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DRIVEN BY FAITH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, ENGLISH TEACHER GAYNELLE DERR HAS DEDICATED HER LIFE TO SERVICE

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Photos courtesy of Gaynelle Derr

As much as we'd like to think we're in total control of our lives, often it's only through reflection and retrospect that we can more fully appreciate the influence that serendipity has played in our life's journey.

For English teacher Gaynelle Derr, providence and good fortune have been delivered via the pages of a philosophy book, the drudgery of piano lessons, and a timely phone call. Now, from the vantage point of her impending retirement from teaching, it's clear that these early experiences transformed her into a champion for social justice, a top political operative and a woman of faith.

It has been the little things, the unexpected conversations, the special moments, that have filled Derr's life with wonder and opportunity. And it all began in what she describes as a "dumpy, tiny, little town" in Southern California.



Born Jan. 12, 1954, Derr started her life in Riverside, California, about an hour's drive from Los Angeles.

She lived there until she was 2-years-old, when her family packed up and moved to Santa Ana, California, where her father became the preacher at Camile Street Baptist Church.

Then, as a 7-year-old, her family moved to Coachella, California. Now known for its enormous music festival, Derr said the desert-like town was not all that enjoyable for those who lived there.

Realizing she wanted more than her hometown had to offer, she says she quickly realized "education would be my out."

Little did she know that there would be not one, but 88 keys to her success. With her father as the local Baptist preacher, the church played a central role in Derr's upbringing. Sticking with a Baptist tradition, she began to learn the piano.

"It was very important if you were a young girl in the Baptist church to take piano lessons," she said.

Taking these lessons changed the course of her life, but it

had nothing to do with piano.

Derr took lessons from Barbara Gibson and when she would go to the Gibsons' house to practice, it wasn't the piano that captured her interest – it was the high level of political discourse happening in an adjacent room. Derr soon learned that her instructor's husband, Fred Gibson, was a "huge mover and shaker in the Democratic Party down in the desert."

Soon, it was politics, not piano, that became her motivation for attending the lessons.

"Frankly, I was never really very good at piano. Looking back more I realize now, it was not the piano that was drawing me there. It was the different people that would be by," Derr admitted with a chuckle.

Lesson after lesson, week after week, Derr would come early and stay late, with the goal always to soak up as much of the day's conversation as she could. It was at those lessons where she met former U.S. Senator John Tunney from California, the son of a boxer and a friend of the Kennedys. It was also there where she met the revolutionary activist Cesar Chavez, who gave Derr her first job.

Organizing farm workers

Having Chavez as a first boss was anything but ordinary. Derr said her involvement in organizing the farm workers led to gaining valuable political experience early in her life.

But it wasn't just the career advancement that made Derr's experience working for Chavez so valuable. What she saw in Chavez and the farm workers led to what she describes as an epiphany.

Derr was in her late teens and had long believed the stereotypes about Mexican farm workers, namely the stereotype that the Mexicans were "a particularly lazy people."

"I will admit by that age, I think I would call it a slight amount of racism. Because I tell you there was a dichotomy at that time in the desert," she said.

Derr said meeting Chavez provided her with her first glance into the truth. Chavez, she realized, was nothing like the stereotypes she had heard all her life.

"It didn't take a long time to realize [Chavez] was very, very organized. He had a really clear picture in his mind about boycotts, how to do them well and he always had his eye on what the outcome would be," Derr recalled.

It was Chavez's organization and clear vision, Derr noted, that ensured the success of the farm workers' union movement.

"Just as Civil Rights needed Martin Luther King Jr., farmworkers had to have a Cesar Chavez who had a vision and people around him to keep the vision straight," she said.

At that time, Chavez had organized several successful boycotts of produce in order to advocate for improved conditions for farm workers. Derr said the conditions for farmworkers at that time were inhumane and unjust.

"[Farmers] could pay [workers] next to nothing, because

[farmers] provided [farm workers] with housing, but it was very sub-standard. When we say they provided them housing, they provided a room. They didn't even have working toilets in many cases. It was a form of servitude," Derr said.

