



The Sunday Capital

75 cents

A Capital-Gazette Newspaper — Annapolis, MD

JUNE 15, 2003



Capital file photo By G. Nick Lundsow

Six months after Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s inauguration, the first family — Kendel, son Drew and Mr. Ehrlich — has adjusted to life at Government House.

New neighbors

Ehrlich family at home in Annapolis

By THEODORE KIM
Staff Writer

Let the word go forth: The Ehrlichs are a "normal" family, or at least they want to be known as one.

No Michael Jackson weirdness. No Kennedy intrigue. No Osbourne-family hijinks.

Bob (the governor) likes Campbell's soup, late mornings and watching football on Sundays. Kendel (the first lady) is a fan of Perry Mason, California Pizza Kitchen and her 3-year-old-son Drew. And Drew likes chicken nuggets and pizza, fishing in the governor's fountain and everything related to Spiderman.

"We go down Main Street. We get ice cream. I shop," Mrs. Ehrlich said in an

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interview last week. "People see us out. We're doing what they do, and it's just showing that we're a regular family. We're like they are. And I think people really identify with that."

The differences between the Ehrlichs and the family of four down the street?

Well, first there's the 24-hour security detail and

the personal gourmet kitchen staff. ("Even the chicken nuggets are better here," Mrs. Ehrlich said.)

Government House — a 125-year-old mansion just a sneeze away from the State House with a three-tiered fountain, cathedral ceilings and crystal chandeliers — is a pretty nice abode.

The Ehrlichs no longer shop for groceries or make trips to the dry cleaner. And Bob manages a \$22 billion annual budget and 80,000 state employees.

"The privilege of living in that house," Mr. Ehrlich said, "is tremendous."

Six months after he was sworn into Maryland's highest office on a chilly January day, the Ehrlichs are settling into life as

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Annapolis's most visible denizens.

For the most part, they've gotten used to the around-the-clock police surveillance, the crush of media attention and the governor's frequent late nights crisscrossing the state.

Being known as the first Republican occupants of the governor's mansion in 36 years is also becoming old hat.

But carving out family time — "Drew Time," as the governor likes to call it — while presiding over 5 million Marylanders and jousting daily with a Democrat-controlled legislature presents an Everest-like challenge.

"Getting used to the personal side has been a little more difficult than the professional side," Mr. Ehrlich said in an interview last week. "We met here, we dated here. But the loss of privacy, the loss of freedom, having the security detail all the time — it takes some getting used to."

The Ehrlichs are night owls who like to watch movies late and read, Mr. Ehrlich said. He admits that Drew has "no particular bedtime."

"We are extremely late-night people and late-morning people," he said. "That's partly driven by Drew. Our 'Drew Time' is later at night."

Mrs. Ehrlich, the governor said, has served as the family's epoxy. She has temporarily mothballed a high-flying legal career to pursue an assertive role as first lady.

Perhaps more significantly, she wants more "Drew Time," so she works part-time for Comcast Corp. and sets aside Tuesdays and Thursdays for her son.

"You have to make time," she said. "I don't want to be in the position down the road of having missed out."

On the policy front, Mrs. Ehrlich has sketched a broad agenda to bolster drug and alcohol treatment programs and

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close the technology gap in schools.

She also is discussing plans for a new women's history museum, possibly in Annapolis. In addition, she wants to establish an endowment for the governor's mansion "so that each administration doesn't have to start from scratch."

Those waiting for Mrs. Ehrlich to take on Maryland's ailing health care system or the long-term budget crisis Hillary Clinton-style, however, shouldn't hold their breath.

"I will not get involved in specific legislation or specific funding issues," she said. "I just will not do that... I think each first lady brings whatever her personality is to the office."

A long climb

Of course, Bob and Kendel are no strangers to the public eye.

Bob Ehrlich was born in Arbutus, a working-class community southwest of Baltimore. An only son, he earned a law degree at Wake Forest University in North Carolina and was elected to the Maryland General Assembly at the tender age of 28.

Kendel Sibiski grew up on the north side of the Baltimore Beltway, in a close-knit middle-class neighborhood called Seminary Ridge.

