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Alaska VIDEOS



Palin's Way

Written by Melissa DeVaughn

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She has attracted attention for everything from her appearance to being a maverick Republican, but Sarah Palin says she just wants to straighten out Alaska politics.

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin stands in her kitchen wearing a black skirt and silver-sequined sweater, dressed for the gala she is about to attend. In front of her are a BlackBerry and a cell phone, devices that rarely leave her side. It's her favorite room in the large but unpretentious home her husband, Todd, designed and built five years ago. In the kitchen, 6-year-old daughter Piper's artwork dominates the décor in an otherwise modern, black-counter-topped room that opens into the rest of the living space.

"I wanted to be able to see everyone, to talk to them from here," Palin says, glancing at her BlackBerry while leaning on the countertop. She quickly pushes a few buttons on the device. It is a rainy Saturday afternoon, but the work of the state's first female governor never stops.

Palin straightens up and walks over to a tall table, taking in the expansive view of Lake Lucille through the wall of windows along the front of the living room. Todd's floatplane is docked just a hundred yards away, at the edge of the neatly mowed lawn. Three grebes float by, and a duck loiters at the edge of the grass.

Across the room, the front door bursts open and Bristol, 17 and the second-oldest of the Palins' four children, rushes in. She's a younger version of her mother, with the same striking, dark eyes and hair that have earned Palin a reputation as "the hottest governor in the country."

It's a moniker that Palin shrugs off. Although poised and confident on camera, she is nonchalant when it comes to the comments on her appearance.

When a reporter and photographers from *Vogue* magazine came to Alaska in December to do a story on her, Palin was sure she disappointed them. "In the interview you could tell that the writer was trying to get me to focus on the gender and appearance issues, but I kept talking about energy and national security, and not relying on foreign sources of energy," Palin said. "Finally, she stopped me and said, 'I know that's what you want to talk about, but this is a women's fashion magazine.' I don't know about fashion. It's bunny boots and fleece and The North Face. So I tried to talk about that, but it's just not the way I'm wired."

Palin's father, Chuck Heath, said that's simply the way his daughter is. "She's not phony. She never has been," said Heath, who moved his wife, Sally, and four children from Idaho to Skagway in 1964, when Sarah was just three months old.

Since his daughter took office last December, Heath has received several T-shirts proclaiming his daughter the best-looking political figure around. "One says, 'My governor is hotter than your governor,' and the other one says 'Alaska: the coldest state with the hottest governor,'" Heath said, laughing.

And she has gained notoriety online as well. Wonkette.com, a political blog, seems obsessed with Palin, admiring not only her appearance (she's a Tina Fey look-alike, the blog claims) but appreciating the simple fact that she is not, as it reports, "one of those creepy old men" in politics. Another blog, Palinforvp.blogspot.com, likes her so much it has started a grass-roots campaign to get her elected as the nation's next vice president.

The Silver Lining

To be sure, Sarah Palin is a breath of fresh air in an Alaska political climate that is at one of its all-time lows and for years has been dominated by career politicians. In the past year, three former legislators were arrested on public corruption charges, and two of them have been convicted. A fourth was tried and convicted of similar offenses, and a fifth has been investigated, although not charged with any crime.

It isn't much better on the national level. The country's longest-serving Republican senator, 83-year-old Ted Stevens, is under investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Internal Revenue Service, which are looking into who—Stevens or a oil-field services company known to have bribed to state lawmakers—paid for a renovation of the senator's home in Girdwood.

Rep. Don Young, 74, is subject of a federal investigation into his campaign finance practices. Even Alaska's first female senator, Republican Lisa Murkowski, a relative newcomer who was originally appointed by her father, Frank Murkowski, to fill his Senate seat when he became governor, isn't immune. Last summer, she found herself under scrutiny after buying land from a supporter at a price that many considered a gift in disguise. She later sold the land back, claiming the loss of public trust was not worth it.

Such political missteps provided the platform upon which Palin, a former television newscaster, councilwoman and mayor of Wasilla, mounted her campaign in 2006. For too many years, she said, the state has been controlled by the oil industry, which has manipulated legislators like puppets on a string. Old ways had to change, she told voters, promising that if they elected her governor, cronyism—at the state level, at least—would end. It was time, she said, using a term that would be used repeatedly over the next few months, to reinsert "transparency and trust" in Alaska politics.

