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CITIZEN WHITMIRE

She ran the city for a decade, but who is she, really?

It's been more than a year since Houston voters fired Kathy Whitmire from the best job she ever had. Once a rising political star, the ex-mayor now spends her days in a windowless office at Rice University, where she directs the Rice Institute for Policy Analysis and teaches courses in political science and business. After 14 years of defining herself through public life, Kathryn Jean Niederhofer Whitmire, accountant-politician-teacher-aspiring elder stateswoman, is struggling to keep the spotlight from fading. It exasperates her that local reporters — who used to fixate on her hairstyles, her makeup, her clothes, her love life and her fluctuating waistline — now won't even solicit her comments when Mayor Bob Lanier screws up.

But then, Whitmire's relationship with the media has always been one of mutual distrust. She was aloof without appearing inaccessible, hungry for the validation of a favorable story but totally disdainful of what it took to get there. She was the most overexamined public figure in the city, with nearly every defining moment in her adult life captured in print or video, from her emergence as city controller in 1978 to the 1991 mayoral election that ended with her political epitaph being splayed on the front pages of both Houston newspapers for everyone to dissect. Yet she remained an enigma.

When Whitmire first entered public life, few people could claim they honestly knew her. Still fewer say they truly know her today.

"I'm kind of unrequited with Kathy," says one longtime aide, who worked closely with her for years in the mayor's office. "I have no idea what is in her heart, and if she told me, it wouldn't be true. I get the feeling that her vulnerability is so deep, she's not opening up for anybody."

There are those who wonder if she's ever displayed a genuine emotion other than anger. During her political life, her wrath was legendary, and directed at those she deemed incompetent, disloyal or indolent. While in private she is said to have a witty, even ribald, sense of humor, in public her gaiety has always seemed strained. As mayor, she carried an illogical cheeriness about her. A tense moment at the council table could trigger a wide, strained smile; political disappointments were dismissed with perky optimism.

BY JANE GRANDOLFO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY F. CARTER SMITH

THE FORMER MAYOR SWUNG open the big wooden door of her Houston Heights home on a recent fall afternoon, looking trim and bright in a red Polo-style shirt, jeans and white Reeboks. Inside, classical music floated from the sunroom — an airy sanctuary with white walls, hardwood floors and wicker furniture. Just outside the window, her gray and white tabby, Tiger, climbed a tree. And even her refrigerator — filled with Miller Lite, white wine and soda water — seemed stocked for idle time. The mere fact that Whitmire would consent to an interview at her home, the first one in recent memory, suggests a new freedom in her life.

Whitmire says she's reveling in the liberty of being a private citizen again. Things most people take for granted, like walking across the Rice campus in bicycle shorts and a T-shirt on the way to exercise class, are a treat for her. When she was mayor, bare legs were taboo. And she rarely went to a public gym to work out. Even though her days are full, she has more free time now than she's had in years.

She insists she is not pining away for another chance to be mayor. She even wonders aloud why she has agreed to subject herself to public scrutiny once again.

"It would not be nice to get back into a high-profile position," she says, but continues, "if there were something that I thought I could do to make a difference, I would run again and put up with the high-profile nature of it just to do it." Some folks are betting that she will soon re-emerge on the political scene.

Whitmire has been hitting the national lecture circuit from Duke to Harvard, maintaining as much visibility as possible for any defeated politician. More telling is her agreement with KTRH radio and Channel 11 to provide political commentary on local, state and national issues. For a year now, she's been issuing such insipid platitudes — which are nowhere near reflective of her salty and insightful opinions — that most of the pros say she's positioning herself for another bid at public office. Speculation about where she'll pop up next runs the gamut from murmurs of a 1994 Democratic run for Harris County judge to a bid for state treasurer. Bob Stein, a Rice University political science professor, says that under certain circumstances she might be even be drafted for a mayoral comeback.

Whitmire dismisses any suggestion that she's trying to stay politically viable. Still, she makes it clear that she would like to be more of a force on certain city and social issues. She wants people to know, for instance, that she thinks

Lanier is mortgaging the city's future by selling bonds to pay for current operations. She also wants to share her views on her most recent and compelling interest, the advancement of women. In fact, she suggests, wouldn't that make a nice focus for this article?