The youngest of three children, she idolized Perry Mason,

America's favorite television lawyer. Asked by a teacher to draft a letter about her ambitions while a senior at Dulaney High School, Kendel wrote about attending law school. She did, becoming a prosecutor in Annapolis and later in Harford County.

"The law thing for me was there for a long time," she said. "It was the stage, being on stage. It was fun to be on."

Bob and Kendel began dating over a decade ago when the governor was still a member of the General Assembly. Their first date was over coffee at the Maryland Inn on Main Street, Mrs. Ehrlich said.

But as their relationship advanced, Kendel had doubts about a life in politics.

"Great guy, bad job," she said. "I was used to getting out of court, hopping in my car and going to the beach. I was used to doing whatever I wanted, so the idea of (political) 'bull roasts' was not exactly high on my list."

After one night chock-full of political events — including a GOP roast in downtown Baltimore with "not a lot of attendees" — she decided to break it off.

In a story that has grown into legend with each telling, then-delegate Bob knocked on Kendel's door and presented her with a David Letterman-style list of 10 reasons she should reconsider a life in politics.

It worked. They were married at Calvary United Methodist Church in Annapolis.

In 1995, their first year hitched, Mr. Ehrlich won a Baltimore County congressional seat. The transition was tough: Mrs. Ehrlich reluctantly left her job in Annapolis.

Thinking of their time on Capitol Hill, the Ehrlichs re-



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member the frenzied Clinton impeachment vote and many State of the Union addresses, plus the birth of Drew.

Then came last year's heated race for governor, which ended with Mr. Ehrlich upsetting the favorite, Democrat Kathleen Kennedy Townsend.

Mr. Ehrlich's decision to run for governor "was something I think his gut was telling him to do, but all the objective facts weren't there," Mrs. Ehrlich said. "The issue was him deciding, 'OK, I'm ready to leave politics.' Because, really, what you need to do when you (run) is prepare for the fact that you might not win. So he needed to do that personally."

Pitched battles

The Ehrlichs admit that adapting to the shark-infested waters of the General Assembly and warding off a pesky State House press corps have been difficult.

In his first legislative session, the governor's plan to legalize slot machines, the centerpiece of his agenda, ran into stiff resistance and was nixed by his political nemesis: House Speaker Michael E. Busch,

D-Annapolis.

Mr. Ehrlich's initiative for charter schools was significantly watered down. His gun-crime legislation died in committee, and his nominee to head the state's environmental department, Lynn Y. Buhl, was rejected by the Senate.

What's more, top Democrats have accused Mr. Ehrlich and his staff of being politically aloof.

That assertion doesn't sit well with Mrs. Ehrlich.

"There is certainly a frustration that this particular legislative session was so ridiculously partisan," she said. "But I think that's why people wanted Bob to be here. They didn't want business as usual. They didn't want partisan politics. They want two-party government. Bob has a plan, and he's doing and has done exactly what he said he would do on the campaign trail."

One person has cruised through the transition process unscathed.

"Drew made the transition in about 10 seconds," Mr. Ehrlich said.

"As long as his parents aren't making a big deal about the

change, then he's fine, and he has been," Mrs. Ehrlich said. "He just kind of goes with the flow."

Politics aside, prominent local Democrats admit that the Ehrlichs present a new twist for Maryland voters who are used to a dusting of dysfunction and intrigue.

Former governor Parris N. Glendening divorced the first lady, Frances Hughes Glendening, and married an aide, Jennifer Crawford. His predecessor, William Donald Schaefer, and his longtime companion, the late Hilda Mae Snoops, chose not to live at Government House.

"Glendening was so very staid," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., D-Calvert. "Bob Ehrlich's a jock, handsome. Kendel's trim, athletic, pert. In the election, they reflected change."

Annapolis Mayor Ellen O. Moyer, a Democrat who's close to Frances Hughes Glendening, agreed.

"This is a younger family with a young son," Ms. Moyer said. "It's exciting for a young family and a young son to grow up in this area. There's just a totally different dynamic involved."

Mr. Busch predicted that the Ehrlichs would flourish in a city that views the first family as part of its own.

"They are very personable and I think you'll see them downtown a lot," he said. "Schaefer viewed himself as a Baltimore guy, and Glendening was not really out and around. I wouldn't be surprised to see this governor having a beer at the Ram's Head Tavern. That's just the way Bobby is."

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