Palin's appeal as a potential state or national politician began to broaden in January 2004 when she resigned as head of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission after complaining to the governor and state attorney general about ethics violations by another commissioner, Randy Ruedrich, who was also state chairman for the Republican party. Later that year, Ruedrich paid a \$12,000 fine for breaking state ethics laws. In 2005, she joined a Democrat to launch an ethics complaint against then state attorney general Gregg Renkes. The governor reprimanded Renkes, who soon resigned.

Her record and her promises struck a chord with voters. In the Republican primary, Palin crushed Frank Murkowski, the embattled incumbent who had enraged the public by largely ignoring its sentiments on issues ranging from the elimination of a longevity bonus for Alaska seniors to the purchase of a private jet for government use. Palin collected nearly 51 percent of the votes to Murkowski's 19 percent.

She went on to handily win the general election with more than 48 percent of Alaskans' votes compared with her opponent, former Democratic Gov. Tony Knowles, who collected 40 percent. Winning the election not only made her the first female governor in Alaska but, at age 42, the youngest. "I think those actions that I took in the past ... established that I would be an Alaskan first before my chosen party, the Republican Party," Palin said. From an ethics standpoint, the move gained her favor among the masses, and citizens praise her openness.

Alaska's political bigwigs, though, seem wary of her. "The hindrance, some would say, is that because I have done things like calling for Ben Stevens to step down as our national Republican committeeman, I don't have those communications with the party's hierarchy. "I don't think of it that way, though. I consider it a freeing and independent position I'm in to do what I believe is the right thing for Alaska. They're not telling me who to appoint, or how to make a decision."

Thinking For Herself

It is the last day of the 25th Legislative session, and Palin sits in her office watching lawmakers at work via a television mounted in a mahogany-colored cabinet. She watches with the intensity of a fan watching a football game, knowing the clock is ticking. Many of the issues she has been working on—municipal revenue sharing, reinstating the longevity bonus for seniors and education funding—languish in committees. She is particularly concerned about a measure that would limit the deductions oil companies can claim when making necessary safety repairs.

"Just put it on the floor for a vote," she says to herself, clearly frustrated at the number of bills being held up so late in the session.

"This is a good bill," she continues, speaking to no one in particular but to everyone in the room. "If they can make these (tax) claims, we'd be on the hook for 52 percent of their costs. It's ridiculous."

To hear such talk come from a Republican, a party known for its guardians of big business and proponents of paving the way for more oil production, comes as a surprise to many. Palin has been called a maverick Republican for her unconventional views, but she steadfastly maintains that she has the best interests of Alaska—and big business—in mind.

Despite her occasional differences with the party's mainstream ideas, she fits the mold as a lifelong member of the National Rifle Association who is pro-life and opposed to gay marriage. But she seems to appeal to Democrats as well as Republicans.

"She has not been partisan," said Rep. Les Gara, a Democrat from Anchorage. "Anybody that comes to Juneau and says, 'I'm not going to do my party's bidding' deserves credit. We had some very dark years under Frank Murkowski, and it has been nice to see something different."

In her office, Palin continues to pace near the television screen, watching the legislators while she conducts her usual, day-to-day business. An aide brings a letter for her to sign, which she does after reading it closely and clarifying one point. Representatives from the National Education Association present her with a framed promotional poster that shows the governor sitting in a chair, reading a story with Piper on her lap. Later, she has an impromptu meeting with the British consul from San Francisco, here on a cruise vacation with his wife.

"Are you having a great time?" she asks the couple as she sits on a sofa and sips coffee. Her staff appears antsy for her to move on to other matters, but Palin gives the couple her full attention. Although the meeting is meant to be casual, there is an agenda. Every meeting has one, and Palin knows it. The NEA folks reiterated their need for education funding. The consul, after several minutes of chitchat, reminds Palin that something must be done about global warming. Palin listens intently and responds with patience that, according to many in the Capitol, is refreshing.

"She's got this even keel to her, and it's pretty amazing," said her deputy press secretary, Sharon Leighow, who shadows Palin most days. But Palin's style has critics, even among those who like her.

While Gara said he and Palin have met halfway on many issues—such as taxing oil companies—there are other challenges ahead.

"While I like her, I don't think we have the same vision about how to uplift those born without privilege," Gara said. "Alaska is still one of only 10 states that doesn't have universal pre-kindergarten education. All the studies show it works, and we should be educating those kids better. That's been a frustration for me. We just have different visions. In that sense, this is still a very Republican state."

Palin said she appreciates the need for pre-kindergarten education, but it is kindergarten through 12th grade that she is most intent on helping. "Constitutionally, we are mandated to provide public education and, traditionally, we are talking K-12," she said.