"I mean, I just don't mind people knowing now what a committed feminist I really am," she says. "When I ran for controller and when I ran for mayor, I had to very carefully downplay that part of my beliefs and emphasize other issues, because I had to prove that I was a candidate who could do this job."

When she was mayor, Whitmire quietly did her best to open doors for women. She stocked the city's boards and commissions with women and minorities, allocated thousands of dollars each year from a city fund into the Houston Area Women's Center, and derived satisfaction from showing the next generation that a woman could successfully manage the fourth-largest city in the nation. Now that she's a private citizen, she doesn't have to be so subtle. Last summer she lent her name to an abortion-rights Planned Parenthood flyer, made it a point to rub elbows with pro-choice Republican leaders who were in town during last summer's GOP convention, and has stepped up her role in Task Force 2000, a local organization that promotes the advancement of women in business and politics.

She also overcame the skepticism of some ranking academicians at Rice last year by offering an impressive syllabus for the university's first-ever Women and American Politics course. But Whitmire is aware that her born-again feminism in the wake of last year's so-called "Year of the Woman" may look like a way to ride the coattails of a powerful movement back into elected office.

"Since I'm not running for anything, I guess it's OK," she retorts. "I'm happy to ride this very popular issue." Life could be worse for her. She will tell you that she is content. But it is obvious that this is not the path she would have chosen. For the first time in her adult life she is on the outside looking in. No longer a power broker or even a political player, she is pressing her nose against the glass, so to speak.

That she should want to continue a career in public service would hardly be astonishing. But if she made a comeback, would people see a different woman, a more authentic or reflective version of Kathy Whitmire? Probably not. There's little evidence to suggest that after 14 years in the spotlight she is making up for lost time. If she has a love interest, a hobby, or more important, if solitude has allowed her to evolve personally, she's not saying.

For the past year, some of her closest acquaintances have waited in vain for the emotional coolness they thought was a

Left: 1978: Nikki Van Hightower and City Controller Whitmire receive awards given to outstanding Houston women by the seminal feminist publication, Breakthrough, *at the magazine's office. Right: 1985: Breaking ground for the George R. Brown Convention Center with then-Vice President George Bush. Above: January 1981: Whitmire is sworn in as Houston's first female mayor.*

function of her position to thaw. The hermetic environment that she created while in office, ostensibly to protect her personal life, is still air-tight. Even former members of her spin-control team — the thorny and insular group that guarded her public image — are no longer insisting that she's got a life outside of work.

"From a real personal standpoint, I've been disappointed in Kathy. I used to think she was the way she was because she was mayor," says Margaret Menger Wilson, a longtime Whitmire confidant who managed three of Whitmire's mayoral campaigns. "Many of her friends have said to me in the last year, 'We thought if she wasn't mayor anymore that maybe we could have dinner and talk about something besides politics.' But no. It's just not there."

There has been pain in Whitmire's life, and at some point she

shut down. Something big happened and it never made the 6 o'clock news. When and where it occurred remains as much of a mystery as the woman herself, but interviews with those closest to her point to a troubled past. Even those who don't know her sense that something's amiss.

"I hate to sound like John Bradshaw," says University of Houston political science professor Richard Murray, who has been a Whitmire watcher for the last 20 years, "but it's no secret that she grew up in a reasonably dysfunctional family. I think she was always trying to prove that she could make it."

Whitmire says that though her childhood wasn't perfect, she has no complaints. She and her brother, Tom, grew up poor in northeast Houston under the watchful eyes of strict parents — a Germanic and disapproving father, a mother with an explosive temper. Whitmire says she cannot remember a time when they weren't fighting.

"It's fair to say that my mom and dad didn't get along very well, that they argued with each other. I'm not sure how much of an effect that had on me," she says. "I would not call my family a dysfunctional family."

She also wouldn't call it unnatural to wage a campaign to encourage her parents to get a divorce — which is exactly what she did when she was in the fifth grade. She is nonchalant about her crusade, which ultimately succeeded.

"I remember mother being unhappy and wanting a way out and not having a way out," she says. "It was the logical thing to do." For Whitmire, emotional troubles should be dealt with cleanly and efficiently. "She's always been able to adjust the outward manifestations of her emotions," says her brother, Tom. "And that always gave her a psychological advantage. I don't know if she learned it or was born that way, but I always admired that."

