

Charlottesville Remembers A State Senator

EMILY COURIC’S CREDO FOR COURAGE: “HEAD UP!”

- Thanksgiving was her favorite holiday.
- According to her friends, there were two kinds of time—Eastern Time and Emily Time—late, but always worth waiting for.
- Each morning, when her youngest son ambled toward the school bus, his teen-aged eyes downcast, the steely mother, author and school board chairman called from the front porch, “Head Up! “

These are a few of the stories shared last month about Virginia’s Democratic State Senator Emily Couric. This was the person many believed would be Virginia’s first woman governor. This was a leader even her opponents called “lovable,” or “friend.” This was the diplomat who said, “Thank you for coming,” just because you showed up at a function she was attending.

Ultimately, this was a woman who believed in hitting life—and the threat of death—head on. She was an original. And she showed us—in stories left with us—how we might live.

On Monday, October 22, by 12:15 p.m., St. Paul’s Church on University Avenue was packed solid. Early myself (a rare event) I requested to stand in the back of the sanctuary rather than view the service from overflow space in the chapel or outdoors via a television screen.

The service began at 1 p.m. and continued beyond 3 p.m. In story after story, Emily’s life unfolded . . . the early grammar school politician whose campaign signs by

the water fountain read, “Free water, compliments of Emily Couric” . . . her decision to run for the senator’s seat, despite its formidable challenges. . . the legislative respect she engendered . . . the health and education bills she championed into laws. And, there was the day after her announcement not to run for lieutenant governor of Virginia because she had pancreatic cancer. That day, she cleaned her house and took out the trash. That day, she told her Unitarian minister, “I am going to fight this thing.”

Head Up!

At the Carr’s Hill reception following the memorial service, Richmond dignitaries crowded together with the Couric family including NBC anchor Katie Couric, and faithful constituents of the admired senator. The conversational buzz and hum was about Emily.

“Such a loss,”

“Too young.”

“What a moving service!”

“People should write down their stories about Emily.”

“Everyone has some.”

And so do I.

One night at a Chamber of Commerce banquet in the ballroom of the Omni hotel, I fell into conversation with Couric and George Beller, MD, her husband. My “date” that evening was my oldest son, Bradley, as my husband was out of town. I introduced him to the regal state senator, impeccably dressed in a three-piece royal blue suit, a gold pin at her shoulder. As the summons came to dinner, she suddenly turned toward us and smiled, “Would you like to sit at our table?” Bradley was stunned.

“Sure,” he stammered.

Throughout the evening Emily Couric bent her head toward this young man, listening to his opinions and to his plans following graduation from the University of Virginia. Being a fellow mom, I smiled and offered that we thought Bradley might enter public service as he was comfortable with diplomacy and as a matter of habit uncritical of others. Couric confided one of her gems of advice,

“That’s good, Bradley” she said. “Because people have so much to give you. If you close them off with critical thought, you close off all those things they have to offer.”

It was one of her life creeds. Raising her own two sons she told them, “If you *don’t like* someone, find something about them you *do like* and focus on that. You may find you like them after all.”

As for my son Bradley, he was enchanted with Senator Couric. Later he said, “She’s not like a politician. She is real.”

Another time, I was asked by an editor to broach the idea of Emily Couric and George Beller appearing as a couple on a February—Valentine-- issue of a newsmagazine. I pitched the idea. Couric turned me down flat. “Janet, I can’t tell you how NOT interested I am.”

As she gave her reasons, I marveled at how she could make me feel okay, even though she had just squashed my assignment. At the same time, mentally I reviewed how disappointed my editor would be. So together, the three of us thought about it and realized that the story was staring us in the face. Among the shining lights in Charlottesville, Dr. Beller had just been elected national president of the American College of Cardiology and was to be honored at Charlottesville’s forthcoming Heart Ball.

“George on the newsmagazine cover?” Emily grinned. And that’s what happened. Emily’s separate profile was inside, several pages back. Each had a spotlight, but their private life as a couple remained just that.

The day in July 2000 that I heard of Emily’s cancer diagnosis, I was packing for New York City. I’d been accepted to Columbia University’s Graduate Journalism School, and my husband and I were getting ready to move for the year. Hearing Emily’s news, I wandered around putting things in boxes and cussing. It just seemed so damned unfair. I finally calmed down, wrote a little note to her, and put it in a post office box before leaving town.

A year later, returning to Charlottesville in July, I received an invitation to Ben Coolyn Farm in Keswick for a fund-raiser hosted by Emily Couric. Under the late afternoon sun, the pastures stretching toward the Southwest Mountains were limned in shades of green and gold. Ancient sheltering trees framed a brick patio behind the historic home. Guests in sun back dresses and open-sleeve shirts greeted one another. Only the temperature was ornery—surely near 100 degrees. Among the guests, also in a sun back dress, hair very short and curly from chemotherapy, figure very thin from years of salads and mineral water, eyes ever bright and welcoming, Emily Couric took my hand and said, “Thank you for coming.”

George Beller approached. “They are waiting for you,” he told his wife, quietly. She stepped out to the patio, raised her slender hands and her enthusiastic voice and welcomed all of us to listen to former U. S. Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt. The crowd clapped, whistled and cheered. But truthfully, I believe they were rejoicing not because of an imminent speech, but because Emily Couric had beaten cancer for a full year.

As the leaves turned red and brown in Albemarle County, ushering in September, then October, Emily's strength failed. But her will did not. Her doctors marveled as she scheduled medical tests around appointments; she worked on a laptop during chemotherapy in the mornings and went to luncheon meetings at noon. There were also days she closed her eyes silently for hours against unfathomable pain.

Head Up!

On October 22, those of us who gathered to say our goodbyes at St. Paul's felt bewildering grief. Outside the church, footfalls crushed the front-yard grass burned by summer's drought. Inside the air stood warm and still. When the memorial service started—just a few minutes late, Emily Time—it was because so many people were silently crowding in. But there, among the tears, the sighs and the sad smiles, it was if we could hear Emily say, "Thank you for coming."

And individually we could return the compliment. *Emily, thank you for coming, for inspiring, for leading.*

Couric may have been late many times in her life, but for this occasion she was early, and for all of us her leaving came too soon. We will miss her.

But also we will celebrate Thanksgiving this year, knowing it was her favorite holiday. We can count our blessings and we will try not to be sad. After all, in this world there is still much to do. And Emily Couric showed us courage walking:

Head Up!

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