

Tipper Gore



Remembers

It was a July afternoon in Tipper Gore's office, one of her rare interviews these days, a moment when the memories came flooding back. There were stories of the Clintons and Nelson Mandela and the infested refugee camps of Rwanda where she experienced the horrors of a genocidal war. But there were also the stories from closer to home, more personal and immediate, like the homeless woman outside the White House who was gesturing, talking, walking in a daze, obviously in need of some kind of help.

Mrs. Gore was a volunteer at the time with a homelessness advocacy organization in Washington, and she often found herself searching the streets for people with no place to go. She approached the woman near the White House cautiously.

"What's your name?" she asked. "How can I help you?"

The woman stared back with her large, dark eyes, looking straight into Tipper Gore's own. She was African-American, thin and wispy, maybe 5-foot-3, and somewhere imbedded in her quiet desperation there seemed to be a certain sweetness in her smile.

"My name is Mary Tudor," she said. "You can help me get my reality back."

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They talked for a while about the places she could go—like a downtown shelter where she could get a hot shower and a good hearty meal, and where they could begin to evaluate her mental health. But a cloud passed over the woman's face.

"I can't go," she said. "My husband will worry."

"Who's your husband?"

"President Clinton."

"Oh, I see," replied Mrs. Gore, a psychologist by inclination and training. "Well, I know how to get a message to the president. We can tell him you are going with me, and it will be OK."

Together they went to the gate of the White House, where Mrs. Gore introduced Mary to the Marine on duty and told him, please, to let the president know Mary was fine. The Marine said he would, and the two women headed away to the shelter where Mary enrolled in emergency housing and soon began treatment at a mental health center.

They visited often in the months after that, the vice president's wife and the woman of the streets. Mrs. Gore would drop by the shelter to see her, sometimes talking for an hour or more, giving her encouragement as she went through her treatments. Mary (which turned out not to be her real name) came several times to the vice president's mansion, twice for lunch and, along with other homeless people from the capital, a couple of times to the Gores' Christmas parties.

As the people who have known her through the years will tell you, all of this was vintage Tipper Gore. She has long been a woman who is given to crusades, sometimes public, sometimes less so, sometimes quixotic in the eyes of her critics. Whatever the case, she has divided her energy, which was always considerable, between the needs of her family

and the demands of the causes she has chosen to embrace.

It is a pattern in her life that continues even now. At the time of her interview last summer, she and her husband, among other things, were putting together a national conference on the family—the 12th in a series of annual meetings at Vanderbilt, which the two of them began in 1991. "We call them Family Re-Unions," she said. "We have met a lot of good people there."

She was sitting at the time in her Nashville office, just across the street from the Vanderbilt campus. She was still moving in, her professional life in cardboard boxes, as she prepared for a series of personal appearances—one in Chicago, another in Dallas, two more in California—but she was happy, she said, to take a little time to reflect on her journey.

She remembered the days in the early '70s when she was still a young bride, working on her master's degree in clinical psychology at what was then George Peabody College for Teachers. She received her degree in 1976, three years before Peabody merged with Vanderbilt as its college of education and human development. There was a beauty about the campus of Peabody College, a feeling of promise as she was beginning her life with the handsome young son of a Tennessee senator.

This was before she knew where all of it would lead her, before she imagined in any realistic way what it might be like as the wife of a congressman or a U.S. senator or, later, the vice president of the United States. But she knew from the start that life with her husband would be something special. In 1964, Mary Elizabeth Aitcheson (nicknamed "Tipper" by her mother) met Al Gore at a high school party in Virginia, and the following weekend they danced to an evening's worth

of rock 'n' roll records. It was like nothing she had ever felt in her life.

"He's such a sweet man," she said years later, and that was the thing that struck her from the beginning. It was true he had other qualities as well. Even as a teenager, Al Gore was strong and sure of himself, as one might expect from the son of the most prominent politician in the state. His aristocratic father, Albert Gore Sr., was one of the most stubborn men in the Senate—part of the loyal opposition during the war in Vietnam, a stand that cost him politically in Tennessee. But his son often talked in the years afterward about his own need to follow both his conscience and his heart.

