

New Press Aide

From Talk Shows
To the White HouseBy Judy Bachrach
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Washington

Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld, fresh from an editing session, fidgeted cheerfully in a large office at WRC-TV in a state of huge excitement. People at WRC were saying "Sheila's in a daze" —and so she was.

"Well, I met First Lady Betty Ford — oh, at a luncheon or two or whatever. But you know, I didn't know her really or anything and she didn't know me."

Well, not until a few weeks ago, anyway. A few weeks ago (and the term is used advisedly, because Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld couldn't quite remember when — or she couldn't last Thursday, the day of the announcement, anyway), she was asked if she'd like to be Betty Ford's press secretary. Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld just didn't know.

Ever since she was 22 and fresh out of Brandeis University she has been primarily involved with the production end of television. She is now, and will be until Nov. 1, the producer of WRC's morning talk show, "Take It From Here."

"The White House called me yesterday and said, 'It looks like there will definitely be an announcement tomorrow—unless we call you back. . . .'"

She shook her head in wonder. "But you know how that is, well, you never actually believe it unless it's official, you know, right? Well, this morning about 7:45 I get a call from a friend and she says, 'Read the paper.' And

I opened the paper and I was just flabbergasted."

It was after her first meeting with Mrs. Ford that she decided to take the job if there were a definite offer. "Well, we spent maybe two hours, oh, discussing philosophy and attitudes, and she was getting to know me and she told me a lot about herself. Gee, I wish I could remember what."

At her second meeting with the First Lady (the day before Mrs. Ford went into the hospital), she expressed her desire to work for her. It was Nancy Howe, Mrs. Ford's particular friend and special assistant, who called her for both interviews; similarly it was Nancy Howe who phoned to tell her last Monday that she would probably be named press secretary. The two met during the second interview.

"Nancy Howe, Mrs. Ford and I just talked — oh, it was very informal. I'll be working directly for Mrs. Ford, but the absolute structure hasn't yet been discussed.

"I like Nancy," she added. "She has good common sense."

She paused when she was asked if the close relationship that exists between Mrs. Ford and her confidante might not interfere with her access to the First Lady. "I think I can handle that," she said.

She discussed the prospect with her husband, Edward, a Washington lawyer. "Yeah. And he said I'd be the best person for the job." She laughed. "But you

SHEILA WEIDENFELD
The right medium

know, I'm not all that impressed by the fame and the White House, well, because my father. . . ."

Her father, Maxwell Rabb, was secretary to the Cabinet for six years under Eisenhower — which is why she spent a good part of her youth in Washington.

Her career has included a brief stint with game shows, working for a show starring Joan Rivers, working part-time as a media consultant to the State Department, two years as producer of Channel 5's "Panorama," (a talk show) and one year of "Take It From Here."

Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld is 31. Like Ron Nessen she is of the medium the White House clearly finds conducive at the moment. "Look, I am with the press in a sense," she said.

A small woman, tiny, really, she rose to tend to her show.

"I'm 5 foot 2," she said.

"That's your first credibility gap," said Jim Peck, "Take It From Here's" host.

"Five foot 1½," she amended herself.