

Survivor of Family Tragedies

Ethel Skakel Kennedy

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WASHINGTON, June 6— Until those early morning hours Wednesday, when her world was plunged into darkness by the shot that killed her husband, Ethel Skakel Kennedy was basically a happy and contented person.

For her there were no nagging ambitions, no unfulfilled careers. Being Senator Robert F. Kennedy's wife and the mother of his 10 children was her career. She was doing the only thing she wanted to do.

As a close friend says, "Ethel never could get over the idea that she was married to Bobby. She still thought it was a miracle."

Ethel Kennedy had a sense of awe and worship for her husband that most people reserve for respected strangers. On campaign platforms, she listened to his words as though she had never heard him speak before.

On a cool April day, while riding in a convertible with the top down, whizzing from South Bend to Gary, Ind., someone suggested that Ethel get into a closed car until they got to the outskirts of town.

Mrs. Kennedy refused. She said, "I want to be with Bobby."

Being with Bobby encompassed a lot of things. When he served as counsel to the Senate select Committee on Manpower Activities in the Labor or Management Field (the Senate Rackets Committee), it meant showing up for nearly every hearing. This year, it meant campaigning—pregnant with the eleventh child she is expecting late this year and being pushed and shoved and reaching out to shake hands. It meant keeping things light and gay in her McClean, Va., home, making it a retreat for her husband from the daily battles of politics. And it meant attacking anyone who attacked her husband.

She can be blindly unrealistic on the subject of loyalty. A friend said, "I remember one time she got mad at something Chet Huntley said on TV and she called him up right there and then and bawled him out on the phone. She was constantly getting mad at critical things people said and wrote about Bobby."



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Her compassion is real

But through all this devotion, Mrs. Kennedy's personality comes through. She has no façade and people use such adjectives as "gay, warm, friendly and unassuming" when they talk of her.

She can be girlishly giggly and outgoing, but she retreats when people ask about herself. During the campaigns she once said she was going to make sure the children had runny noses so that when reporters asked her questions, "I can bend over and be busy blowing their noses."

Perhaps more than any other Kennedy woman, she seems real to the strangers who meet her. A woman, overdressed in inexpensive clothes, said after meeting her at a recent campaign reception: "I forgot she's a millionaire and all. Jackie came off sort of plutocratic, but Ethel's just like one of us."

Pats, Touches and Hugs

Mrs. Kennedy pats people, touches and hugs them, tousles children's hair. Her compassion is real. While touring a children's hospital during the campaign she saw a small girl in a bed burst into tears. Mrs. Kennedy first inquired—then demanded—that a cameraman who was taking pictures leave the room.

When she saw a starving horse tied up in a chicken coop near her estate in 1963, Mrs. Kennedy took it home. The owner later accused her

of what amounted to horse stealing. She testified last year that the horse was the "saddest sight I ever saw." She said it was "just a bag of bones." She was acquitted and the owner was convicted of cruelty to animals.

Mrs. Kennedy, who was 40 years old April 11, has a gustiness of spirit that some friends feel surpasses her physical strength, despite her expertise at skiing and tennis. Close friends, who say she had a difficult time with her last two pregnancies, worry more than ever about her now.

She is 5'5½" tall, lean, wiry and has a perpetually tanned face, with laugh lines around the eyes and mouth.

She is a curious combination of the sophisticated and naïve. She wears the latest clothes, inches above the knees, but with little white cotton gloves, reminiscent of her convent days. She shocks easily. A friend said, "Whenever we'd watch a movie at Hickory Hill and some sexy scene would come along, we'd all kid her and say 'close your eyes now, Ethel.'"

Mrs. Kennedy has survived crushing sorrows—not only in the Kennedy family but also in her own—with a resiliency that amazes even friends. She is a Roman Catholic and leans heavily on her faith, seldom missing daily mass.

Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. George Skakel, were killed in a private plane crash in 1955 and 11 years later her brother, George, Jr., was killed in another plane crash.

Nothing in her pleasant childhood, insulated by wealth, prepared her for the tragedies to come. Born in Chicago, Mrs. Kennedy grew up in Greenwich, Conn. Her father owned Great Lakes Carbon Corporation and Mrs. Kennedy, the sixth of seven children, graduated from Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart the year she married Senator Kennedy, 1950. Her roommate was his sister, Jean, now Mrs. Stephen Smith.

Mrs. Kennedy's children are Kathleen Hartington, 16; Joseph Patrick, 15; Robert Francis Jr., 14; David Anthony, 12; Mary Courtney, 11; Michael Lemoyne, 10; Mary Kerry, 6; Christopher George, 4; Matthew Maxwell Taylor, 3, and Douglas Harriman, 14 months.