In December, Palin's staff unveiled an education plan that would put an end to the year-to-year seesaw of budgeting that school districts are faced with as they wait to see how much money they will get from the state. Under her plan, educators would know years in advance how much money to expect from the state, and it would be more than ever before—\$5,500 per student, Palin said.

"It was always a very nonsensical budget process, but with forward funding, it will no longer be about fiscal funding," she said. "We have to shift that debate from 'how much are we going to fund' to 'what innovative ways will lead to a better education system?'"

Going Her Own Way

About lunchtime, Todd Palin enters his wife's office wearing a dress shirt and tie. He throws his jacket over a chair and sits down by a large coffee table littered with Girl Scout cookies and a floppy, stuffed-animal polar bear.

Having such a high-powered wife does not seem to faze Todd, who refers to himself jokingly as the "First Dude." While Sarah does the work of governor, Todd remains the quintessential Alaska man. He stays busy with his week-on, week-off job with British Petroleum on the North Slope. He's also one of the state's best snowmachiners, and has won the grueling 2,000-mile Tesoro Iron Dog race four times.

In the summer, Todd fishes a commercial site in Bristol Bay and spends time flying his airplane, a hobby he has enjoyed for 20 years. Having his wife become governor changed the Palin household, he said, but not in a monumental way.

"Her schedule dictates my schedule, but with her being mayor for so many years, we were already used to it," he said. "The kids are very adaptable. There are thousands of Alaska families that adapt, whether you're a contract guy who's gone for the summer season, a sloper or in the military, we have a lot of families who don't have the 9-to-5 schedule."

On this day, Todd Palin is preparing to change into work clothes and help oversee construction of a community playground in Juneau. As First Dude, he is a champion of vocational education for Alaska students. "I'm a product of on-the-job training that was offered to me in 1989. And growing up in the high schools that I attended, we had great shops, mechanic shops and carpenter shops. In recent years, that has not been a high priority but that is coming back. So I've told the commissioner of labor, 'Wherever you can use me in that role, I am there for you.'"

Gov. Palin said that goal is much more in line with her husband's skills as a laborer than those of first ladies, who have traditionally been tasked with choosing linens and flower arrangements for social events.

"I think I have the first working spouse working outside the home with a normal job," Palin said. "That, in its first year, has taken getting used to for people."

The playground project has brought together hundreds of community members, and Todd's presence—thought not as coveted as that of his wife—will bring welcome attention to the effort. It also gives Todd a chance to tout his cause.

"My slope job has provided for my family," he said. "When an opportunity is given to an individual, it is what that person does with it that matters. As I travel the state, that's a big concern, getting kids motivated. I am meeting kids that can't read a tape measure or just don't want to work, so it's the same message wherever we go. Step out. Once you step out and are given an opportunity, you can change a life."

Back in her office, Gov. Palin seems to no longer be able to stand it. She wants to know what is holding up the bill that she has been watching. Since taking office, she has been told repeatedly that doing business in state government is not as straightforward as it might seem, and today she is getting a lesson in that frustrating reality.

"There are a lot of political practices in Juneau that would turn your stomach, and it's something I still fight," Gara said. "A lot of practices caught her by surprise—the fact that one committee chair could hold sway over so many legislators. It was interesting to see someone come in and see it for themselves."

"Nothing has really surprised me since I got here," Palin countered. "As a member of the public I already was observing the obsessive partisanship that was getting in the way of doing what is right for Alaska (such as) a Republican's refusal to listen to a Democrat's proposal just because they were a Democrat, and vice versa. That sort of behavior was something that I knew we had to make a commitment to change, and I think it has pleasantly befuddled lawmakers and some don't know how to take it."

Just such a moment occurs as Palin walks out the door and heads for the office of Rep. Mike Chenault, a Republican from the Kenai Peninsula who is

holding onto the tax measure. With looks of disbelief on their faces, a bevy of colleagues follows her as she approaches Chenault's office and speaks to a legislative staff member. Chenault is meeting behind closed doors and doesn't emerge.

Eventually, Palin tires of waiting, then turns around and walks back to her office on the third floor. In the final hours before the session closes, the bill will fail, a development Palin reluctantly accepts but promises to revisit (and does, successfully adding the tax requirement to a bill that passes in a special legislative session she calls later in the year.)

Staff members whisper among themselves, surprised at Chenault's lack of courtesy and equally stunned that Palin marched to his office unannounced.