She began working in the summers alongside the farm workers, spending long days in the sweltering heat bending low to pick grapes. She recalled it as "hot, torturous work."

As she developed relationships with the workers, it was her job to ask them questions that might lead them toward unionization.

The more she worked alongside the farm workers, the more she realized how wrong her previous notions were.

Derr said she admired the farm workers' incredible sense of hard work and their "unbelievably strong" family unit. Together,

they worked the fields, began to organize and even shared tamales. By the end of her senior year in high school, Derr said the farm workers she knew were "finally comfortable enough" to begin to unionize.

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Gaynelle Derr
ENGLISH TEACHER



After becoming the youngest person to win the California state tournament for extemporaneous speech, and after working in the fields alongside Chavez and the farm workers, Derr graduated from high school in 1972.

She was admitted to California State University Northridge and worked toward obtaining a Bachelor of Music in conducting.

While a college student, Derr continued her involvement in politics. She worked on Sen. George McGovern's presidential campaign and returned to the farms to work during the summer.

She had various conducting gigs on the side, mostly for churches, but she didn't have anything permanent. Derr began working as a temp for Porterville County's welfare department.

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Then, out of the blue, her phone rang. She answered it. But this wasn't just any phone call. This phone call changed her life.

On the other end of the line

She answered to the voice of a man named Hamilton Jordan. He told Derr they were looking for young, smart people who were interested in working for a candidate for the presidency.

Derr decided to give it a try.

"And what the hell, I didn't have anything else to do," she said.

So off she went. Derr traveled to Sanger, California, to meet with an ex-governor who she had been told was running for president.

The ex-governor turned out to be Jimmy Carter, who became the 39th president of the United States.

She was intrigued by the offer and by Carter's strong Christian faith, so she decided to take a chance with the former governor from Plains, Georgia.

"I left it all and went to work for Jimmy Carter."



Derr soon assumed an important role in the campaign's operation. She described herself as an "advance man." She was Jimmy Carter's "human Rolodex," always knowing the important names and faces in professional politics and big money.

Derr said she was in charge of "big donor relations" for the campaign.

"Before major fundraisers, they would send me these huge files," Derr said, grabbing a stack of papers on her desk three inches thick as an example.

"When you go to these political events, there are certain people [the candidate] has to talk to, and [the candidate] knows it," she explained.

During the events, it was her job to make sure Carter spoke with each of these people and to make sure he was fully informed about who he was talking to. Using codes, signals and hints, Derr navigated Carter through countless events.

Derr said getting Carter elected was no easy feat. The former governor of Georgia, Carter had very little national name recognition, and Derr said this was one of the main challenges for the campaign staff.

"This was never easy. He was never a shoo-in. He was pretty much unknown," she said.

But it helped greatly that Carter's opponent, then-incumbent President Gerald Ford had a major political setback of his own.

On Sept. 8, 1974, Ford took to the airwaves to grant a "full,

free and absolute pardon" on to former president Richard Nixon.

The pardon came just one month after Nixon resigned after his involvement was revealed in the Watergate break-in of the Democratic National Committee's headquarters. Ford's decision to pardon Nixon was a political disaster and helped Carter defeat Ford in the 1976 election, Derr explained.

"It wasn't that [Americans] were voting for Jimmy Carter, maybe that's why I think he wasn't as successful, they were voting against Gerald Ford," she said.

On Nov. 2, 1976, Derr was part of the team that got the ex-governor from Georgia elected to the nation's highest office.

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Faith and the peanut farmer

Along the campaign trail, Derr got to know and admire Carter for his brilliance and his compassion, she said.

"He was always extraordinarily compassionate, kind and quite soft spoken," she said.

Derr said Carter was not so much charismatic, but rather deeply thoughtful.

"Carter's charisma did not come from his personality as it did from his truly brilliant thinking," she said.

What ultimately impressed Derr the most was Carter's strong faith and his ethical and moral base.

