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Savvy Profile:



Ernestine Schlant Bradley

Professor, mother, grandmother,
cancer survivor—
NJ's Ernestine Schlant Bradley
is in the running to become America's
most extraordinary First Lady.

By Lisa Degnen

Sometimes you're heading down one path in life when suddenly you're taking an unexpected and interesting new road. Such was the destiny of German-born Ernestine Schlant, who never imagined that one day she'd be running to become the next First Lady of the U.S.

In 1969, Ernestine was a young, divorced single mother and accomplished scholar who spoke five languages. She was making a successful living in the world of academia when she decided to follow the stars. In a bold move at the age of 34, she decided to become an artist.

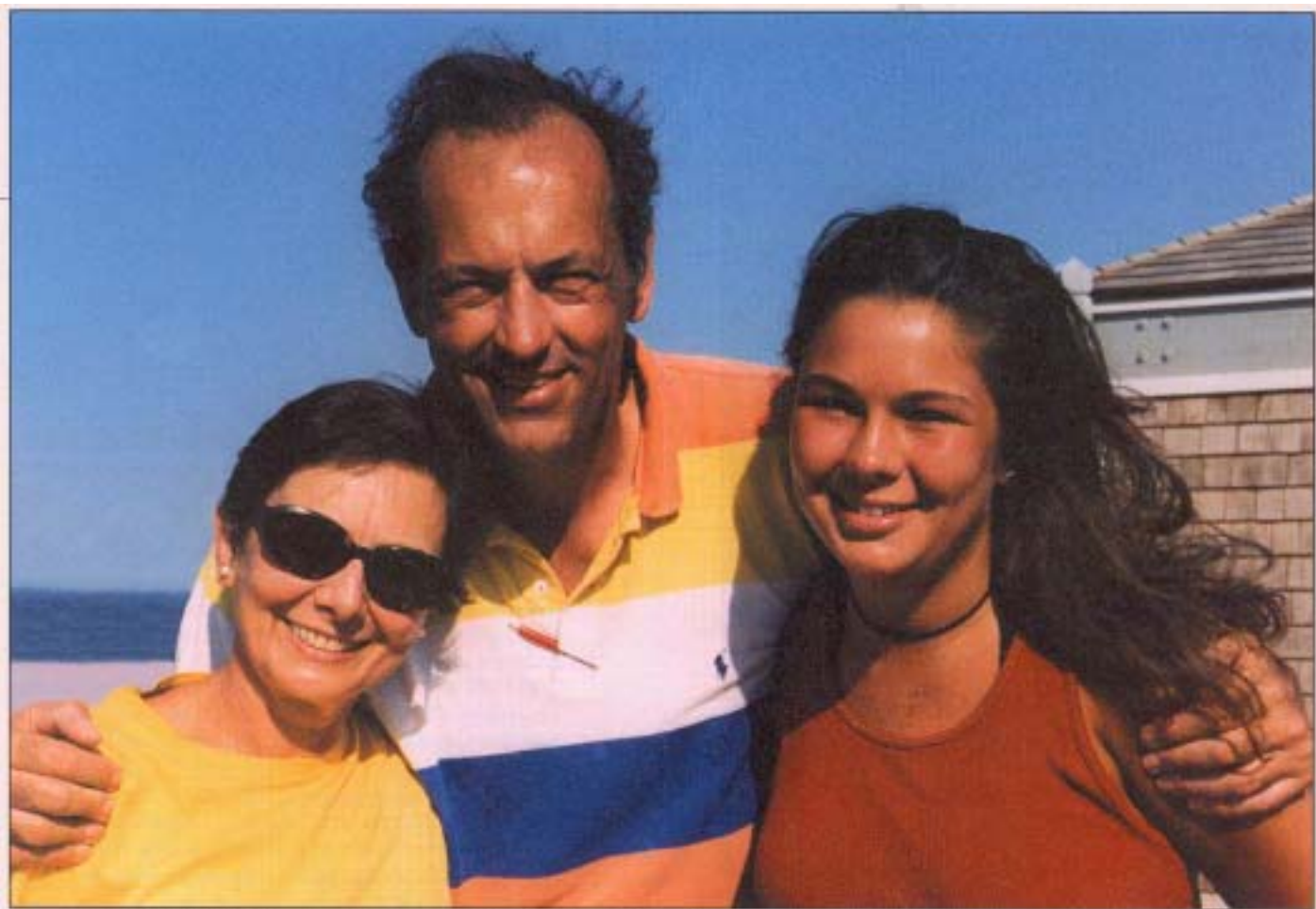
"I thought maybe there was a filmmaker inside of me," explains Ernestine, who's slowly getting used to being called Mrs. Bradley. "When I first came to America, I saw the Eugene O'Neil play

The Iceman Cometh. The lesson of the play was that you can't say, 'I should have [followed my dreams]'. It left a deep imprint on me, so I decided to be a filmmaker. I tried for two years and discovered I wasn't cut out for it. That was also the time I met Bill."