"I think it was an unconventional thing to see the governor just come down and chat about an issue," Palin said. "For me it wasn't devastating or surprising that he didn't come out to talk to me. I'm just Sarah Palin walking down the hall from the third floor to ask a question. But it is a new ballgame for these legislators (who) were used to doing things a certain way. I don't begrudge them in their hesitancy. It will just take some time."

Apparently, the public has not taken so long to convince.

In two polls conducted last May, Palin's approval rating ranged from 89 percent to 93 percent, making her perhaps the most popular governor in the country. The ratings came from both Republicans and Democrats who said they liked the fact that Palin has followed through on the promises she made during her campaign.

One of the larger issues was the construction of a natural-gas pipeline from the North Slope, which many say would bring renewed vigor to the state's economy. Soon after taking office, Palin introduced the Alaska Gasline Inducement Act, which in Alaska has taken on its own identity. The act, which passed last spring, calls for competition among those with interests in building a natural gas pipeline to tap Alaska's reserves. The state would be the driving force behind the competition, and there would be inducements to create it. As of December, five companies had made bids for the gas-line construction, defying critics of the plan who said it would scare away big business.

There are other criticisms, too. Some say she is playing a popularity game, and that she simply says what the masses want to hear. Others worry about the record-high \$6.6 billion operating budget Palin passed in June and the near-record \$1.6 billion capital budget she approved, despite making more than \$235 million in cuts. After the cuts, some lawmakers said they hadn't received clear guidance on what could be put into the budget. Others seemed confused by her seemingly random cuts.

"The importance of having a grasp of facts, figures and policies continues to be the same as when (Palin) was on the campaign trail: No it doesn't really matter, just smile and talk about trust and transparency," wrote former state representative Andrew Halcro, who failed in his 2006 bid for governor against Palin and now writes a blog related to state politics. "The fact is, both the operating and the capital budgets came in at a combined \$350 million higher than what she promised."

That's not the fiscal restraint she promised, Halcro pointed out.

"Criticism, when you're in elected office, of course, it's expected," Palin said. "I will take the criticism that is constructive, that is helpful. If it needs to be listened to, I don't mind."

But criticism like Halcro's is not constructive, she said.

"The irony with Andrew is, I am the same person with the same positions I had when he so wanted to work with me in the administration," she said. When Halcro was not hired for a job, she said, his tone changed.

"There is certainly bitterness now," she said. "But I hope for his sake that he can find something to be happy about."

A Family Foundation

Todd and Sarah Palin are driving to Chuck and Sally Heath's house for a short visit before they head into Anchorage for the gala. Seeing her parents, who live less than 10 minutes away in a beautifully kept home, was once an everyday occurrence. These days, it is an uncommon treat, squeezed in between public appearances, meetings and travel.

Inside the Heath home, there are walls covered with photos showing the Heath children—Chuck, Jr., Heather, Sarah and Molly—at various ages doing childhood things. From a young age, they hunted, fished, hiked and camped.

"They had to go do these things because they had to go with me," Chuck Heath says. "Enjoying the outdoors and making the most of it is what you do in Alaska. Alaska is a participant-type sport place, not a spectator-type place."

In one photo, Sarah is pointing a rifle at a distant caribou. She took it from 300 yards out, her father says proudly.

"She's a good shot," Heath says. "We were up on the Denali Highway for her first one, and she shot one up out of Cantwell with Todd. Don't pin me down on how many she's shot, but there's been a few."

Contrasting the hunting shot is one of a well-coiffed Palin, smiling as Miss Wasilla 1984. Her hair is bigger, her cheeks plump with youth, but it's still the same person. Palin pretends not to see that one—she has endured so much grief over her brief stint as a beauty queen that it has become a tiresome topic—and instead points to one of her brother shirtless and flexing his muscles.

Around the room is more evidence of a lively childhood. Stuffed birds, mounted animal heads and bear hides cover the walls. On every shelf and tabletop is some sort of Alaska artifact—mammoth teeth, tusks from a steppe bison, fossils and rocks of various sizes.

Near the back doorway are two giant, dried-out snakeskins hanging the length of the doorway. The Heaths had boa constrictors during Sarah's childhood, a fact the girls in the family were never too thrilled with, Chuck points out.

"Remember that turtle, too, that we had?" Palin says. "It disappeared and we never found it again. I wonder what happened to it?"

Then there was the albino skunk, yet another of Heath's specimens used for science lessons during his years as a teacher. Perhaps when you grow up in a household knowing anything is possible—one day it's a skunk, the next a 9-foot snake—you grow up knowing no limits. It's a trait Palin has carried with her to Alaska politics.

