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Cindy McCain carves out traditional role

By Jill Lawrence, USA TODAY

ST. PAUL — Cindy McCain has been promoting charitable giving and her husband's vice presidential pick here this week. It's a traditional role for a woman who has made clear she'll be a traditional first lady if her husband wins the White House.

McCain, a multimillionaire who heads her late father's beer distribution company, Hensley & Co., has been involved for decades with global philanthropy. Many of her causes involve medical care for the world's poor.

PHOTO GALLERY: [Cindy McCain](#)

In 1991, she visited an orphanage in Bangladesh founded by Mother Teresa and brought home two infants "in desperate need," one with a severe cleft palate and the other malnourished and "hanging on to life," family friend Wes Gullett told convention delegates Tuesday night.

John and Cindy McCain adopted Bridget, now 17. Wes and Deb Gullett adopted the other baby.

"Cindy McCain decided to bring them home, give them hope and save their lives," Gullett said, his daughter Nikki beside him onstage, as McCain teared up and clutched Bridget's hand in the audience.

Cindy McCain, 54, will address the convention today or Thursday. She appeared Tuesday at an event for the bipartisan ONE Campaign against global poverty.

Monday, McCain and first lady Laura Bush spoke to Louisiana delegates as Hurricane Gustav bore down. They attended a National Park Service event and urged from the convention stage that delegates make contributions online for hurricane relief.

McCain called Bush a role model. "The fact that I am standing here on the same stage with her, aspiring to take the job that she is holding now, to me is still a little bit mind-boggling. I always have to pinch myself a bit," she told the Louisiana delegates.

First lady watchers say McCain has signaled that, like Bush, she'll be a traditional first lady — continuing her philanthropy rather than delving into public policy from a West Wing office, as Hillary Rodham Clinton did.

"We're on a cusp among first ladies. We're going to get a mix of types in the coming years," says Debbie Walsh, head of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University in New Jersey. She says McCain "talks very little about herself" and doesn't put herself forward.

Kellyanne Conway, a GOP pollster, says McCain has a compelling biography but is reserved.

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"She's done a great deal of charity work abroad. But if you asked her the question, what is her chief role in the campaign, she'd say, 'I'm the candidate's wife.' "

Ann Romney, wife of former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, got to know McCain when their husbands were rivals during the primary campaign. She says McCain's public image is misleading. She notes that McCain, like her, is an equestrian: "Girls that can get on a horse and gallop — you have to be gutsy."

McCain has been a point person this week in introducing the new GOP vice presidential candidate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. She told Fox News Channel this week that she "jumped for joy" when her husband chose Palin.

"She is a reformer. She is tough. She is straight-talking. She is a maverick. She is a true Western woman," McCain said.

McCain had a tougher time Sunday when ABC's George Stephanopoulos said Palin had no national security experience. McCain replied that Palin's experience comes from "what she's done in the government. And, also, remember, Alaska is the closest part of our continent to Russia. So it's not as if she doesn't understand what's at stake here."

The Associated Press has estimated Cindy McCain could be worth more than \$100 million. Her wealth and her husband's inability to say how many houses the family owns were hot topics on the campaign trail last month. News about hurricanes and Palin, including her 17-year-old daughter's pregnancy, has blasted those topics off the radar screen for now.

"I'm sure she feels better about the fact that somebody else is ... the recipient of all that scrutiny," says Myra Gutin, a first ladies expert at Rider University in New Jersey. She notes that McCain has used her wealth to help people.

"She certainly has not chosen to just sit back. She's been all over the world," Gutin says. "That's not the method of operation for someone who doesn't care. She's definitely involved."

For the campaign, Walsh says, the shift in coverage from McCain's wealth to Palin's pregnant daughter is probably a wash. "Neither one is the message you want," she says.


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