Tipper liked that about him, and even his occasional flashes of petulance seemed to fade easily, subsiding into something more gentle and fair. Once when he was a freshman at Harvard and Tipper was still a senior in high school, Al invited her to come to Boston to see him. The problem was, Tipper's grandmother insisted on coming along, which in many ways was not a surprise. Tipper's parents divorced when she was only 2, and she and her mother went to live with her grandparents. For years after that, Tipper's mother, Margaret Ann Aitcheson, battled the agony of clinical depression, and Tipper's grandmother, Verda Carlson, became like a surrogate parent. She was a sturdy woman with old-fashioned values, appalled at the notion that a pretty young girl might go off to visit a boy by herself.

Al was not at all happy with the news. "I hope this isn't making you mad," he wrote, "but I don't care about spending a week with your grandmother. I want a week with you. ... As I think more about it, I don't like it worth a damn."

But when the week finally came, the grand-

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mother was there and Al could do nothing but adjust. “He was a perfect gentleman,” Tipper said years later, a fact not lost on her or her family. Whatever the various frustrations of the moment, Al Gore’s stock was still on the rise.

In May 1970 they were married, and after Al served a hitch in Vietnam they moved for a while to the Gores’ family farm. It was nestled away near the town of Carthage, in the scenic hill country just east of Nashville, and Tipper thought it was perfect. She could imagine herself in such a place forever, a farmer’s wife living close to the land.

In those early days of fantasy and promise, Al went to work as a reporter in Nashville and Tipper tried her hand at journalism, too. She worked for a while as a part-time photographer and soon discovered she was quite good at it. She had taken a class from Jack Corn, the (Nashville) *Tennessean’s* chief photographer, driving the hundred-mile round-trip from Carthage and absorbing his wisdom and sense of the craft. In one class, Corn told his students to photograph someone who loved them—a photo in which that affection was clear. Tipper took a picture of her husband shaving, his dark hair tousled, his face still lathered, but with a smoldering softness in his eyes as he stared at the camera and the young woman behind it.

A short time later, Corn offered her a job.

She juggled photography with work on her master’s degree at Peabody, and then came the day in 1976 when her husband decided to run for the Congress. Though it wasn’t easy for her, given her own professional aspirations, Tipper quickly made a fundamental decision. She would share in the journey as fully as she could. She would not be like those Washington wives who would make their obligatory appearances at

a fund-raising dinner or perhaps at the national convention of the party. She would be there with him every step of the way.

Tipper says it was difficult at first, that the political small talk with total strangers was hard for her to muster in those early days. But she soon discovered an aptitude for it, a natural gregariousness and an ability to look people squarely in the eye.

The people who knew her were not at all surprised.

“With Tipper Gore,” says Larry Woods, a Nashville lawyer and Democratic activist, “what you see is what you get. I’ve known her now for three decades, and she has impressed me as a person of wisdom and substance who has that knack for getting things done.”

As Woods had expected from the moment he met her, Mrs. Gore soon emerged as a public figure on her own, and her passionate crusades for the causes she embraced were tied in many cases to her family. Her concern for the homeless, for example, began on a luncheon excursion with her children. They were still quite young, ranging in age from 2 through 10, and three of the four were attending a public school in Washington.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, an early release day for the children to spend with their families, and they had gone to eat lunch with their father at the Senate. On the way back home, they were stopped at a light, and there on the corner was a ragged-looking woman talking frantically to nobody in particular.

“What’s wrong with her, Mom?” the children kept asking. “Who’s she talking to?”

“Well,” said Tipper, “she’s homeless and she’s probably mentally ill.”

The younger Gores were appalled. “You mean she’s sick and has no place to go, and we are just going to drive off and leave her?”



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That night over dinner they talked about it—Tipper and Al and all four of the kids—and they resolved that the time had come to get involved. Tipper had already called about the woman on the corner, alerting the people at the homeless hot line, and within a short time her husband would introduce new legislation to create housing for people in the streets.

Her children, meanwhile, began to volunteer at a homeless shelter, making sandwiches, doing what they could, and Tipper herself began a 20-year commitment to the issue. “I stopped turning away,” she would later explain. “The children and their innocent compassion got to me. They saw the world with such total clarity.”

