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By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — With Barack Obama's bid for the White House, the torch has been passed to a new generation in more ways than one: For the first time, the best-known Kennedy on the presidential campaign trail is named Caroline.

As Sen. Edward Kennedy, the patriarch of the nation's most famous Democratic family, battles brain cancer out of the public eye, his niece is emerging as a political player in her own right.

Caroline Kennedy's role as a surrogate for Obama and adviser to him on choosing a running mate raises the intriguing possibility that the only surviving child of President John F. Kennedy is taking an unexpected step into the family business.

Kennedy's bold political moves this year represent a significant departure for an author and philanthropist who has spent most of her life trying to duck the spotlight that has followed her since her tragically interrupted White House childhood. Today, Kennedy is a 50-year-old mother of three.

Friends are convinced recent events represent more than a brief interruption in Kennedy's private Park Avenue lifestyle.

"From my perspective, the most revealing thing about her endorsement of Obama is that it demonstrates she's not at all withdrawing from a legacy that comes from her father," says John Seigenthaler, a retired newspaper editor who sits with Kennedy on the panel that bestows the annual Profile in Courage Award in honor of her father.

"It's a different frontier that she's crossed here," says Seigenthaler, who worked for Sen. Robert Kennedy, D-N.Y., her late uncle, and later was editorial page editor of USA TODAY.

Another family friend, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., also sees Kennedy's newly raised profile as politically significant.

"It's a big statement," says Kerry, the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee. "She has credibility because she hasn't been out there."

Kennedy declined to be interviewed for this story, but friends say they're seeing a newly politicized Caroline. "I've known her for 20 years and I've never seen her so interested and excited," says Greg Craig, a former attorney for President Clinton who now works for Obama.

But friends differ as to whether Kennedy's heightened profile signals the birth of a political star.

"I don't think she'd go that far," Theodore Sorenson, her father's former speechwriter, says when asked whether Kennedy might run for office one day.

"I could see it," counters Rep. Bill Delahunt, a Massachusetts Democrat whose district includes the Kennedy family compound at Hyannis Port. "It's clear that Sen. Obama has great confidence in her and respects her."

In an interview with USA TODAY earlier this month, Obama said Kennedy would "add good perspective" to his running mate search.

"She's one of the smartest, most engaging, wise people I know," the presumptive Democratic nominee said. "She has become a very dear friend. I trust her."

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Assessing her credentials

As the daughter of a legendary president, Kennedy could help Obama with female voters who hoped New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton would be the first of their gender to become a major party's presidential nominee. Many of Clinton's staunchest female backers are of a generation that recalls Kennedy as an endearing toddler who brought a pony named Macaroni to the White House.

Debbie Walsh, director for the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, thinks Kennedy's gender is less important than "the mystique" of her name. "I don't think she's highly identified with women," Walsh says of Kennedy. "That's not what people think of when they think of her. They think of the Kennedys, and especially President Kennedy."

Kennedy's mystique is evident in the kid-gloves treatment she has received from Republicans.

The other two members of Obama's vice presidential search committee — former Fannie Mae chairman Jim Johnson and former deputy attorney general Eric Holder — came under immediate fire from the Republican National Committee.

Johnson quit the Obama campaign after charges surfaced that he got a sweetheart loan from Countrywide Financial, a subprime lender under investigation by Congress and the Justice Department.

The Republican National Committee continues to blast Holder for not stopping President Clinton's controversial 2005 pardon of Marc Rich, a financier who was on the lam from tax evasion charges. Rich's ex-wife, Denise, raised millions for Democratic campaigns.

The Republican Party has leveled no such organized attack on Kennedy. But one GOP strategist, Keith Appell, questioned her credentials for the vice presidential search.

"How is she in any way qualified to select the person who will be one heartbeat away from the Oval Office?" he asked.

Defenders say Kennedy's accomplishments are underestimated because she's never gone out of her way to publicize them. "She's really almost shy," says Joel Klein, chancellor of the New York City school system. He credits her with helping to raise \$350 million for public schools.

Kennedy graduated from Harvard University and earned a law degree at Columbia University. She has helped write or edit seven books, including two on legal topics with a law school classmate, and several anthologies of her mother's favorite literature.