"I would credit Jimmy Carter on that campaign with actually setting the trajectory of my faith for the rest of my life," she said.

Every morning on the campaign trail, the Carters would begin with a prayer.

"I remember one specific morning. We were actually sitting and having coffee in his house in Plains. [Carter] and I and Rosalynn [Carter] and two other people specifically started talking about our faith. [Carter] then got up, went into his really nice library in his office. He pulled out a book by Paul Tillich, who was really more of a philosopher than a theologian, but he was kind of both," Derr recalled.

"Then [Carter] said, 'I want you to read this and we're going to talk about this maybe once a week,'" Derr said with a Southern drawl, imitating Carter's voice.

"That totally changed my life. We probably had four or five conversations about that," she said.

These conversations focused on faith, social justice and equality, among other things.

"If there was always a disparity, even worldwide, between the rich and the poor, we would never meet the standard of humanity that he would say God, through Christ, established. So the world would always be broken," Derr said, recalling a common theme of the conversations she had with Carter.

In her eyes, Carter embodied what it means to be a servant leader.

"Carter was the only person I've ever known in politics who truly put the people above himself and I believe that's why he was not successful as president," she said.

"If he felt it was going to cross some line ethically or morally, he just said, 'No,' because it wouldn't be right for the people, and he was their servant," she explained.

Chapel before the White House

With the Carter camp taking over 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, Derr was offered a position inside the White House. Given her music background, she was asked to coordinate all of the White House's musical guests. This would mean bringing in the biggest names in the entertainment industry for special concerts.

She turned it down.

The spiritual realization she underwent during talks with Carter was so powerful, she wanted to develop her faith before continuing with politics.

"I had only known my faith as a kind of emotional thing, and then Jimmy Carter opened up this avenue that it could be an intellectual experience as well," Derr said. "I really felt like I wanted to continue to pursue that avenue a little more."

She had long thought about attending a seminary. And so she moved back to Southern California and enrolled at Biola University in Los Angeles.

With a renewed purpose and a new outlook on her faith, Derr wanted to explore the ideas of "intellectual Christianity" to which Carter had introduced her.

However, it wasn't quite right for her. Derr felt it was "too conservative" for her taste, so she decided to leave after one year. And although she left early, she said her time at Biola "served its purpose."

But Derr's next move turned out to be far more lasting.



As she was deciding what to do next, Derr visited the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. She instantly fell in love.

"I don't think I'll ever forget my first visit to Cal. I had this overwhelming feeling that this is the home I have longed for all my life," Derr recalled.

The legendary "Berkeley Free Speech Movement" protests and the riots of the early 1970s had put the school and city on the map. Derr flourished in the academic environment. And while Berkeley helped Derr to solidify her political beliefs, she developed her faith as well.

"If you were going to find a bunch of intellectual Christians, Berkeley would be the place," she said.

Studying English Literature with world-class writers, Derr loved her time at Berkeley and said, "Cal was so important to my development as an adult."

Cal was also where Derr met her soulmate.

She met Jay Derr for the first time at the First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley during a lecture series. They began as friends and remained great friends long before they became a couple.

Derr graduated from Cal in 1980 and took a job in

"Cal was so important to my development as an adult."

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Phoenix, Arizona, but she wasn't happy with her new home and was anxious to leave.

After completing law school at Berkeley, Jay Derr joined a law firm in Seattle. He invited his college friend, Gaynelle, to come check out Seattle and use his apartment while he was on a three week vacation.

She moved out and decided to stay. Derr said it was just a matter of time before they realized they were meant to be.

"We were at one of his firm's events. It was like a picnic in the summer and it was on the beach. I remember distinctly sitting on the porch of this really big house. I was on one end of the porch and he was on the other end, and I remember looking up from the distance and seeing him and I thought, 'Wow, he is a great man,'" Derr noted.

"Three weeks later, we kissed for four hours and said, 'When are we getting married,'" she recalled.

They wed in 1983, and had their daughter Kaitlyn in 1984 and their daughter Allison in 1988.