In an effort to replicate that kind of clarity, she organized a pair of photography exhibitions, betting on the power of her favorite art form to put a human face on an abstract issue. She also volunteered at shelters, and after her husband was elected vice president she became a regular with Health Care for the Homeless, an advocacy organization in Washington that scoured the streets and public parks of the capital, searching for people who needed better care.

It was work that took her into difficult places, which sometimes drove the Secret Service crazy. “Totally nuts,” she told one reporter. But most of the agents understood the mission, and on several occasions she was glad they were there, such as the time they took away a knife from one of the desperate-looking men in an alley.

Every so often the payoff was clear, for there were homeless people who responded to treatment and managed to turn their own lives around. But there were others who didn’t, who died of AIDS or other illnesses in the streets, and that too was a part of the reality.

Through it all, she made no mention of her efforts to the press, for somehow that would have cheapened everything. “It was a personal commitment I made that meant something to me,” she explained. “There didn’t seem to be any need to talk about it.”

That, of course, wasn’t always the case. Other causes on other occasions were much more visible and controversial, with Tipper Gore squarely at the center of the storm. One of those took shape in the 1980s, and once again it was triggered by her children.

In December 1984 she bought a copy of the album “Purple Rain” by the rock artist Prince. Her daughter, Karenna, who was then 11, had been asking for it because of a song she had heard on the radio. They sat down together, mother and daughter, to listen to the music, and were startled by the lyrics to one of the cuts: “I knew a girl named Nikki/I guess [you] could say she was a sex fiend/I met her in a hotel lobby/Masturbating with a magazine.”

About the same time, Karenna’s two sisters, Kristin and Sarah, who were 6 and 8, began asking questions about videos they had seen on MTV. This time Mrs. Gore was even more shocked, for she was treated to the image of a heavy metal band, Mötley Crüe, locking away semi-naked women in cages.

She had never thought of herself as a prude. She had been raised in the rock ’n’ roll generation—had been a drummer, in fact, in a high school band—and she knew that sexuality was imbedded in the music. “I understood the themes,” she would later explain, “but I was like, ‘Whoa.’ Here I was explaining S&M to my 8-year-old.”

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ington wives who shared her concerns. Together they formed a nonprofit group, the Parents' Music Resource Center, and in May 1985 they set out to bring pressure on the entertainment industry. They found an ally in the National PTA and began holding public meetings and talking to the media, eventually beginning negotiations with leaders in the industry. They were seeking more responsibility and restraint, and some kind of warning labels on records, and for a while at least, everything got ugly.

Frank Zappa, an aging rock 'n' roller with a national following, labeled Gore and her allies "cultural terrorists." One of the young rockers said Gore was afraid of the sexuality of her children, and an industry spokesman declared that her efforts "smacked of censorship."

In fact, they didn't. As others noted, from the *New York Times* to the ACLU, Mrs. Gore and her friends were seeking voluntary labeling, not a standard imposed by the government, and in the end that was what they got. In 1987 the record industry began to rate its own products, putting warnings on albums with explicit lyrics, and Tipper saw that achievement as a victory.

"It was a tool for parents," she said looking back. "It's up to us to guide our children, and as mine got older I would sometimes say, 'OK, it's your choice. You can listen to this if you want to.' But we would talk about the values, and that's what you have to do as a parent—set the limits, and then loosen up as your children get older. The warning labels were just another tool. I really thought of it as truth in marketing."

Even now, some critics say she was simply jousting at the wind. Peter Cooper, music writer for the (Nashville) *Tennessean*, points out that lyrics once hidden away on albums

are now heard freely on the radio, and that a label can do nothing about that. In the largest sense, Mrs. Gore and her friends were resisting the irresistible tide.

Whatever the case, whether it was a victory, a defeat or something in between, for Tipper the whole episode was soon overshadowed—obliterated by a moment of horror that quickly put everything else in perspective. It was the moment she almost lost her youngest child.

April 3, 1989—opening day of the baseball season. The Baltimore Orioles, with the great Frank Robinson managing the team and Cal and Billy Ripkin anchoring the infield, were playing at home, and Al and Tipper Gore and two other couples took their children to the game.

Outside the stadium Albert Gore III, who was not yet 7, was holding tight to his father's hand, when he suddenly jerked free and went running off in pursuit of his friends. It all happened so quickly that the Gores could only stare in disbelief as their son ran squarely into the path of a car. He flew through the air in a horrifying arc and then lay crumpled and still on the pavement.

