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MARTHA ZOE WHETSTONE

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If you need California's 54 electoral votes, who you gonna call?
Martha Whetstone. A transplanted Arkansan, she busts
Republicans by having fun with her politics.

After hearing the identity of their commencement speaker, the University of San Francisco law class of '85 exclaimed collectively, "Bill who?"

Then all 300 sets of puzzled eyes turned to Martha Whetstone, an Arkansas native who had gotten herself on the graduation committee, stacked it with her friends and taken on the responsibility of recruiting someone to give the keynote address to her classmates.

She had promised someone great, and delivered the virtually unknown governor of her home state.

During a recent visit to Little Rock to visit her parents, Carolyn and Bernard, Whetstone - who now serves the Democratic National Committee as northern California Political Director -- recalled how taken aback her classmates were to discover that Bill Clinton would be in the spotlight on their graduation day.

"Everyone was asking me, 'Why is your hick governor coming to speak to us?' Their attitude was, 'What could he possibly have to say to us enlightened Californians?' " she laughs.

And her reply?

"You guys wait -- one day you'll thank me, because he's going to be president."

As is often the case with Clinton, he began his speech, and "In about 60 seconds, he had them in the palm of his hand," Whetstone says. During a commencement reception in the Fairmont Hotel, "People were coming up to him saying, 'Governor, you really ought to think about running for national office.'" Now, when Whetstone runs into her classmates, "They're constantly bragging that Bill Clinton spoke at their law school graduation."

Which speaks as well for Whetstone's determination as for Clinton's way with a crowd.

"She's the most determined individual, probably, in the world," says Little Rock lawyer Bud Whetstone of his sister. "You can argue with her, explaining why she can't do something, and she kind of goes into a stare. And the next thing you know, she'll do exactly what you said can't be done. She's somebody to have on your side, for sure."

You see, this is the kid sister who, at 12, pestered her parents for a horse and was told repeatedly she couldn't have one. Finally, her mom and dad agreed that if she could earn the money to buy a horse, she could do it, believing that the challenge was tough enough to discourage her.

Wrong.

"I was so obsessed," Whetstone remembers. Doing chores, running errands, even rummaging through her mother's purse and pockets on occasion, she saved \$125 and bought a horse from the veterinarian father of a friend in El Dorado, where the Whetstone family lived. She then perfected her equestrian skills riding in shows and competing all over the region.

It never occurred to her that she couldn't scrape together enough money to buy her beloved horse, just like "it never crossed my mind that he would decline" when she asked Clinton to speak to her law school class. Even though, at the time, she hadn't seen him in years. "Once you are his friend, you're always his friend."

"I think she recognized that quality in the president because she has that quality herself," says Whetstone's close friend Marsha Scott, deputy assistant to the president for political outreach at the White House.

On the phone from Chicago, where she's helping organize the Democratic National Convention, Scott says, "Martha is one of the hardest-working, most outrageous, hysterical people I've ever met. She has a great wit and a great mind, but one of the most tender hearts I've ever known. Martha would do anything to help a friend."

In 1991, Whetstone joined forces with Scott to help their mutual friend Clinton establish a presidential campaign in northern California. Whetstone had first become a Clinton supporter fresh out of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

Through Whetstone's sister, Ruth Wagner (today head of the volunteer operation for the upcoming Chicago convention), and her former brother-in-law, Bill Thompson, Whetstone signed up as a volunteer in Clinton's first campaign, a 1974 unsuccessful congressional race in Northwest Arkansas. Hitting the pavement to canvass neighborhoods or distribute pamphlets dovetailed with her longtime interest in politics.

"I liked history and civics in school, always liked reading the newspaper," she says, adding that Clinton's charisma was contagious. "You can't sit down and have a conversation with Bill Clinton and not be awestruck. And I was."

She remembers that campaign as "homey, grass-rootsy. It definitely had an Arkansas feel to it." In fact, taking a mental leap from that race to Clinton's quest for the presidency, she says, "That's a hell of a jump."

For a few years after college, Whetstone also sampled jobs in a variety of places including the Social Services Division on Aging and the Department of the Interior in Washington. She even taught school in Europe before moving to California in 1980 to help in Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign.

Whetstone worked for a while in a few other campaigns there before starting law school in 1982. After graduation, she became a litigator with an Oakland law firm. All along, she says, "I had never given up the idea that this guy would be president."

So when Clinton threw his hat in the presidential ring, Whetstone got a call from a Clinton aide asking her to help drum up support for the candidate. That's when she met Scott, who was living in Santa Cruz. With a handful of other Clinton fans, they started the northern California campaign of '92.

