

## **Lindy and Me**

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If you are very lucky, you meet by chance the one person who makes all the difference in your life. In my case, it was entirely premeditated.

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be Lindy Boggs, the most famous of Newcomb's graduates. She was my Congresswoman in New Orleans, a powerful politician of unquestioned integrity and famed charms. Along with every other sensible little girl in New Orleans, I worshiped her.

The trick was figuring out how I could convince her to take me under her wing and teach me everything I needed to know to save the world, preferably before I finished college. The first step, clearly, was to meet the Congresswoman, but how? During my freshman year at Newcomb, Professor Jean Danielson, director of the Honor's Program, suggested I try writing a letter and simply ask to meet her. This seemed far too obvious a plan to work, but my more elaborate fantasies of accidentally saving her life were not panning out.

"Dear Congresswoman, I would like to be you when I grow up. Could I please meet you?"

Shockingly, her secretary called me to set up an appointment. The anxiety! The excitement! When the day finally arrived, my parents dropped me off at the federal building downtown for my appointment with destiny. I wore stockings, I think, and something approaching a suit. The walls in her lobby were lined with photographs of the Congresswoman with presidents and popes and other rulers of the universe. She seemed omnipotent.

It turned out that she was also small and loving and nice. She had pale blue eyes just like mine and sat with her feet demurely crossed at the ankles, back straight, bright scarf tied around

her neck. I don't remember exactly what we talked about other than that she seemed sincerely interested in me, which even then seemed ridiculously generous. I do remember that she instructed me to join various women's political groups, which I did promptly, though I had to wait to turn eighteen to join the League of Women Voters.

Two summers later, I got to intern for her in Washington, DC, carefully stuffing envelopes and answering phones, hoping to catch her in conversation. That month she announced her retirement from Congress to pass the torch to a new generation as she approached eighty. More importantly, she had a daughter dying of cancer and wanted to be at her side.

Mrs. Boggs then came to Tulane University with an office and a title, Counselor to the President. I went across campus to the Tulane president's office to ask about a student worker job in her office, maybe to do research for speeches or whatever her staff might need. It turned out that she had no staff, so they agreed to hire me. I was thrilled, but poor Lindy got a teenage college student to replace her entire congressional staff.

I did my best to keep her schedule and to keep things vaguely organized. Her supposed retirement was nonexistent; she gave hundreds of speeches a year all over the world, and did an annual tour of university graduations to accept honorary degrees. She joined countless nonprofit boards and made every appearance requested of her around the country. It would have been an exhausting schedule for someone a third of her age. As I put the latest plaque on the looming pile of awards in her office, I teased her that her new career was accepting awards full-time. I loved to ask her, "Mawmaw" (that's what I called her), "how many honorary degrees do you have now?" "I have no idea darling."

Lindy still did constituent services too. Senior citizens would call with their Social Security problems. She would listen to their entire story and then spend hours on the phone with

the Social Security Administration to get it solved. I am fifty years younger than she is, but I could barely keep up. I never knew whether to try harder to protect her time, or just to stand back and admire her stamina.

Every ring of the phone promised a new adventure. Lady Bird Johnson would call to schedule their annual spring vacation together. (They liked to go to Acapulco.) When I asked her what I should wear for her fundraiser for presidential candidate Bill Clinton, she said “we can wear whatever we like darling, we’re the hostesses.” She took me to mass on holy days of obligation and insisted on giving me a dollar for the collection plate.

She was the dearest grandmother you could have, but one who had the kind of power you wish your grandmother could have had. She had befriended world leaders, hiked in Antarctica, and chaired the 1976 Democratic Convention. She took me with her to the 1992 Democratic Convention.

I shuttled between two worlds in college; one where I listened to professors lecture about American history, and another where I could ask Lindy what really happened. She would tell me about the Washington wives and daughters who did much of the work of government behind the scenes.

Lindy carefully tutored me about women in politics, about power and conscience, about the purpose of a life’s career. We spent lots of time debating the models of women in power. Are women inherently more virtuous? Must women always exercise power through sweetness and gentle tact or should they be allowed to act more like powerful men?

