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Life at the Top of the Hill
First Lady Kendel Ehrlich





The Governor's Mansion.

LIFE AT THE TOP OF THE HILL

By Carolyn Lee

Welcome to Government House," is the traditional greeting for visitors to the Governor's Mansion at 110 State Circle. Originally a Victorian structure, the Georgian-style country house was converted in 1935 to blend more gracefully with the historic buildings which surround it. The home sits formally in its landscaped setting, but First Lady Kendel Ehrlich works at creating a less formal, more "normal" life for her growing family while they reside in the house at the top of the hill.

Of course, 4-year-old son Drew makes the job a little easier. On a day off from pre-kindergarten, he spots his mother and her guests from two stories above the spacious entrance hall. Still in his pj's, with one arm slung over the polished wood handrail of the grand staircase, he greets

them from above. Obviously at ease with strangers, he's asked about school. "I go to NAPS (Naval Academy Primary School)," he declares, adding, "But I don't nap!"

His mother says about her son, "Drew's a character, and he's just been the way he is from the beginning. He was part of our decision about whether we would run or not [for the office of governor]. If we had had a different type of child, who was more shy and didn't enjoy people as much as he did...well, [let's just say] he was definitely part of the equation."

Of the residence, she says, "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Most women are proud of the homes they keep, and the First Lady is no exception. It is composed of 54 rooms, including the private residential rooms, administrative offices and service area. Mrs. Ehrlich is knowledgeable about its history, furnishings and fine art as she strolls through its elegant spaces: the wedgewood blue formal State Dining Room, the Victorian Library, the Drawing Room, the Federal Reception Room,

Editor's Note: The interview for this article was conducted prior to the birth of the Ehrlich's second child.

First Lady Kendel Ehrlich. Photo by Dan Beigel.



First Lady Kendel Ehrlich works at creating a less formal, more "normal" life for her family.

the Empire Parlor, and the Conservatory. She says, "Of all the public rooms, the Conservatory is used most informally." During the holidays, it holds a huge Christmas tree; now, an exhibit of bronze sculpture from the University of Maryland.

A staircase descends from the Conservatory to a large, sunlit playroom with a pool table and lots of toys. "We use the whole house," says Mrs. Ehrlich. "Drew's gotten into a routine. He knows exactly where to go, and that happened within about a week—it's funny how they know. Of course, the pool table was an obvious attraction." A door from the playroom leads to an outdoor patio, a favorite respite for her husband.

Mrs. Ehrlich describes herself as a happy house "and actually one of the nicest governor's houses in the country. Some states don't even have one, so [this is] a real privilege," she says. She explains that this home has plenty of family space for them to have a private life. Other governor's mansions, she says, are more museum-like with considerably less space for family living.

A busy wife and mother, Mrs. Ehrlich recalls her own childhood on Tallyho Road in Lutherville, Md. Youngest of three children, she says the family did a lot of things together. "Summers, we'd go to a local pool and, for vacations, we had two weeks in Ocean City every year." She went to

public schools in Baltimore County, babysat and mowed lawns for several people in the neighborhood, a neighborhood she describes as "the kind with families where kids roamed safely, all the mothers knew all the kids, and everyone kept track of everyone else." She adds, "Now, it's really shocking when I hear about some child I babysat who is in law school. That's when you realize time is really marching on."

Mrs. Ehrlich credits her parents for setting the solid foundation for her achievements thus far, "and also that neighborhood. I had great friends as well, one of whom is on my staff and does my correspondence.

Though she could not have predicted she would be living in this house, she says, "I always thought that I would be successful in whatever I did. I had a lot of confidence as a kid. I didn't know that it would be here, or where it would be, but I always knew that whatever I do, I do pretty well."

Of her combined role as mom and First Lady, she says, "It's interesting to raise a child [in ways] you were not raised. I'm certainly doing everything I can under the circumstances, but I

didn't grow up knowing there were chefs downstairs!" Mrs. Ehrlich admits to overhearing Drew say at times, "Oh, is Mommy gonna have to cook?" She says, "There's as much responsibility for him understanding that this really is not normal life for many people."

The kitchen, for many, is the center of family life, but there is none in the Ehrlich's private living quarters. One of Mrs. Ehrlich's strategies for "normalization" has been to place a refrigerator in the butler's pantry on the main floor off of the formal dining room and near their favorite family rooms. This refrigerator looks familiar. It's covered with family photographs and signed

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art work (Drew's, of course) and stocked with small juice cans and snacks within easy reach for Drew and his friends. "I can come down to this kitchen and still microwave—you know, the popcorn," she says.

The industrial kitchen is on the ground floor of the house. "We spend a lot of time there. Either Bob is coming in late and we'll join him, or Drew and I will eat together at the table," says Mrs. Ehrlich, adding, "We probably eat down there more than [the staff] would like."

