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ONE DOLLAR

First lady finds spotlight shines bright



By J. Henson — The Capital
Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and first lady Kendel Ehrlich appear before the media.

By THEODORE KIM
Staff Writer

Kendel Ehrlich has called the scrutiny she faces as Maryland's first lady, "the zoo effect."

After last week, a zoo might seem more private than the Governor's Mansion.

Mrs. Ehrlich, 42, made headlines from Baltimore to Bali for saying she would like to "shoot Britney Spears" if given the chance.

On Thursday, she reluctantly found herself in the news again as rumors spread that she was pregnant. Later that night, she and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

announced they are expecting their second child. They have a son Drew, 4.

"A learning experience," Mrs. Ehrlich said of her frenzied week in the spotlight at a news conference Friday.

Welcome to life at the Governor's Mansion, which, despite its opaque brick walls, can sometimes feel as transparent as a glass cage for its tenants.

"We've found out in the past few months little that we do is (not) newsworthy," Mr. Ehrlich said at the news conference.

For the Ehrlichs and their

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predecessors, the experience is the same: Every word and action is pored over, every policy

change is thoroughly examined. Perhaps most significantly, every life change — whether a pregnancy or a gut-wrenching divorce — is magnified through the electron microscope known as Maryland's State House media corps.

Much of it, observers say, comes from the emergence of the office and the evolution of media.

Civil War-era administrations were not concerned with the media overload of today — the 6 and 11 p.m. cycles of television news, myriad print publications and instant bulletins on the Internet.

Gregory Stiverson, president of the Historic Annapolis Foundation, said another factor

helps drive the constant curiosity: the gossip machine that is Annapolis, which he characterized as "chronically a small town."

"Everyone in Annapolis cares about what everyone else is doing," Mr. Stiverson said. "And the first family is no different."

Maintaining a public profile while keeping a private life is certainly no new challenge for Maryland's long line of first

ladies.

Gertrude Johnson Harrington, first lady to Emerson C. Harrington during World War I, opened the Governor's Mansion to weary soldiers and sailors, according to the Maryland State Archives.

Edna Amos Nice, first lady to Harry W. Nice during the mid-1930s, garnered attention when she embarked on an overhaul of the Governor's Mansion.

The spotlight has only grown brighter in modern times.

Barbara Mandel, the late ex-wife of former governor Marvin Mandel who was jailed and later cleared on political corruption charges in the 1970s, was embroiled in a messy divorce and legal dispute over alimony payments.

There was the late Hilda Mae Snoops, whose long-time relationship with former governor William Donald Schaefer was the focus of constant media speculation.

Mr. Ehrlich's immediate predecessor, Parris N. Glendening, endured his share of personal controversy as well. He split from his wife, Frances Hughes Glendening, and married his aide, Jennifer E. Crawford, in a scandal that consumed political circles for months and eroded his popularity.

Mr. Glendening's ex-wife said in an interview that the attention can be "overwhelming." Much of it, she said, stems from the demands of the job, which are dictated "not on your own time, not on your agenda."

"I felt like I had prepared for it, but you're never really prepared for it," she said. "It's very challenging, very demanding. You always want to make a contribution. You try to do so many things and you don't always respond the way you want to."

Even in the glare of the public eye, "every woman that has held that position so far has done so the best they can with grace and dignity," said Emily Oland Squires, director of research and student outreach for the Maryland State Archives.

"It's been only very recently when women have really been

scrutinized," she said.

If the others faced scrutiny, Mrs. Ehrlich last week found herself fending off the Hubble Space Telescope.

The international media hype that engulfed Mrs. Ehrlich over her Britney Spears' comment spanned the globe in a matter of days.

She made comments aimed at the pop starlet during an address Oct. 3 at Hood College in Frederick about fighting domestic violence.

"'Shoot Britney' remark flops," screamed a headline in Australia's *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper on Wednesday. A Google search of the words "Ehrlich" and "Spears" on Friday turned up more than 7,600 hits on the Internet.

Britney Internet fan sites around the world, meanwhile, posted messages pledging to flood the State House with anti-Mrs. Ehrlich letters in the coming days.

"She certainly has no political skills," wrote a fan identified as "minnerob" of Mrs. Ehrlich on eFGforum.com.

Wrote "keller" on the same site: "She is one thick lady to be the first lady. She clearly hasn't thought about what she is saying and has clearly just made herself look foolish."

Considering all the buzz, Republican strategist Kevin Igoe said the first lady has so far tamed the tempest well.

"If there's any fallout, I think it's good because the first lady's basic message that the entertainment industry, and Britney Spears in particular, need to clean up their act is widely agreed upon by parents in Maryland," Mr. Igoe said.

Then there's the matter of the new baby, who is due on March 16 and would mark only the second birth at the governor's mansion in over a century.

Said Mr. Ehrlich, a former Baltimore County congressman, "I thought I had become acclimated (to the attention) in Congress. But it's nothing like this job, obviously."

tkim@capitalgazette.com