It took him nearly a year to recover, and during that time there were bedside vigils and moments when nobody knew if he would live. Tipper Gore, a woman of great strength, held it together through all those hours, but the time finally came when the crisis had passed and she felt herself slipping into clinical depression.

"I thought I had dodged that bullet," she said, recalling her mother's mental health problems. But the demons hit her with a devastating force, requiring both counseling and medication to recover.

Typically enough, she would later turn her troubles into a cause, crusading on behalf of better mental health. She would chair a presidential conference on the subject and speak out strongly for insurance benefits comparable to those for any other illness. But for a while she struggled to make it through a day, and even in the delicate period of her recovery, she depended on the love and understanding of her family.

The Gores had always been quite close. Al, she thought, was such a good father, so patient and gentle with all the children, and now it seemed they were getting even closer. Her husband, who had run for president in 1988 but had come up short in the Democratic primaries, decided not to run again in '92 in order to spend more time with the family.

For a while at least, it appeared their time on the national stage was over—just a brief flirtation in 1988, and now it was back to the U.S. Senate, a worthy calling by anybody's measure. But then came the night of July 7, 1992.

It was 11 p.m. when Bill Clinton called, asking Al Gore to be his running mate. Clinton had confounded the political pundits by winning the nomination in the Democratic primaries, and he would surprise them again with his choice of Gore. The two men, after all, were Southern moderates from contiguous states, both about the same age, and according to the conventional wisdom of the time, Gore didn't add a lot of breadth to the ticket.

But Clinton had a feeling, and after a little while so did the Gores. The campaign season was inherently self-contained, the November election less than four months away and far less disruptive to their time as a family than the arduous string of Democratic primaries. Before the call the Gores

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hadn't known the Clintons very well, but they quickly discovered an affinity that was rare.

"I felt Hillary was my long-lost sister," Tipper said more than once. And they would laugh sometimes when all four were together about how Tipper was really much more like the president—more outgoing and more animated, far more at ease in the company of strangers.

All in all, they seemed to complement each other's strengths, and they shared a basic understanding of the country. They valued its diversity and hated the pitting of one group against another, and they saw the government as a tool for doing good. There was a sense in which all of them—and maybe most of all the president—had internalized the idealism of the '60s, and it gave them a feeling of possibility and hope. They would tackle the economy and the massive budget deficits, and they would talk to the Russians about nuclear disarmament, protect the environment, and wrestle with waste in the federal bureaucracy.

As the years went by, they would succeed in many of those aspirations, but eventually came to the surface the intricate character flaws of Bill Clinton, which in the eyes of many voters never fully defined him. Whatever his failings, he was also a man of resiliency and grace, and the Gores understood that as well as anybody. But in the end there were strains, as Al Gore made his own run for the presidency and sought to establish a political identity distinct from the double-edged legacy of his friend.

Today Tipper Gore is much more guarded in talking about the Clintons, more reluctant to go into personal detail. When a reporter recently asked about Hillary, her answer was enigmatic and abrupt: "I have my life, she has hers. But we do talk."

And yet, for Tipper, whatever the weight of the personal history, the memories of those eight years in Washington were as rich and compelling as any she had known. Some of them, of course, were deeply disturbing, including her visit to the killing fields of Rwanda. Her poignant photographs—which were featured in her 1996 book, *Picture This: A Visual Diary*—tell the story of the trip: pictures of children and occasionally their parents, staring at the camera with a vague and empty pain.

But she will also tell you that on the same troubled continent at about the same time, there was a moment of inspiration so powerful and pure that it stands head and shoulders above all the rest. In 1994 she was part of the official American delegation attending the presidential inauguration of Nelson Mandela in South Africa.

She had never met anyone quite like him. She knew his story, how he had spent 27 years in a cell on Robben Island, which she would later see for herself—the claustrophobic rectangle that he had somehow known was only temporary. At one of the inauguration ceremonies, she and the other Americans in Pretoria watched in astonishment as Mandela called his former jailer to the podium, put an arm around his shoulder, and talked to the country about the power of forgiveness.