By the time Kathryn Niederhofer was in junior high, she could play the piano, the French horn, twirl a baton and put on such convincing airs that few people would think anything was awry inside the little house on Dodson Drive — a three-bedroom bungalow where her father still lives today.

By mid-1950s standards, the family appeared happy enough. Karl Niederhofer was hard-working, and his wife, Ida, kept an immaculate house and shuttled her perfectly mannered kids to and from music lessons, piano recitals and square-dancing lessons. Behind closed doors, however, the family was crumbling. They rarely spoke, even among themselves, about Karl's long absences from home. Nobody outside the house knew that Ida frequently turned, in despair, to her tiny daughter for solace.

It didn't take Kathy, a precocious youngster, long to figure out her role in the family. It was clear who needed to be strong and brave. The year she entered Marshall Junior High, she continued to calmly urge her mother to get a divorce.

The year was 1956. Ida Niederhofer had no job skills, two children and a firm belief that it was a woman's duty to suffer through unhappiness. Never, even in her darkest moments, did divorce seem like an option. Kathy saw it otherwise: Her father was abusive, her mother unhappy, and it was a reasonable solution. It would take 20 more years, but she finally prevailed.

"It never would have gotten done if I hadn't gotten a lawyer myself, filed the papers and done it," Whitmire says without a hint of remorse. "I even bought a duplex so my mother could move into it. She still lives there today."

Whatever triggered her efforts she won't say, but there are hints of darker times even before the Niederhofers moved to Dodson Drive.

Kathy and Tom spent part of their early childhood on their grandfather's farm in Walker County near Huntsville. It seems to have been a good place for Karl to drop off the family for a while. Kathy was 4 and Tom was 6. Continued on page 54

Right: Election day, 1991: The soon-to-be ex-mayor. Below left: 1990: Greeting the Democratic National Convention's site selection committee. Below right: Campaign 1991: A lighter moment during a debate with candidates Bob Lanier (left) and state Rep. Sylvester Turner (center).

citizen whitmire

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Karl lived apart from them for three years, though he did come up to the farm on weekends. "I guess he just didn't have a great appreciation for having Mother and two kids around, so he felt it better for us to live up there," Kathy surmises.

Tom is inclined to think that his father was being protective, hustling the kids off to the country to escape northeast Houston, which by 1950 was rapidly turning into a melting pot of blacks and Hispanics and blue-collar whites. "At the time, he had a real narrow range of who he approved of, and if you weren't a white person from Germany, he didn't like you very much," says Tom. "I think he thought we'd be better raised up there."

During those years, Ida Niederhofer raised her children with occasional help from her in-laws. The diminutive Irish woman, who stands just under 5 feet tall, threw herself into the task with the force of a giant. Like her husband, she was a strict disciplinarian who believed in hard work. Kathy and Tom were feeding chickens, gathering eggs and doing laundry even before they were tall enough to reach the clothesline. Ida also bought a set of encyclopedias and tutored both kids regularly, passionately resolved to give her children a quality of life that she never had.

"She deserves 1,000 percent of the credit for the fact that she had two straight-A students," Whitmire says. "She was the one who was making learning exciting for us when we were preschoolers. She was going to make sure her kids had every opportunity they could."

When Karl brought his family back to the north side of Houston, near I-59 and Laura Koppe, the reunion was far from idyllic. He was still running his independent electrical contracting company, but things were not going as planned. In the Niederhofer tradition, he worked hard, played by the rules, and tried to contribute more to society than he took. But those values blended about as well with the good ol' boy tradition at City Hall as a bucket of salt water in a barrel of Texas crude.

While savvy contractors were getting work permits with a nod and a wink, Niederhofer found himself among the have-nots. He'd come home each day blasting public-works officials as a bunch of baleful bureaucrats who did a businessman more harm than good. Some of Kathy and Tom's earliest memories of their father are of him ranting about the inequities he perceived in city government.

Karl tried his own hand at the game by entering a race for precinct judge in 1954 — but it flopped. The Niederhofers were also struggling to get by, and every penny in the household Continued on page 85

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budget had to be accounted for. That became a source of contention between Karl and Ida and was at the root of many of their fights, says Tom.