Her husband, Edwin Schlossberg, is an artist and designer whose firm has created interactive exhibit space for Time Warner, the Brooklyn Museum and the National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame.

They have three children: Rose, 20; Tatiana, 18; and Jack, 15.

Since the death of her mother, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, in 1994, and the plane crash in 1999 that killed her younger brother, John, Kennedy has become a civic leader in New York.

She is the honorary chairwoman of the American Ballet Theatre, following in her mother's footsteps. Kennedy loaned her name to an exhibit of her mother's fabled wardrobe at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She also hosts the annual Kennedy Center Honors in Washington, a nationally televised gala honoring achievement in the performing arts.

"Gradually, she's gotten more and more active," Sorenson says.

Taking up the mantle

Sorenson, 80, began campaigning for Obama early in 2007. He says he set up a meeting between the Illinois senator and Kennedy after a chance encounter with her in New York City last year. "She said her kids were all for Obama and she and they would love to meet him sometime," Sorenson recalls.

Until this year, Kennedy has limited her political activities to the family circle or close connections. Along with other members of her family, she made an appearance on the podium of the 2000 Democratic National Convention.

Four years later, she campaigned alongside Kerry's daughters, but not until he had secured the nomination.

On tour to promote her books, she struck many interviewers as a reluctant subject.

"She got that horror of the press from me," her mother wrote in a note that Sorenson quoted in his recent memoirs, *Counselor*. "She used to put her hands over her face when she saw cameramen."

Not any more.

After writing an op-ed piece for *The New York Times* declaring that Obama would be "a president like my father," Kennedy hit the hustings for her candidate, speaking at venues ranging from a small college in Pennsylvania to a big stage in Los Angeles.

"This is a bit unusual for me because I generally don't get involved in politics," Kennedy said in Austin, at one of the many Obama rallies she headlined.

Occasionally, she showed flashes of her father's famous self-deprecating wit.

"This is a big day for me because I get to introduce somebody who is not my Uncle Teddy," Kennedy said, flashing the familiar family grin, as she prepared to bring Oprah Winfrey to the stage at a February rally for Obama in Los Angeles.

Kennedy's endorsement of Obama in January — carefully choreographed for maximum impact with the one her uncle delivered a day later — put her at odds with her own senator, Clinton, and with some of her cousins. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, a former lieutenant governor of Maryland, Robert Kennedy Jr., an environmental lawyer, and Kerry Kennedy, a human rights activist, all backed Clinton in the primary.

But the backing of the former president's only living brother and daughter provided a direct link to the White House that her mother had so famously and romantically nicknamed.

"Camelot Crowns Obama," read the caption on the TV screen as the former first daughter and her beloved "Uncle Teddy" appeared on ABC to discuss their endorsements.

Upholding the family name

While Kennedy has always shared her mother's desire to avoid prying eyes — she wrote one of her legal books about the right to privacy — she has also grown into a keen appreciation of her political birthright.

"Caroline is the keeper of the family flame," Sorenson writes in his memoirs.

He recounts a visit she paid him in 1974, when she was researching a high school paper on her father's foreign policy. The teenager at first relished the project but "it really became traumatic for her," her mother said in a thank-you note to Sorenson, which he included in his book.

"The more she read, the more it made her miss her father," Onassis wrote.

Kennedy has maintained her interest in her father's legacy.

Seigenthaler describes her as "deeply involved" in his presidential library.

She's president of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation and helps select the winner of the award named for her father's book about senators who risk their political careers to stake a stand on principle.

In a 2002 interview she did while promoting *Profiles in Courage for Our Time*, a book of essays about some of the award winners, Kennedy did not close the door on a run for public office.

"I don't have any plans to do that right now," she said. "I don't plan ahead. My kids are young."

Now that they are older, "I would hope that she becomes increasingly involved on the national stage," Klein says. The New York schools chief, whose wife attended Harvard with Kennedy, sees her role with the Obama campaign as "part of her evolution."

Paul Kirk, a former national Democratic Party chairman who serves with Kennedy on the her father's library board, thinks that her preference to stay out of the limelight may be giving way to her desire to make a difference.

"You can't ring a bell quietly," Kirk says. "She realizes she bears some responsibility to keep the legacy going."

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