

A Capital Crusader

During her college days, Kay Coles James learned to take a stand for what she believes. Her convictions have made her a leader in american politics.

Kay Coles James believes that, as women, we can have it all—though not necessarily at the same time. Kay is a model for women to emulate, having given up a senior position in the private sector to become a mother and, later, an adviser to U.S. presidents.

Kay has been married to the love of her life, Charles, for 28 years. They have three children: two sons, Charles and Robert, and a middle daughter, Elizabeth, who was married recently. Her engagement prompted Kay to write a third book, titled *What I Wish I'd Known Before I Got Married* (Multnomah Publishers), which followed her autobiography, *Never Forget*, and *Transforming America: From the Inside Out*, both from Zondervan.

Kay is currently serving in the George W. Bush administration as director of the Office of Personnel Management, where she is in charge of the entire federal workforce—"all 1.8 million of them," she says. She also serves as President Bush's principal adviser on federal human resources issues.

"It is a huge job and a sacred am just awestruck at the privilege that I have to serve there," she says.

Kay has held a number of prominent positions in both the private and the public sectors. She left a responsible position in corporate America to become the spokesperson for the National Right to Life committee and then decided she wanted to work for pro-life candidates in the political arena.

Under Virginia Governor George Allen, Kay got involved in

another issue she cares deeply about. While serving as secretary of health and human resources, she helped create and implement the state's welfare reform initiative.

At the federal level, she was appointed by President Ronald Reagan and reappointed by President George Bush as head of the National Commission on Children. She also served in the previous Bush administration as associate director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy and as assistant secretary for public affairs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Most recently, Kay served as a senior fellow and director of The Citizenship Project at the Heritage Foundation, a leading conservative think tank.

As a Christian with strong leadership skills, Kay has been called upon to fulfill many ministry-related positions. Prior to joining Heritage, she was professor and dean of the school of government at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She also was senior vice president of the Family Research Council and a member of the board of several organizations: The Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Young Life, Focus on the Family and the Center for Jewish and Christian Values.

A DIFFICULT START Looking at her now, it's hard to believe Kay didn't start at the top. But Kay's early years were fraught with difficulty. When her father let alcohol consume his life and set out on his own, her mother was left to raise a house full of children, including Kay, her only daughter, in government-funded public housing. Knowing it would be difficult for a girl to grow up in that environment, she made the tough decision to send Kay to live with one of her older sisters and her husband.

Kay soon captured the hearts of her aunt and uncle, who had no children of their own. They lived in Richmond's northern section, "where middle-class black people lived during that

time. Neighborhoods were very segregated in the early days," Kay says.

"My mother had a very close-knit extended family," she continues. "When our father left her with six children and she had no marketable skills, her sisters surrounded her and supported her and helped her raise her children. Around 5 years old, I was taken by my aunt and uncle and given what I believe to be a very privileged childhood and education."

Although it was difficult for Kay not to live with her family, she remains very close to them and says she had "opportunities that other kids in my public housing project could only dream of."

The most important opportunity Kay has ever had came one evening while she was watching television. A high school senior at the time, she describes her late teen years as the "tortured, navel-gazing, introspective, trying-to-figure-it-all-out years, particularly for someone who spent too much time reading."

But that night, gripped by the words of evangelist Billy Graham, Kay heard clearly for the first time that "Jesus Christ has the power to help you to be the person you wanted to be but felt powerless to become." After dinner, she went to her bedroom and "handled the situation very scientifically," she says, giving her life to Jesus for one year.

Kay's church background consisted of going to church once a quarter "to be respectable, so that if you died or got married, you'd have a church you could do it out of," she says. Not having a church family, she simply set out to learn more about Jesus in the best way she knew how.

She remembered that the Bible had something to say about Jesus, so she started studying the New Testament. But, she says, "I thought it was the dumbest book I'd ever read because I got all the way through Matthew, and it started repeating

itself. I didn't understand the concept of the four Gospels."

Kay believes that during her first year as a Christian, the Holy Spirit was able to instruct her through her diligent study of the Word. Eventually she started attending church.

But it wasn't until she got to Hampton University, a historically black college in Virginia, and overheard some students having a conversation about the Bible that she realized she wasn't the only one grappling with understanding God's Word. As a result, she got involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and started studying the Bible with a small group of believers on campus.

"I was particularly drawn to InterVarsity because I didn't have to check my intellect at the door," she says. "I could ask tough questions which in other circumstances might have seemed irreverent. I didn't accept easy or pat answers. I was allowed to struggle and ask hard questions and to doubt and to really grow. I can see how God used those as preparatory years for what was ahead."

The late '60s and early '70s, when Kay was in college, were the heydays of the black power movement on college campuses. Christianity was considered the "white man's religion." In that environment, Kay says, "it would've been far too easy just to reject it all, but if Jesus Christ is who He said He was, you couldn't just dismiss Him out of hand." And she had to learn to defend her faith.

In fact, it was in college that Kay learned how to face confrontation. She learned to give an answer for what she believed.

Through the years, she has also learned another important communication skill: how to be a bridge builder, seeking common ground in matters of politics and faith.

In politics, one of the most difficult—and unusual—positions

Kay has held is the post of Chair of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission.

“Quite frankly, it was a difficult job going to require a certain set of skills to bring people together, build consensus and produce a document. So I was asked to do that, and after having prayed about it and thought about it, I agreed to do it. It was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done in my life and, in retrospect, the most rewarding,” Kay says. James Dobson of Focus on the Family also served as a member of the commission.

Bridge building has also come in handy in the church. Though it wasn’t something they set out to do, Kay and Charles found themselves integrating all-white churches on two separate occasions. It happened because it was in those churches that they found the teaching, fellowship and evangelism they were looking for, and they persevered despite the difficulties they encountered.

Summing up her life philosophy, Kay says, “The driving thing in my life is to be obedient to the will of God,” adding that it has taken her “to some unusual places and some places where sometimes I didn’t want to be.”

It’s obvious now she was where God wanted her to be—and still is.

Christine Johnson is assistant editor for Christian Retailing magazine.