"One night I heard her threaten to break his neck," Tom recalls. "Coming from a person who was 5 feet tall, it sounded kind of ludicrous, but I never doubted her for a moment. She was a keg of dynamite."

The children felt the financial pinch in different ways. Tom remembers aching for something as simple as a baseball glove, and Kathy felt pangs of envy when she got to San Jacinto High School and saw "fancy clothes and cars" that were out of reach. But there was a starker, more fundamental difference that set the Niederhofer kids apart: They were expected to be models of excellence. "It was not an option," Tom explained, "to fall below minimum standards."

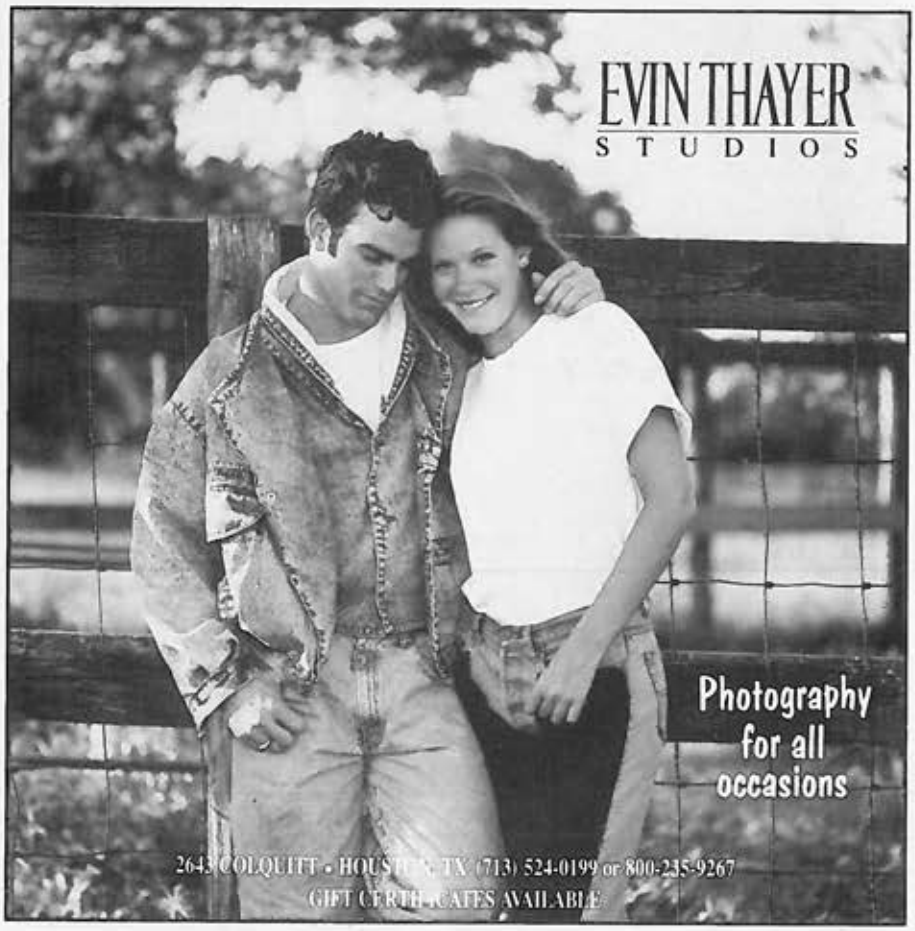
Both Tom and Kathy, already honor students, plunged into school activities. Tom became a champion debater, Kathy a classic overachiever, pulling a heavy academic load and involving herself in the R.O.T.C., the girl's drill team, the choir and the Junior Deputy Sheriff's Band. In 1964, Kathryn Jean Niederhofer graduated from San Jacinto High School with the highest honors.

But the little girl with the glasses just wanted to be liked. "I'd like to say making good grades was most important, but it wasn't. I wasn't particularly popular," Whitmire says. "Being accepted by the other kids was probably the most important thing then."