With her extensive political experience and extensive studies in political science while at Berkeley, Derr became a political heavyweight in Washington state.

She became co-owner of a political consulting firm, working on issue advocacy and lobbying in Olympia for issues such as gun control and gay rights.

Derr was one of three people to run Patty Murray's first campaign for the U.S. Senate. Derr and her team developed the iconic "Mom in tennis shoes" slogan that branded Murray as someone to whom voters could relate. That slogan helped propel Murray to victory. Derr said it was one of the "most fun" campaigns she ever worked.

One of the key issues of the time was youth gang violence. Derr said gang violence had exploded in the 1990s and the issue was "super hot during that time." With her political experience and her involvement in the state PTA's committee to combat gang violence, she was called upon to help develop a solution to the crisis.

Former Washington Governor Mike Lowry appointed Derr to lead the state's task force to combat gang violence. It was her job to coordinate and organize with the various organizations and groups who were seeking to develop solutions to the problems.

"I went all around all over the state and met with different

groups and got to know gang members," Derr said.

When gang tensions would flare up in different communities, Derr was brought in to hold community forums and to meet with the various parties involved.

But the long hours and commutes to Olympia did not allow her to spend as much time with her young daughters as she had liked.

Derr was being pressured by the Democratic Party, members of her district and other elected officials to run for a seat in the state legislature. Derr said she did a great deal of thinking and praying, and reached her decision not to run.

"It was clear that my family was not going to do well if I made the choice to move further into the political arena," Derr said. "That was the end of my political career."



Although she put an end to her involvement in politics, Derr said she still wanted to make a difference and "do something for humanity."

She was leaning toward becoming a high school teacher, but wasn't sure until she bumped into a gang member she knew from her taskforce days. That interaction solidified her decision.

She began talking with "Michael" and she felt he was acting nervous. When she asked him if anything was wrong, Michael said no. But then Derr looked him right in the eye and said, "Ah, you have a weapon on you."

He didn't say anything, but rather just stared at Derr. Instead of acting outraged, she praised him for his decision to stay in school and showed compassion rather than animosity.

She then said to him, "I'm going to choose to believe you, whichever answer you give me, I'm going to believe you, because I believe in you."

Derr said Michael looked at her and replied, "You know, you really like to give people hope. You need to give people hope with your life."

She left the conversation having made up her mind: she was going to be a high school teacher.

That was how she was going to help humanity.

She received her Master's degree in education from Seattle University and soon began teaching.

Starting out in various Seattle schools, Derr has taught history, music, English and other classes during her teaching career.

Derr keeps her classes lively, with frequent discussion and debate, forceful speeches and tough questions for students to tackle.

She has what most teachers long for: the ability to inspire and energize a room full of young minds.

What's next for Derr

The big question Derr said she's still trying to answer is when to step down from her teaching gig.

She describes herself as a "very fragile diabetic," causing her to miss quite a bit of school to take care of her medical needs.

"I just am not sure it's fair for the students for me to be missing two to three days a month, and sometimes more," she acknowledged.

If she retires this year, Derr says she won't be stepping away from education altogether. She's strongly considering becoming a teacher-mentor or even substitute teaching.

She has a tough decision ahead, that's for sure.


A champion for others

Few students know her as anything other than "Mrs. Derr." Few know she was once a top political operative, a right-hand woman to individuals like Cesar Chavez and Jimmy Carter and had turned down a job in the White House.

The fact that so few know these details speaks to Derr's incredible humility. She never brags, boasts or gloats about the remarkable life she's lived. But ask her, and she'll tell you everything you want to know.

And maybe even a little more.

Whether she retires this year, she has already made her mark on MTHS and beyond.

From farmworkers, to aspiring public servants, to communities ravaged by gang violence, to students in her classroom and her family at home, Derr continues to serve others. 



English Teacher Gaynelle pictured in 1976 at one of the numerous campaign fundraisers she attended while working for Jimmy Carter's Presidential Campaign.