lawn. She strikes up a conversation with them, asks where they're from and how they're spending their day in the capital city. She offers to photograph them in front of the historic home and, smiling, sends them on their way.

Many times they drive off without realizing they've just met Janet Huckabee, whose first day as Arkansas' first lady on July 16 was also her birthday.

Huckabee is a familiar figure to Arkansans who've followed her husband's career, first as a Southern Baptist pastor and president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, then as the lieutenant governor who commuted from the family's Texarkana home.

The Huckabees and their three children are now collected under one big roof in Little Rock, where they moved when Mike Huckabee became governor after a tense and well-publicized changing of the guard.

Those who don't know much about Janet Huckabee won't have to speculate about her based on public appearances, speeches or television footage.

If you want to know anything about her, all you have to do is ask.

"I want the people of this state to know they can talk to me about anything," she says. "I want to be approachable."

So a couple of visitors to the mansion recently took her up on that offer on a morning when friends from out of town -- missionary friends, actually, from out of the country -- also dropped by for a visit. The long table in the dining room was set for a formal luncheon where Huckabee would later act as hostess, sitting in for her husband.

Huckabee comes across as someone whose feathers are not easily ruffled. In this flurry of activity, she is calm, easy-going, friendly. She pops open a can of caffeine-free Diet Coke before a photo shoot, then leaves it behind after a few sips as she follows a couple of visitors upstairs to the comfortable, airy sitting room that doubles as her office.

Three more partially empty Diet Coke cans sit around the room and on a table covered in bills and bank statements.

In the course of settling her family in their new home, Huckabee's been resolving old accounts and establishing new ones -- a couple of the normal things about running a household that may not be all that much fun, but she doesn't seem to mind.

Some parts of establishing this new life, though, will take some getting used to. Arkansas' first lady says she isn't crazy about sitting at head tables, giving speeches, having her picture made -- "And what am I doing for a living?"

She also hates being called "ma'am." Just ask the mansion staff.

"Ma'am is not my name," Huckabee says. "Security and I go around and around about things like that."

Asked how she feels in her new surroundings, she says it's not necessarily a question of whether she feels "at home" in the Governor's Mansion. "To me, home is where you are. If you're not happy in a small, wood-frame house in a small town, you're not going to be happy in this brick mansion," she says.

"But there's lots to get used to living here. For people to do constantly for me is a big, big adjustment. I don't want (the mansion staff) to think they're my employees. I want them to feel like my family."

Consider the story of an Arkansas state trooper on duty at the Governor's Mansion, whose daughter could not start second grade in August when teachers went on strike in the Pulaski County Special School District. Since the child had nowhere to go, Huckabee invited the girl to spend her days with her until classes began.

"We watched movies, went four-wheeling and swimming -- I had a great time," recalls Huckabee, who also took the child to play with the daughter of her friend, JoNell Caldwell of Benton.

"We had so much fun," Caldwell says. "No one saw Janet do that" for the trooper and his wife; "that's just who she is."

With the whole state and even the national Republican Party watching, "I think it's so important to be yourself," Huckabee says. "You don't go to school" to learn to be first lady.

If you could, though, "Preacher's Wife 101" would be the course to take.

"Going through the ministry and the pastorate is the absolute best place" to learn the ropes of public life, she says. As a minister's family, "You're always in a fishbowl, on a pedestal, shaking hands with people, raising money, working with volunteers, sometimes smiling when you don't want to smile.

"But the big difference is that when you're in that fishbowl and on that pedestal in the ministry, people put you there as their example," she adds. "They want you to be their leader. In politics, in that fishbowl, on that pedestal, they can't wait to knock you off. And that's sad. There's a real parallel in a lot of ways."

In political life, "It's hard to get used to people saying ugly, untrue things," says Huckabee. "It used to not bother me at all if people didn't like me. Now I would say that I want the people of Arkansas to be pleased. I don't want to do anything that would embarrass myself, and I don't want to embarrass my state, either."

While her husband's in office, "I want to see it all, meet people in every area, and I want them to know I like to do the same things they like to do."

Especially if they like to be outside skiing, shooting hoops, swimming or flying an airplane -- a few of Huckabee's favorite things. She says her husband teases that she has to be entertained every minute, but she counters that she just enjoys life and learning about other people.

When she attended the Republican National Convention last summer, she rode along for a few hours with members of the U.S. Border Patrol and with firefighters employed by the California Department of Forestry. Huckabee believes that keeping your eyes and ears open to new experiences "helps you understand more about what other people do and how they live."

Of course, there are a lot of things she knows about from experience. Like growing up in a single-parent family. Huckabee is one of five children whose parents divorced when she was a little girl. Her mother, Pat Stephens, is a former county clerk of Hempstead County who reared all her children to work hard and work together.

Stephens says Huckabee was "very bashful and pitifully timid when she was little. She thought she was a boy because she had two older brothers, and she had to be tough to put up with them. They made her life miserable."