Could there possibly be any sweeter revenge than to go on to collect tens of thousands of votes one day? If there was, Kathy Whitmire hadn't heard of it. How deliciously ironic this must have been for her, considering that throughout high school and college she thought her future lay in becoming a politician's wife. When she met Jim Whitmire, a bright, earnest economics major at the University of Houston, it appeared as though her destiny would be fulfilled. He was a junior, like herself, and he had big political aspirations. She would proclaim him her soul mate.

"I was very excited about his commitment to doing something to make the world a better place," she says. "He was intelligent. And he was wonderful to me."

In 1967, after dating for less than five months, Kathy and Jim got married in the chapel at First Methodist Church. They moved to an apartment in Oak Forest, and later to a place near the University of Houston while they earned master's degrees in business. Then, in 1970, they moved to a house in Spring Branch, immersed themselves in their accounting



careers and began dabbling in local politics. In 1971 Jim considered a run for the city controller's office, but decided to wait and run for City Council instead. With Kathy managing his campaign, he ran and lost respectable races in 1973 and 1975, but by then the couple had already begun to build a coalition of other like-minded young progressives bent on cracking into the white, male-dominated City Hall. They were an inseparable team: Jim was the named candidate but Kathy was considered equally political.

"You couldn't much tell where one started and the other stopped," says political science professor Richard Murray. "He was sort of a blond, pale, elfin character, very much like her."

People who knew the couple say their admiration for each other was mutual. "They had a great deal of respect for one another. They spoke the same language," says Kathy's brother, Tom. "When one of them said something, the other understood exactly what they meant."

Their storybook romance took an abrupt turn in 1975, when Jim developed complications from juvenile diabetes. Kathy had known about the disease, and was not prepared to let Jim go without a fight. When his kidneys failed, she performed his dialysis while searching tirelessly for a transplant; when his eyesight failed, she became his chauffeur; and when he began to suffer severe back pains from nerve disorders, she became strong enough for both of them.

Jim Whitmire died in November of 1976. Kathy mourned, but, as is her way, nobody would ever know how deeply or for how long. She immediately threw herself into closing her late husband's affairs, finishing a course he was teaching at Texas Southern University and wrapping up his accounting practice, which she had joined when he became ill. Several months later, the bereaved widow launched her own political career.

Kathy Whitmire became the first woman to ever win a city office in Houston when she turned a 1977 feminist uprising into a successful race for the city controller's office. Whitmire used the names and addresses of nearly 1,000 demonstrators who had stormed City Hall that year to protest the firing of one of Houston's leading feminists, Harris County Treasurer Nikki Van Hightower. From that list, Whitmire recruited an army of volunteer sign painters, fund-raisers and organizers who helped her win in a contest against four male opponents. She drew support from inner-city gays, blacks, feminists, good-government types who saw the bespectacled accountant as their kind of reformer, and from conservative young professionals as well. These would be her core constituents for the next decade as she parlayed her controller's victory into a second term and ultimately into a near-record five terms as mayor.

She came to the table with the seeds of her father's suspicion firmly planted in her mind, and once she entered office, she found many of them confirmed. The city was on a precarious financial course, the Houston Police Department had a reputation for violence and bigotry, and the downtown business establishment essentially ran City Hall. Not surprisingly, there were folks who didn't take kindly to the little woman who wanted to shake things up. "Just because she was small, petite and the first woman to ever hold citywide office, she took a lot of crap from people who wanted to put her in her place," recalls Van Hightower.

A rumor that wouldn't disappear quite so easily was that of a torrid romance between her and Anthony Hall, a married, black city council member

In the early years, Whitmire's mettle was tested at every turn. If she was soft, people wouldn't take her seriously. If she came on too tough, they'd call her mannish. She struck a middle ground by becoming the androgynous, unflappable professional. Her uniforms of bow ties and shin-length skirts, in retrospect, looked absurd, but they communicated the message: Don't look at me, listen to me.

Whitmire's cherished private life was nonetheless always a target of speculation. The first five years after Jim Whitmire died, most of the men Kathy dated were young, politically ambitious acquaintances — including Harris County Court-at-Law Judge Al Leal and attorney David Berg. The only anomaly, four years later, was artist John Alexander, whose name was leaked to the press by Whitmire's campaign staff during a brutal 1985 re-election campaign when rumors were flying that she might be gay. Alexander was the perfect foil: He was handsome, he seemed alluring, and he lived in New York.