Down to Earth

The Heath-Palín connection has created a large and wide-reaching family tree. Todd's family is spread from Bristol Bay to Homer, and Sarah's siblings all still live close to home in Southcentral Alaska. Todd and Sarah have four children of their own: The oldest, Track, 18, graduated from Wasilla High last May and then enlisted in the U.S. Army. Next is Bristol, who is staying in the Valley to finish high school. Willow, 13, and Piper attended school in Juneau during Palin's first year in office, which made the transition easier for the whole family. But despite her fame and new job requirements, Palin is still a mom first.

"She can be on the phone with Dick Cheney and have (Republican Senate President) Lyda Green right outside her door, and her kids call and she goes, 'Oops, hold on,'" said Leighow, the deputy press secretary. "Her kids trump everyone, and I think that's pretty neat."

Watching her everyday life, it's easy to forget Palin is the governor, a quality that unnerves her security detail. She likes to go running alone. She often walks down the road to meet Piper's school bus. And although she could have a driver with her at all times, she often prefers driving herself.

"I know I don't need a chauffeur, that's for sure," she said. "Their time can be better spent elsewhere. I watch people slogging through a slushy parking lot to get to a building and I know I should be doing the same thing. Also, I do like getting to just chill for a 10-minute drive into (Wasilla), or my commute into Anchorage. It's nice and quiet, and private."

"Besides the home life with the kids—and offices in Juneau and Anchorage are so busy—that's the only time that I'm alone."

Leighow said in all their years of government detail the security personnel, mostly retired state troopers, have never had a governor who drove himself.

"It drives them crazy, keeping up," she said.

At a July governor's picnic, held on a greenbelt in Anchorage, Palin stood behind a grill, flipping burgers and talking to the people lined up with plates in hand. The hordes wanted to talk, shake her hand, tout their latest cause or make a plea on some issue.

Leighow stood nearby, watching as the crowd grew closer and closer, enveloping Palin. She kept a keen eye on the governor, watching for potential signs of trouble. Palin seemed oblivious to it; Leighow was nervous.

"You just have to be really careful," Leighow said.

Perhaps it's Palin's everyday normalcy that the public appreciates. She presents herself more as a PTA mom than a political force, someone just as likely to trade tips on scrap-booking as discuss public policy. But one thing is clear: The public is ready for this sort of leadership.

In the end, Palin is a practical, real-life person applying the rules of everyday life to government. When she laid off the chef at the governor's mansion, it was not because of poor performance; she simply didn't need one.

"She told me, 'I get home from the capital at 9, 10 o'clock. I can warm up something myself,'" Heath said. "The lady was a good cook, but the kids would rather have a hot dog than a gourmet crab cake."

Bristol, upon returning from a shopping trip in Anchorage, received Palin's nod of approval for the \$15 dress she bought for the night's gala they were about to attend. No need for a \$300 gown, Palin said.

But when Bristol revealed she spent \$30 on leg waxing—"That was supposed to be gas money," Todd Palin said disapprovingly—the governor wasn't too happy, either.

"That's a waste of money," she said. "You have razors."

When they married in 1988, Sarah and Todd were coming off a mediocre fishing season in Bristol Bay. She didn't want to burden her parents with the costs of a lavish wedding, something the young couple felt was unnecessary.

So they took the practical approach. One day in August, they simply drove to the Palmer courthouse and bought a marriage license. But they still needed two witnesses to stand for them at the ceremony.

"So they went to the senior center there in Palmer and got two old people as witnesses," Heath said. "They didn't know them at all. I'd love to have seen that. When Sarah came home, she said, 'By the way, we got married today.'"

It's that kind of attitude that seems to have gotten Palin where she is today. She has been a practical person since before her future even hinted at a career in politics, and she's bringing practicality to Juneau. As Palin sees it, for too long the state has been waxing when it could have been shaving. She acknowledges that there is still much work to be done to reduce state spending, improve business growth and create an open and honest state government.

But, she maintains, it can happen.

"We've said all along we are going to be open and honest," she said. "We're certainly going to have to continue to let our actions speak louder than words. Some lawmakers just need to feel more comfortable and confident that our part is to work with them, not against them. Instead of pessimistically believing things can't get better, we need to help them see they can, and will, get better."

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-Melissa DeV Vaughn is a free-lance writer from Chugiak. She wrote [A Constitution for the Ages](#), part two of our [Alaska Statehood series](#), in June 2008.

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