How Bill met Ernestine

The "Bill" Ernestine refers to is, of course, Bill Bradley—former basketball star, former three-term Senator from New Jersey and now a candidate for President of the United States.

Before they met, Ernestine was working for a New York arts-film company that wanted the New York Knicks star to interview poet and sports lover Marianne Moore. "Someone said, 'He lives in your building, so you



Ernestine, Bill and Theresa Anne Bradley at Bill's favorite vacation spot—the Jersey shore.

talk to him," she recalls with a laugh. "So I said, 'Well Okay' without thinking. It was only in retrospect, when I saw how he treated his mail, that I realized Bill would have never opened a letter if we tried to contact him that way. He was in the middle of his playing career and his mail was piled up on the floor."

Bill never did interview Moore, but the soft-spoken basketball star knew he'd met his future wife. Still, instead of asking Ernestine directly for a date, he suggested they meet for additional "business" meetings.

"Bill and I are really proper people," Ernestine says. "We knew this was a business meeting and we had to have another professional meeting or two before he would ask me out."

This year the couple celebrate their Silver Anniversary and one of the most unusual political marriages Washington has ever seen. Ernestine is not the typical Washington matron by any stretch of the imagination. Dressed in a cream-colored sweater set and long black skirt, without a trace of makeup, Ernestine looks much younger than her 64 years. Her delicate features and pixie haircut often have people, including her husband, commenting that she resembles Audrey Hepburn. "Bill only says that when he's being romantic," she jokes. Looking at her, it's also hard to believe Ernestine is eight years older than her husband.

Campaigning is a family affair

Stephanie, Ernestine's oldest daughter, lives in Bernardsville with her husband and four children, who like to call their step-grandpa, "Poppa Bill." Theresa Anne, the Bradleys' only child together, is a 20-year-old college student. While other politicians rarely are seen without their children in tow on the campaign trail, the Bradleys prefer to let their children find their own place. "They have their own lives," Ernestine says.

When Bradley was in the Senate and living in Washington, their

daughter lived in New Jersey with Ernestine, who pursued her career as a professor of German and Comparative Literature at Montclair State University. (She has since taken a leave of absence to devote herself full time to the presidential campaign.)

However, when Theresa Anne was 10, her father suggested she move to Washington so he could assume a stronger parental role. His wife agreed, and commuted to the Capital every weekend to be with her family. Bill became the primary caregiver.

Ernestine doesn't characterize herself a feminist in the strictest terms. Nevertheless, she has a strong sense of herself and isn't willing to bend her own beliefs to cater to how others feel a politician's wife should behave.

"I'm not [a feminist] in the sense that I go out and give speeches, but I am in the sense of how I lead my life, my relationship with Bill and how we raised our child," she says. "I think there was a time when [political] spouses had prescribed roles, but I think this has changed in the last two decades."

"When Bill was in the Senate, there were people who thought spouses should walk around wearing white gloves. Now a lot of people in Washington have spouses who have jobs. It's no longer the case that there's a specific role wives have to play."

Ernestine says it's premature to outline what kind of platforms she would address in the White House. One thing is certain, though: if her Bill becomes President, she'll be the country's first foreign-born First Lady.

Heart in the Garden State

Ernestine Mistlebeck was born in war-torn Passau, Germany. Her father was a World War II air force pilot. Although she insists he was



If Bill Bradley becomes President, Ernestine will be the country's first foreign-born First Lady.

n't a member of the Nazi party, she has struggled with the German people's compliance during the Holocaust. She wrote scholarly books like *The Language of Silence*, about how non-Jewish post-war German writers refused to acknowledge their country's atrocities during the war.

In 1957, she moved to the U.S. as a flight attendant for Pan Am Airlines. Ernestine still recalls her first adventurous days in New York City, and points out she had a green card long before she met Bill Bradley.