A rumor that wouldn't disappear quite so easily was that of a torrid romance between her and Anthony Hall, a married, black city council member. It was no secret that Whitmire and Hall were political allies and that they met regularly outside of City Hall to discuss city business and political strategy into the wee hours of the morning. Her political adversaries began to delight in mentioning the number of times Hall's Corvette had been seen parked in her driveway late at night. Nobody knew who was counting, but it was also a common assumption among City Hall insiders that the police were the ones staking out Whitmire's house and waiting for Hall sightings.

The rumor mill spun into overtime in 1983, when Whitmire endorsed Hall over her former ally Van Hightower for a vacant Position 4 council seat. The uncharacteristic meddling of a mayor in a council race, especially one in which the stakes were so high, raised more than a few eyebrows.

"I always felt that her obligation was to stay out of it. I understand that she saw Anthony as a loyal ally on City Council and she did not want to lose him," says Van Hightower, "but I felt like I had given her the kind of support, friendship and loyalty in the past that deserved at least the consideration of her keeping her hands out of the race."

Regardless of what drove the Whitmire-Hall relationship, most City Hall players thought the alliance was a symbiotic one. Hall was a former state legislator with mayoral aspirations. Whitmire needed black support to maintain her voting bloc and someone with Austin ties to help her get certain legislative measures passed. The assumption was that Whitmire could mentor Hall and both would win .

The alliance nearly cost Whitmire the 1985 election, when at Hall's urging she put a controversial gay rights referendum into a City Council ordinance. The measure passed at the council table, but sparked a backlash when a conservative ministers' group supported Council Member John Goodner's successful petition drive to force an election and overturn the ordinance. The Whitmire-Hall measure went down in flames, getting only 18 percent of the vote. Why Whitmire would let Hall talk her into such a move set tongues wagging anew.

A few of Whitmire's closest associates, however, speculate that there was never anything more than political expediency at play. "I saw them together a lot. I saw them as business partners and I was aware of the rumors. I would have noticed any physical attraction and it wasn't there," says a former Whitmire administration official. "To be honest, I just don't think f-----g is on her agenda. The black vote is."

The rumor was never substantiated — Hall has remained married and Whitmire denies there was ever any romantic involvement — but it persisted for so long that it became the stuff of urban myth among the City Hall press corps.

The reams of nasty Whitmire caricatures and nicknames that wreaked mischief on her tenure stemmed from the Houston Police Department, and many believe the Hall rumors did too. Whitmire's dispute with the male-dominated police force

began as soon as she graduated from city controller to mayor and declared war on police wages, benefits and civil service laws. And whether she was merely being an establishment-bucker or trying to justify the lack of police pay raises in 1982, Whitmire made a fateful political error by announcing that she didn't think the police force was up to snuff.

"It was just a gratuitous insult," recalls UH professor Murray. "Particularly since they were already being squeezed economically. What you want to do when the economy is lousy is at least go around patting backs and saying, 'You guys are doing a great job and it's just tragic we don't have enough money to pay you.' Instead she said, 'You're doing a lousy job.' It infuriated them."

It was one of the first illustrations of how Whitmire would run the mayor's office. And it would ultimately play a pivotal role in her defeat. Ten years later, during the political fight of her life, voters didn't want to hear about her legacy of efficiency, or the way she appointed the city's first black police chief to ease race relations, or how hard she hustled to get the George R. Brown Convention Center built or bring the Economic Summit and the Republican National Convention to Houston. The city was undergoing a crime wave during the summer of 1991, and Whitmire — a perennial opponent of the police force — was perceived as public enemy No. 1.

"While she was a very dynamic and intelligent individual capable of doing great things, her vision was blinded many times by going off on tangents or getting derailed in personal fights," says Mark Clark, vice president of the Houston Police Officer's Association. "That and public safety, in the end, were the issues that took her down. Even $3 million in TV ads couldn't buy her credibility." Whitmire's then-campaign manager estimates that the cost was closer to $300,000.

By the end of Whitmire's fifth term, the consensus was that you could fill the Astrodome several times over with ex-friends of hers. The unwavering focus and determination that had always been her strengths had contributed to her downfall. Even people who counted themselves among her closest allies were unable to reach her. "She didn't sit back and reflect and listen and take heed of changing moods and opinions," says one her best friends, Municipal Courts Director and Presiding Judge Sylvia Garcia.