The staff, most of whom have survived several administrations, are enjoying having a child in the house. According to Meghann Siwinski, the First Lady's press secretary, "There hasn't been a child Drew's age in the house (3 years old, when they moved in) since 1939. "The Ehrlichs handed out Halloween candy for the first time in about 20 years, and at Christmas the staff made gingerbread houses. They love having kids around when Drew has his friends over from school. The whole feel is different, more upbeat. There's lots of energy here."

Mrs. Ehrlich says that "the only downside to living in this house is that it is somewhat separated from the community." She feels part of her job is to become more involved. "I love Annapolis," she says. "I lived here in 1990 when I met my husband, and we're privileged to live in the center of it." She likes to walk with Drew down Main Street. "The candy store is a big favorite and the ice cream, of course—and we like to feed the ducks."

In an effort to be a part of neighborhood activities, the Ehrlichs joined the Mears Marina pool in Eastport. "It's a great little spot, all moms and kids. I feel lucky to be there," she says. They have also become involved with Drew's school to try to "make things as normal as possible for him. The good news is

that he doesn't pay attention to anything I don't bring attention to, so he just goes with the flow."

The First Lady, like her husband, has 24-hour executive protection. Mrs. Ehrlich explains that she copes with the associated loss of spontaneity by arranging plentiful visits from friends and family. Under these circumstances, she says, "A sense of neighborhood becomes more visit-oriented. You're always bringing in people who are near and dear to you—neighbors from [our former] Timonium community, old friends from nearby, college friends from out of town. We make an effort to see those [important] people in our lives, and I try to see girlfriends who have kids Drew's age—we have a lot of kids here." Mrs. Ehrlich describes herself as a good friend and says that,



Drew greets guests from the grand staircase.

Dan Belgel

"As a result, I have very loyal friendships. It's rare these days to have five or six girlfriends from second grade who you're still in touch with."

She extends the same generosity of spirit to the greater community as well. Last year nearly 200 people visited the Governor's Mansion every week. Mrs. Ehrlich says that she personally organized an event for the people [who work across the street] in the courthouse [Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County] because she knew that many of them had walked past the home for years and had never been inside. It is really a wonderful thing to share, and that responsibility I feel very strongly about."

The First Lady has little time to herself these days, but getting outside is what she loves to do most. She is accompanied by security at all times but, whenever she can, she walks around the Naval Academy for exercise and enjoyment of a place she loves. One strategy she uses for privacy, whether she's walking or driving, is to wear a headset. "I'm usually [being driven] in the back seat of a car and don't have control over the music anymore. With a headset, I can combine what I like to listen to and isolate myself a bit. I don't drive [now], except in the golf cart."

Speaking of golf, Mrs. Ehrlich says she loves the game. She became interested when she was single and living in Annapolis. "I had the time and a lot of friends who played." She recalls "when the course in Queenstown was brand new and you could go over the bridge for twilight golf." The allure, she says, was "the beauty of the setting and just being outside with a competitive purpose."


Like mother, like son? Mrs. Ehrlich says that Drew is very interested in the game. "And this isn't just a mother talking, but his eye-hand coordination is really excellent. We go to the Severna Park Golf Center and do the 9-hole and the little putt-putt—he loves it." In the summer, she says,

given the choice of activities, it's golf he'll choose. "Some nights we'll go very late to Eisenhower, about an hour before the sun goes down. We'll all go out in the cart, and [Drew] actually pays attention to the rules." Drew's dad is a very good golfer, but Mrs. Ehrlich says she simply doesn't have the time and won't for the foreseeable future al-

though, she says, "Every once in a while, I can commit to 9-holes."

Like most women's lives these days, Mrs. Ehrlich's is a balancing act, and the ability to move gracefully from one role to the next is an important one. Although in her official role as First Lady she is not formally using her law degree, her courtroom experience is Dan Beigel. invaluable as head of the Teen Council on Drug and Alcohol Abuse. She has spoken out broadly on issues of domestic violence. She believes education is one of the strongest answers, "because education was a big

part of my life in making choices, making decisions." She is also working on a project, now at the grassroots level, for a Maryland Women's History Museum.

The First Lady says she is asked occasionally how she feels about having her portrait hang in the gallery one day along with the previous First Ladies of Maryland. She replies that she doesn't actively think about herself being part of history. "You just live your life and know that [on the way] you'll become part of it." She says, "The historic event was winning the election, and that captures the history for me, but mostly for my husband. It was a huge risk. I always knew he'd win. The excitement of that particular night is bound in the history books." 



The refrigerator in the butler's pantry is covered with family photos and Drew's art work.

Don Beigel



When not wearing one of her hats for Inside Annapolis Magazine, Carolyn Lee can be found paddling her kayak or working in her garden.