Lindy operated in an era when her non-threatening charms and graciousness were the most effective way for a woman to wield power. Congress marveled at her ability to whisper in the ear of the Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neil, and get whatever her district needed. A staff

person for Louisiana Senator J. Bennett Johnston told me that they dreaded his meetings with Lindy because he would return sheepishly, having promised her the world.

At the time Lindy entered politics, she probably had no choice about how to be effective. But even given other models of women in power, Lindy would not have changed. She builds consensus by showing sincere respect for the best in others, and makes others fear only disappointing her. She is insistent in asking others to do the right thing, but pushes them without feeling anger.

Her perspective and her stories transformed my college experience. She made me feel part of the unbroken chain of young women who entered Newcomb each fall and graduated each spring. I could squint at the oak trees and imagine Lindy Claiborne as a teenager on campus in the 1930s, wearing her white gloves and heels, cutting a rug on Saturday nights and politely refusing bathtub gin.

Lindy started Newcomb in 1931 at fifteen-years old, a little girl from the country and an only child raised by a house full of women. The nuns at her convent school graduated her first in her class and before she was old enough to be admitted to Newcomb. So Lindy traveled to New Orleans from her plantation home in New Rhodes, Louisiana, to convince the Newcomb dean to let her enroll. She had one piece of information to her advantage; she knew that he loved Shakespeare. When he sternly asked her age, she replied with her utmost attempt at charm and sophistication, “to be or not to be, that is the question. I cannot tell a lie, to thine own self be true, I am only fifteen, but....” She started that year.

The Depression changed everything, even for those privileged enough to go to college. Until then, college meant finding a husband and educating oneself enough to grace him with sparkling conversation. Newcomb, like many women’s colleges, had a rule that if a student

married, she had to quit school. The Depression postponed marriage for young men who could not afford it. For Newcomb women striving for an actual career seemed suddenly both possible and a matter of survival.

Because no one could get serious too quickly, students dated casually and often. Lindy tells stories, with laughs and winks, of scheduling multiple dates on the same night. Two of her suitors got so tired of splitting time with her that they finally decided to take her out together.

Lindy wanted to be a professional photographer like the famed photojournalist Margaret Bourke White, who immortalized bridge builders and factory workers. She discovered at Newcomb that she was absolutely no good at photography, but she kept working towards a career as a journalist and became the Newcomb editor of the *Tulane Hullabaloo*. At that time, women were not allowed to be the editor-in-chief of the paper and that post was filled by Hale Boggs. Hale courted Lindy by leaving an apple every day on her desk to ward off the medical student she was dating. An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

Lindy took the art classes for which Newcomb was renowned, but found her own way to shape them. One of her professors, a handsome young man, had the annoying habit of expounding endlessly about rococo – the elaborate gaudy style abundant in New Orleans architecture. He hated it and would not stop talking about it. Lindy and her friends found his views a little pompous and his tirades tiresome, so they wrote a letter pretending to be an anonymous student expressing her love for him. The imaginary student knew she could never expect the professor to return her love, they wrote, but if he could give her any hope at all, all he needed to do was to mention the word “rococo” during class. Flummoxed, the professor would occasionally let the forbidden word slip and then blush and change the subject. Lindy tells this story with a smirk and great professions of embarrassment.

She graduated in 1935, and scrambled with everyone else for one of the few jobs available. She was hired by Saint James Parish to teach history and English, and moved into a house in Romeville, Louisiana with three others. This would become the first of about five careers, and possibly her favorite. Of her many suitors, and by all accounts she had her choice, Lindy would eventually pick Hale Boggs, handsome, fun loving and fiercely intelligent. She married him and moved to New Orleans where they worked in local politics.

In 1940, Lindy became a congressional wife at the age of twenty-four. She spent the next decades raising a family, being ready in case Hale brought the president home for dinner, organizing the Kennedy inaugural ball, managing Hale's campaigns, helping him agonize over his unpopular votes for civil rights, and traveling with him all over the world.

Hale's plane disappeared over Alaska in 1972, and, in the midst of her grief and uncertainty, she was forced to decide whether to run for his seat. The voters elected her to Congress by an overwhelming margin at the age of fifty-seven. Instead of merely holding the seat for a designated male successor, however, she served with great distinction for seventeen years.