Though her administration was largely free from personal scandal, her opponents in the 1991 mayor's race, Bob Lanier and State Rep. Sylvester Turner, managed to paint the one-time reformer as the leader of a new good 'ol gang. They attacked her for accepting campaign contributions at meetings pertaining to city business and for presiding over a municipal pension fund that gave sweetheart deals to two of her wealthy supporters.

"She didn't become personally corrupt, but as she gained stronger control of the system, she didn't question it as often," says City Controller George Greanias. "The Kathy Whitmire of 1981 would have been outraged by the pension fund deals and the campaign contributions. Her willingness to allow herself to appear to tolerate those things showed that she'd lost touch with who she was politically."

By the time 80 percent of the city's voters handed her a pink slip in November 1991, polls showed that they considered her distant and out of touch with the mood of the city. Even up until a week before the election, when all signs pointed to defeat, she refused to believe that she might not win. When Berg, who had remained a close advisor and her debate coach over the years, suggested she consider writing a concession speech as well as a victory speech, she reportedly became angry, accusing him of being negative and disloyal. The strain was evident elsewhere, even in newspaper photographs: Here she is with a panicked smile on her face, surrounded by picketers at the police station; there she is at a debate podium, wide-eyed, looking like a deer in headlights.

> She wouldn't call it unnatural to wage a campaign to encourage her parents to get a divorce — which is exactly what she did when she was in the fifth grade

It wasn't until the first few days after the election that the impact hit. One by one, her most trusted advisers began defecting, announcing their support for Lanier. Whitmire would hold late-night phone conversations with her inner circle, dissecting campaign strategy, questioning their calls and laying blame. Two days after the election, still bitter and reeling from her loss, she called Berg and gave him an earful.

"She said many unpleasant and ungrateful things to me and about others I valued," Berg recalls. The next morning, he phoned her back — just moments before he called a press conference — to tell her he had decided to back Lanier.

It's unlikely Whitmire will ever admit that it was painful to see friends scatter as her political fortunes plummeted. She maintains that she and Berg are friends, even though, a year after the election, they still have not seen one another. The truth of the matter, says Judge Garcia, was that Whitmire "was really, really hurt" by Berg's defection.

One City Hall staffer remembers that on the day after the election, the third floor of City Hall looked like a MASH unit, with teary-eyed secretaries routing condolence calls, high-level staffers paralyzed by indecision and gloom, and a shell-shocked Whitmire making phone call after phone call to try to find jobs for her employees.

She so aggressively rejected any offers of sympathy or support that more than one intuitive associate simply played along, pretending everything was normal. "She doesn't know how to deal with people on an emotional level. Allowing people to touch her would mean she would have to touch them in return," he says. "She needs to control events, and this was an event that could have easily gotten out of control. That's why her primary concern from the moment she lost to the moment she left was to take care of her staff and the people who supported her. That was something she could do mechanically rather than open herself up."

Whitmire prefers to not even talk about this dark season in her political career. The most she will say is: "Losing is no fun. I don't recommend it to anyone."

But even those who tried to spare her the discomfort of an emotional confrontation couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the air of sadness about her. "From the moment she lost, she was a whole different person," says a mayoral aide. "I can't really describe the look on her face except to say I've seen it in the eyes of a parent who lost a child. It was like there'd been a death in the family. It was extremely deep."

In many ways, Whitmire's troubled childhood was a canvas on which she would paint her political destiny. Her willfulness would evolve into legendary determination, her emotional detachment would become political armor, and her denial would be seen as unwavering optimism. She would become one of the brightest leaders the city had ever seen. And when she could no longer hold on to the best job she ever had, she could blame it on a summer crime wave, bad press and false promises made by her political opponents.

What she didn't realize was that people wanted something she was incapable of giving. They voted in her antithesis, a lanky, likable, gap-toothed genuine article who made Whitmire look like a stiffly smiling cardboard cutout. She ran the race of her life, running on her technical competency, her legacy of reform and her personal honesty. In the end there was really nothing more that she could have given. Except, perhaps, herself. ■