"There's still this tremendous myth about America and the opportunities that exist here," she says. "I wanted to come here because Germany at the time was really confining. After the war, this was the country that held out the dream. I was very lucky I had the opportunity to come here and stay."

These days, Ernestine's adopted home of New Jersey is where her heart is. She and Bill are living in an apartment in Montclair while they campaign, and Ernestine admits she misses the simple pleasures of life in the Garden State. "Bill came here in 1961 to go to Princeton and I came in 1971 to teach at the State University of New York at Stony Brook on Long Island, so we've been here a while," she says with her slight accent.

"For some time we thought New Jersey was the best-kept secret. Most non-Jerseyans see the Turnpike and they think that's it. We have always felt very comfortable here. Before we moved to Montclair, we lived out on Route 80 in Denville, which is beautiful with its lakes. We felt like we were living in a resort all year round."

Ernestine deals with cancer

The couple first moved to Montclair in 1992, when Ernestine was hit with the shocking diagnosis that she had breast cancer. In a story told by millions of women, she felt a lump one day. She had it tested, learned it was malignant and, a week later, had a mastectomy. Bill moved closer to the hospital where Ernestine was admitted, while friends offered love and support.

Recently, as honorary chairperson, she was on hand in Hackensack for the opening of New Jersey's first chapter of Gilda's Club. Named after comedian Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer in 1989, the club offers a haven for cancer victims and their families. Ernestine says she fell apart emotionally in the days following her diagnosis and relied on her husband's strength to help pull her through the life-shattering experience.

"When I underwent the chemotherapy, I didn't think much. I just went through it almost on automatic," she says. "Afterward, I talked to a lot of people who had cancer and similar experiences. It made me reassess my values and what's

important in my life. I cherished human relations more."

Before, Ernestine says, she took it for granted that she had friends and colleagues. "We'd get along, but it was never a big deal," she says.

After, Ernestine adds, she started to see how precious such times were. "Before I was diagnosed, my neighbors were friendly, but that was it," she says. "Then, they came out and really were supportive."

After overcoming the disease, Ernestine joined many organizations that promote breast cancer awareness and work towards a cure. She says she would like to help under-insured women who may be able to obtain a diagnosis but have difficulty paying for the treatment.

The reluctant role model says she is willing to speak out about her own battle because she knows how difficult it is for others. "I wanted it to be okay for people who have had cancer to talk about it," she says.

Drawing lines on private and public issues

It's a view she and her husband share. In fact, she and the 18-year Senate veteran agree on most issues privately and politically, including a belief that the present campaign should be run on issues like tax reform, health care and gun control. They also agree that it is Vice President Al Gore, not movie star Warren Beatty, who stands between them and the Democratic nomination. "I think Warren Beatty will be so far to the left that no one will take him seriously," she says dismissively.

The Bradleys have been described as reserved and guarded about their private lives. But these days, when every past and present detail of a candidate's life is served up for public consumption, it seems odd that they have chosen to run for the most scrutinized job in America.

"Of course you have concerns," Ernestine says of the road ahead. "But Bill has been in public life for a major part of his life; when I met him he was in public life. I've learned through him that you can keep your privacy even though you're a public person."

And Ernestine has learned by experience how to manage a delicate balance between the two. "When Bill was playing basketball," she recalls, "there was this one incident when we were having a romantic dinner in New York. A man came up to us and he was a little drunk. He started to talk to Bill, and Bill gave him an autograph and he still didn't go away. By that time, I felt secure enough in our relationship that I could open my mouth. I said to the man, 'I'm so sorry, but can't you see we're having a private conversation?' And he started yelling, 'Who do you think you are? Do you think you are too good to talk to people?'"

"That was the one lesson I needed—and that was 25 years ago. In private you are private and in public you are public."

Ernestine also never takes it to heart if the press criticizes the man she loves. "Again, Bill's basketball career helped me a lot," she explains with a smile. "I have seen him praised and cheered one night in The Garden and then the next move he makes they boo him. You learn to walk the middle road and not fly too high when they cheer and don't drop too low when they boo."

She laughs, and adds, "I don't think the press has been too negative. They just say they don't think Bill has a chance."

While most agree that it's likely to be an uphill battle for the Bradleys to reach the White House, a Bradley-for-President banner that hung outside of a New Hampshire restaurant when he campaigned there may say it best. It read: "He has made the long shot before."

And Ernestine was there to cheer him on. ●