Lindy always recites what the nuns taught her, "you can get anything done in life as long as you are willing to give someone else the credit." Sometimes I bristled at that advice as it applied to her though, because as much as people adore Lindy, she does not always get credit for the things she accomplished.

Lindy never brags. She has a way of sincerely claiming that she just *happened* to be in the right place at the right time and was lucky enough to be able to help. She tells the story of her greatest legislative accomplishment that way, the inclusion of women in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act at a time when women had enormous difficulty getting business loans,

mortgages, or even credit cards in their own names. When she was first elected, a bill was making its way through Congress that would forbid lenders from discriminating by race or national origin. When the bill came through her banking subcommittee, Lindy quickly added in “sex and marital status” and told the committee members sweetly, “I am sure you all just overlooked this issue.” The amendment passed unanimously and signs prohibiting gender discrimination now hang on the walls of every bank in America. Lindy, however, gives credit for this accomplishment to the women’s business organization that met with her and educated her about the problem, and the luck of being in the right room at the right time.

Lindy does have a postscript to this story, however, in which she expresses uncharacteristic delight in what she accomplished. In the early 1970s, she bought a condominium closer to the Capitol, but was inexplicably denied a mortgage loan. She looked at the banker and said in her proper way, “I don’t mean to alarm you, but you are breaking the law. I authored the Equal Credit Opportunity Act which makes this illegal. You shouldn’t let your bosses put you in this position.” She got her loan.

After my graduation from Newcomb in 1992, Lindy sent me off to Harvard Law School with hugs and urgings of caution about that “Yankee protestant school.” She then embarked on yet another adventure. President Clinton asked a favor of her, to serve as Ambassador to the Vatican. Only half-joking, I offered to go with her and she said, “Oh no darling, we would get into too much trouble together.”

If diplomacy is all about nuance and consensus, she was the perfect choice for a very important position. She helped foster the relationship between the most powerful nation in the world and a church that influenced (and had intelligence about) every country in the world.

I spent a week visiting Lindy in Rome, wandering around cafes during the day and following her to diplomatic parties at night. At breakfast in the formal dining room of the embassy residence, a butler in a white coat and brass buttons served us espresso. As soon as he was safely out of sight, Lindy pulled out a hidden jar of instant coffee with chicory to add to her cup.

We headed out every day in her bulletproof Mercedes with police escort. Lindy would liven up the ride by making me sing opera to the Italian driver and making him sing back. The driver careened around Rome, driving even through ancient pedestrian squares. Elderly ladies, their heads covered in black, wagged their fingers at us for being so rude. Noting my discomfort, Lindy leaned over and told me to “either look very important or very ill.”

Even when she could not understand a word that people were saying to her in Italian, she responded in English, smiling and bowing while they babbled praise. Being eighty allowed her to flirt with cardinals with impunity, to the astonishment of the State Department staff and the delight of the cardinals. In almost every picture of Lindy and Pope John Paul II, he is holding her hand. We teased her that the Pope, several years her junior, had a crush on her.

Since 2000, Lindy has been back in New Orleans helping everyone who asks. We go to dinner about once a month now, and find jazz to sing along to. (We have some pretty good harmonies.) Her heart has been broken by Katrina, but she is ready to start the rebuilding, to cut down the tree that fell on her Bourbon Street home, and to keep fighting. She turned ninety in March 2006, and received a nice handwritten note from both President Bush and the new Pope, Benedict XVI.

I have never heard an introduction of Lindy at an event that did not include the word “gracious,” but I worry that people mistake that quality for mere good manners. Lindy’s charm



does not stem from a disciplined politeness, but a sincere delight in every person she meets. She exudes goodness -- not the pure, cloistered virtue of those who manage to avoid the evils of the world, but the integrity of one who has fully participated in the struggle for social justice.

And as for me, Lindy has made all the difference. I have met some very successful women who are weary of mentoring, resistant to the expectation that they assist every young woman who comes along. They understandably resent the ingratitude of a younger generation oblivious to how much better they have it, and wonder if they are not better off making their own way.

Lindy thrives on mentoring and pushes us most by her example and her high expectations. Once I complained to her wearily about politics; she sighed and answered, "I know darling, but someone has to do it." She taught me that the point of life is to use all of the gifts you have been lucky enough to receive. The point of life is to spend your life trying.