Then, "When she got to junior high and found out about basketball, she came out of all of her timidity and lack of self-confidence -- she was such a good player. She was going to win or die," Stephens adds. "And that gave her something to excel in. She has an older sister who was a straight-A student. Then Janet came along, and she needed something all her own."

With a lucky No. 13 emblazoned on her basketball jerseys -- and all over everything in her room at home -- Huckabee was a standout at Hope High School. She was involved in other activities at school, too, just like her future husband. After one of her ballgames, the two had their first date over cheeseburgers, french fries and milkshakes at a nearby truck stop -- "Everything else was closed." On their second date, they went bowling in Prescott. During their first year in college at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Mike Huckabee roomed with Caldwell's husband, Rick. During the summer after their freshman year, the Rev. Rick Caldwell married the Huckabees -- who were, and are, polar yet complementary opposites.

Stephens jokes that when Mike Huckabee told her he wanted to marry her daughter, "I asked him, 'Why would you want to marry Janet? She can't sing or play the piano, and all preachers' wives can do that.' But she had her own talents," like running television cameras to broadcast services, working with elderly church members or cheering at ballgames for teen-agers in the congregation. "And that was her calling, I think, in church work."

When the couple married, Mike Huckabee pastored a church and worked at two radio stations while carrying a full load of classes. "He was a busy boy," says Janet Huckabee. "But Mike is a machine. He's not a normal person. He was a machine then, and he is now. I feel shafted if I don't get 10 hours' sleep. He gets by on four or five."

The couple were living in a \$40-a-month duplex in Arkadelphia when they learned that Janet Huckabee had cancer in her back. They were told that if she lived she would probably never walk and surely never have children.

JoNell Caldwell says the Huckabees "are best friends. They don't always agree on everything, yet they have a very, very strong commitment." When Janet's cancer was diagnosed, "They had a commitment that whatever her illness would bring about -- if she never walked again -- no matter what, it was like, 'We'll take it as it comes.' Janet takes each day as it comes, and gets through it."

She adds, "I hated watching them go through it, but they were stronger because of it. You always grow stronger through the hard knocks."

Doctors' prophecies turned out not to be true for Huckabee; the couples' children are John Mark, a sophomore at OBU; David, 16; and Sarah, 14. There have been other hard knocks and unexpected turns during the years, though.

The couple's transition from the ministry to politics was met with some skepticism. Mike Huckabee was soundly defeated during his first statewide race, which cost his family most of its savings. And then there was the unusual and unsettling transition of power this summer when the lieutenant governor became governor.

But all along, Janet Huckabee has had a feeling that her husband's future was bright; "I've always pictured him doing big and mighty things."

And as for her place in the big scheme of things? "I guess I thought I was going to watch from the sidelines," she jokes.

In the excitement of seeing her husband become governor, "It didn't dawn on me that I would be first lady, and that has a weirdness about it. I can't imagine anyone being impressed sitting down and having a Coke with me. I can't see that that's a big thrill.

"I'm not into titles. I don't need a title to enjoy life and have fun," she adds. "I guess that's the drawback of my laid-back attitude. It's not that I don't respect the position (of first lady); the attitude I have is, 'Let's all be friends here.' And I hope I can convey that to the people."

Huckabee seems to have been conveying that message most of her life. And chances are, she won't stop now.

Life in the spotlight "hasn't changed her a bit, and I don't look for it to change her," says Stephens. "She's going to be Janet no matter what."

SELF PORTRAIT

Janet Huckabee

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH -- July 16, 1955, Lake Charles, La.

BEST ASSET -- The fact that I'm extremely laid-back and easygoing.

WORST HABIT -- Sometimes my best asset has been a problem, as well.

FAVORITE WAYS TO SPEND A SATURDAY -- I love to swim, jet ski, ride a four-wheeler -- outdoor stuff. I like to fly, and I prefer to be the pilot if at all possible. I enjoy life and like to live it to its fullest.

TRADEMARK EXPRESSION -- This, too, shall pass.

FIRST JOB -- I was a lifeguard as a teen-ager.

EVERYONE BUT ME HAS TRIED -- Skydiving, which is on my list of things to do.

LAST GOOD LAUGH -- About 30 seconds ago. I love to laugh. I think it's good medicine.

MY HERO IS -- John Wayne.

I'M MOST COMFORTABLE WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE -- Laid-back, easygoing, fun. I like real people.

PEOPLE WHO KNEW ME IN HIGH SCHOOL THOUGHT -- I was fun. We had a good time; I think they would say I was a character.

BEST ADVICE I'VE BEEN GIVEN -- To be yourself.

BEHIND MY BACK, THEY SAY -- She's crazy; what have we done here?

ONCE I GOT CAUGHT -- By a policeman when I was about to throw a water balloon at a friend on Halloween.

ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP -- Happy.