"Al and I were just blown away," she remembered, and the image was never very far from her mind. It was a source of perspective, a lesson against bitterness and regret, as the Gores encountered their own disappointments—the controversial loss of the 2000 election, and the decision in December 2002 to abandon their presidential dreams altogether.

The latter decision was made in New York City, and somehow the richness of memory made it easier—the simultaneous feelings of

accomplishment and gratitude for all the opportunities they'd had.

Tipper, Al, and all four of the children came together in New York for a week of rehearsals for "Saturday Night Live," on which Al, improbably, would appear as guest host. The show itself went remarkably well (later it was nominated for an Emmy), and those who were watching had no way to know that the host was working toward a difficult decision.

He had long been worried that the American media had little interest in a Bush-Gore rematch. He thought it was possible to beat George Bush, and because of the economy and the looming war in Iraq, he also thought it was critically important. But would it be possible, if the press corps were bored, to get his own message out?

More and more he was afraid the answer to that question was no, and he told all this to the members of his family. Later he would say the same thing to Leslie Stahl, stunning a national "60 Minutes" audience. Tipper Gore thought it was typical of her husband, putting the interests of the country ahead of his own, and she bristled at even the vaguest suggestion that some more cynical strategy was at work—an angling, perhaps, for a Democratic draft.

She said she knew him as well as anybody, and understood the subtlety of his political ambition. "You win some, you lose some," he had said in his speeches, and if that sounded glib to many of his listeners, particularly the reporters out there taking notes, maybe it was because they saw through a lens that simply didn't fit. They insisted on seeing every national politician as a man or woman of naked ambition, some of them caught in a grand sense of destiny and others obsessed with the concept of power.

But Tipper was certain the man to whom

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she was married was not like that. There were ideas and issues in which he believed, and he was deeply confident of his own understandings. But when he made the decision not to run a second time, there was never any feeling of a destiny denied or a burning ambition that could never be replaced. What he said was exactly what he meant. He was trying to do what was right for the country.

Tipper believed that as much as she believed anything. “My husband,” she said, “is an honorable man.”

By late afternoon, as our interview was ending, Tipper glanced past the reporter sitting across the room toward a picture of Al Gore hanging on the wall—a color photograph she had taken herself.

“Cute picture, isn’t it?” she said with a smile, and her face was suddenly the face of a girl. For anyone who had seen it, it was easy to flash back to her wedding photograph, as her blue eyes sparkled and she brushed back a strand of blond hair with her hand. She said they had come a long way in the past 30 years, and whatever the twists and turns still ahead, she was caught in the same old spirit of adventure.

Already, since the end of the White House years, they had written two books on the American family, and she knew other opportunities were out there, perhaps even some teaching possibilities.

“Al is a natural teacher,” she said, knowing from conversations with his students that most of them seemed to share that opinion.

Rodney Crumpton, for example, was a former Tennessee truck driver who decided in his 40s to go back to college. He took a course under Gore, a seminar on the family, and found the whole experience sur-

prising. For one thing, there at the front of the room every time was the former vice president of the United States—a man who had missed being president by a handful of votes, and who, in the aftermath of that defeat, could have taught at any school in the country. But he had chosen Middle Tennessee State University, a blue-collar institution tucked away in the hills, and Gore seemed to revel in that opportunity. He was not at all like some people expected, not stiff or awkward as he sometimes appeared on the campaign trail, but a teacher who seemed to “bubble over” with knowledge.

Crumpton got to know Gore outside of class, and soon met Tipper also. He thought of her then, as he does today, as a woman who knows how to light up a room.

“I’m so proud of the Gores,” he says. “They could lead an elite lifestyle, but they choose not to. You can be real with them—anybody of any race or any background. Professor Gore was so accessible to his students, and Tipper is like your cousin, your mother, your long-lost friend. There’s no pretense about them at all.”

Mrs. Gore smiles at such testimonials. She is proud of Al and his ability to reach out, and is ready to push ahead with her own work as well. “I’ll continue to make speeches on health care and the status of women and families,” she explains. “I’ll continue to be an advocate on these issues.”

As you listen to her talk, it is easy to believe that life after Washington is exactly as she says. It may be a little less visible now, a little less public in between her appearances. But she still has the passions she has always had—her family and her causes, made richer by her memories—and what more, really, could anybody need?

The answer, she says, is nothing at all. ▼