Clinton had given Whetstone about 30 names of people in the Bay Area who he thought might be willing to volunteer. She and Scott divided the list and began to make phone calls. "Then at some point, it kind of took over my life," says Whetstone, who soon joined the campaign staff as director of special events and fund raising. She and Scott became known as the "M&Ms," enthusiastic Arkansas cheerleaders for Clinton in California.

Whetstone recalls, "People would call the campaign office and say, 'I want to talk to that girl, Martha or Marsha. She's from Arkansas,' We'd say, 'Well, believe it or not ...' "

There weren't many prospective voters who shared their enthusiasm in the winter of '92, when Clinton's infamous "character issues" -- questions about his military record and marital fidelity -- caused a severe drop in the presidential polls.

In California, "Everyone thought he was off the radar map except us," says Whetstone. "To this day, I can tell you every single person who stood with us during that time. Those people who really did not know him and were loyal during those dark days, I have a special feeling for. A lot of what I do is about friendship and loyalty."

She adds, "The mean side of politics infuriates me. I have a new admiration for people who will get involved in it and subject their families to it. It's a rough game. ... I get so tired of fighting. You fight because you feel like it's the right thing to do, but it's easy to give up."

During that time, when Clinton's showing in the polls was as cold as a New Hampshire snowdrift, Scott says, "Martha Whetstone never wavered one iota in her faith and belief that Bill Clinton was not only the best candidate for president, but that he would win."

She remembers being snapped at by a staff member during the meeting who accused Whetstone and Scott of "only saying good stuff about Clinton. Martha shot back, 'Well, all there is to say about Bill Clinton is good stuff, and you ought to be saying more of it to turn this thing around.' "

In her heavily Democratic area of the state, Whetstone concentrated on getting voters to the ballot box to counteract Republican activity in Southern California.

"I always felt politics wasn't creative enough. We don't reach nearly as many people on a personal basis as we should," she says. "I thought we could make the campaign really fun for people who couldn't afford to give \$1,000, but would go to an event for a celebrity or a (political) surrogate," such as one-time vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro.

A constant round of \$35 to \$50 meals drew in Whetstone's target crowd; parties and dances attracted young voters. She also planned a series of house parties in volunteers' homes, taking Scott along; by selling campaign memorabilia and telling Clinton stories, Whetstone raised enough money to pay for most of the field offices in Northern California's 22 congressional districts.

And in two months, the strategy to "have fun, and involve as many people as we can" raised \$150,000 for the Clinton campaign.

"My attitude was, 'If anyone has an hour, I'll do an event.' " When musician Stephen Stills offered two hours of his time to the campaign, Whetstone put together a Saturday barbecue for him to attend as featured guest. "Ten people paid \$750 a piece with two days' notice to hear Stephen Stills play a couple of songs at a cookout," she says. "We had events going constantly."

Whetstone also made some new friends during the campaign; among them Christine Lahti, Barbra Streisand, Mary Steenburgen, Linda Ronstadt and Stills, who surprised Whetstone by dedicating to her his hit "Love the One You're With" during a concert last year in Konocti Harbor, Calif. Her name is included on a list of friends Stills acknowledges in the liner notes of the 1994 Crosby, Stills & Nash compact disc, "After the Storm."

After Clinton got to Washington, Whetstone planned to return to her law practice. But about that time, honchos with the Democratic National Committee decided against pulling all the DNC staff out of Northern California in anticipation of the '96 elections.

"Nobody (there) feels connected to what goes on in Washington. I knew the donor base and the volunteers pretty well. If there was a person in California connected with the White House that (voters) knew and trusted, that would be a way of keeping them very plugged in."

The campaign is headquartered in a wonderfully roomy old Ford dealership on Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco, while Whetstone lives across the bay in Marin County with her children, Kate and Annie. She's separated from their dad, Mark Zambini, whom she married in 1987.

Gearing up for the presidential race that's just around the corner, Whetstone has maintained contact with longtime Democratic donors in the area and also recruited new ones. To enlarge Clinton's base of support, "I'm talking to groups every time I can. It's been a wild experience."

She adds, "Basically, last time we were just trying to get people to know who the heck this guy is. You have to create some kind of buzz and excitement there."

Which doesn't seem like too tough a challenge for Whetstone.

Politics "is such a personal thing to me," she says. "It's hard to get that mentally involved if it's just a job. I don't have any personal ambition other than to see (Clinton) do well."

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