Long Hours, Low Pay, Endless Compromises: The Not-So-Big Jump from Teaching to Politicking
On the Gubernatorial Campaign Trail with Former NWP Site Director and Teacher Charlotte Pritt
by Fran Simone

What do teaching and politicking have in common? Plenty. Recently, I spent a day on the campaign trail with Charlotte Pritt, a former high school English teacher and former director of the West Virginia Writing Project. Pritt is running for governor of West Virginia. She is stylish, dynamic, and she reaches out to others with the interest and empathy of a caring teacher. I caught up with her on a magnificent autumn day five weeks before the election. I wanted to do my own comparing of Pritt, the teacher, and Pritt, the public figure.

Obvious similarities between teaching and politicking exist: long hours, little pay, no respect, and endless compromises. However, other similarities became apparent as Charlotte visited a nursing home, a hospital, and a Chamber of Commerce dinner. The day was long, from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m., the schedule tight and the candidate late for each event. At 4 p.m. we rolled into a crowded Hardee’s restaurant in Chapmanville where we refueled on caffeine for the evening ahead. Charlotte posed for pictures with a girls’ junior-senior volleyball varsity from Calvary Baptist Hurricane Academy. Interestingly, I noticed two Writing Project teachers sitting quietly over coffee (Chapmanville was the site of our 1995 Invitational Summer Institute). Charlotte talked to everyone, moving from table to table, shaking hands, smiling, listening.

As we drove from place to place, Charlotte — like the organized teacher making use of every waking moment — handwrote thank you notes to every person who had contributed to her campaign.

“What transferred best from teaching to politics?” I asked. Without hesitation, she answered, “As a teacher and a writer, I know the importance of planning and also of revising my plan if it isn’t working. I want to work with different people — teachers, social workers, truckers, the ones in the trenches — to share with me what’s working and what isn’t. Based on their feedback, we can revise and change the way we did in our Writing Project peer response groups. What works, what doesn’t, what do I keep, what do I change?”

Charlotte’s populist theme set the tone for the entire day. During her morning talk to social workers and nursing home residents, she said, “I believe in affordable health care for everyone.” On her afternoon visit to doctors and staff at a small county hospital, she told them, “I want to work with you in solving the paperwork problems you mentioned. The cost of prescription drugs is a national problem. I’m moved by your stories of painful choices your patients must make.” And at her evening speech to the Logan County Chamber of Commerce, she said, “As a teacher, I believe that everyone should have access to a community college education, and I’ll work with you to see that it happens.”

So far I had witnessed Pritt the politician, sincere and passionate candidate, 100% for West Virginia and her people, but Pritt the teacher had not disappeared.

MawMaw and Teeth
Both English teachers and West Virginians love stories. Charlotte told about how during high school she had planned to enlist in the Marines because she couldn’t afford college. (She is the oldest of six children from a Buzzard Rock Mountain coal mining family.) Her biology teacher, Miss Coons, helped her land two full college scholarships. At Marshall University, Charlotte joined the ROTC.

When her MawMaw Lanin was diagnosed with cancer, Charlotte, 15, the oldest grandchild, moved in with her. Years later, MawMaw who lived another twenty years, said, “Those doctors don’t know everything. They don’t know about prayer and love.” Pritt does.

Charlotte told the story of how, at the Vandalia Festival, an annual West Virginia folk/heritage event, a young woman holding her hand in front of her mouth approached Charlotte tentatively. “Excuse me, Charlotte, I want to talk to you, but I’m embarrassed because I don’t have any teeth.” The young woman explained that she and her husband couldn’t afford a new set of teeth. Just as a teacher is pulled into the lives of those with whom she works, Charlotte was compelled to act. She took the woman’s name and address and later arranged for a neighbor to make the woman a set of dentures. A year later the same woman, smiling with her new teeth, approached Charlotte at another event. "Thank you so much," she said. "I just got a job as a receptionist and I get to use my new teeth and smile at people every day."

The Personal is Political
As I watched Charlotte move from place to place, group to group, I was struck by how nearly everyone wanted something. Like the teacher who has learned to listen, she heard their different needs. One nursing home patient complained about an unfair provider tax charged at private nursing homes to bring in federal dollars. "They’re taxing people who can least afford it. They’re taxing people on their death beds." A senior from Huntington, in blue blazer with a red, white, and blue striped tie adorned with donkeys and stars, wanted a state park to enhance tourism in that city. Over a hot dog, slaw, and chili lunch, a social worker spoke about a client with MS who couldn’t afford the medication to prevent him from going blind.

The doctors who talked with Charlotte wanted freedom from bureaucratic red tape and restrictions. One young doctor said, "Drug and insurance companies have left physicians out of decision making." Another commented, "The public has an image of doctors as rich, insensitive, and materialistic."

See From Teaching to Policing, page 4
From Teaching to Politicking
continued from page 3

Charlotte listened carefully. Her expression revealed that she was thinking about what she was hearing; she was taking it to heart.

Recently I read that learning is a messy process, and the search for truth and knowledge is open-ended. Most of the important issues raised during political campaigns are complex. However, voters, the same as students, like neat, tidy problems with simple answers.

When we finally stumbled into Charlotte's home at 11 p.m., I was too exhausted to even contemplate complexity. Driving home, I marveled at her stamina, her respect for every person she had met that day, and her ability to stay present and focused, qualities she developed during her fifteen years in the classroom.

All day I had witnessed her teaching experience serve her well on the campaign. Yes, there is a direct relationship between effective teaching and effective governing. Good teachers are rarely satisfied with their methods and results; they constantly evaluate and revise their strategies. Self-reflection is automatic. Good teachers, like effective politicians, hold onto a touch of idealism.

In a televised speech at a political convention, Charlotte said, "For 15 years I taught high school in West Virginia. I loved teaching because it gave me a chance to help our young people dream and to help them turn their dreams into reality." As governor, Pritt wants to continue this work, expanding her vision to include not only the young, but also the not-so-young.

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