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## Next Md. First Lady No Junior Partner

*By April Witt*  
 Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Sitting at an orientation luncheon for new congressional wives in 1994, Kendel Ehrlich -- a fiercely competitive former public defender who has the skills to run for office in her own right -- began to despair. The garden party setting wasn't really her style. Neither was the topic of conversation: how to accessorize with scarves and jewelry.

Stunned, she took her handout on "The 14 Points of Accessorizing" back to her hotel room and cried.

"That was not a good day," her husband, Maryland Gov.-elect Robert J. Ehrlich Jr., recalled. "That was really not a good day."

He laughed at the absurdity. He can afford to laugh.

Kendel Ehrlich, 41, not only found her footing as a political spouse, she raced nimbly alongside her husband all the way to the governor's mansion.

"I love the fight," she said. "I love the excitement."

"We are both very competitive. But people don't always associate that with me, I guess because I'm softer looking."

Maryland's next first lady -- once voted most outgoing student at her suburban Baltimore high school -- wins bipartisan plaudits as a gung-ho promoter of her husband who has never lost a sense of her own power. She is a savvy pragmatist who just happens to have a dazzlingly photogenic smile. And on election night, as she stood beside her victorious husband, her red suit was perfectly accessorized with a brooch depicting the U.S. flag.



*AP Photo/Chris Wedel*  
 Kendel Ehrlich, a former public defender and prosecutor, has been a key adviser for her husband. "It's almost like politics is second nature to her. She has it inside her," said Republican political consultant Jim Dorman. (Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post)

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"From where I stand, she is the ideal political spouse," said Jim Dornan, a Republican political consultant. "It's almost like politics is second nature to her. She has it inside her."

Behind the scenes, Kendel Ehrlich has been a key adviser who urged her husband to run for governor when legions told him he didn't have a chance. "The ultimate decision came down to just Bob and Kendel," the governor-elect said, "because nobody lives with the repercussions more than us."

On the campaign trail, she was notable for her quick wit, often poking good-natured fun at her husband, and her ability to convince other professional women that if her husband chose such a strong partner, he's no Neanderthal.

"We won the white women vote, and I'm going to give Kendel much of the credit for that marketing effort," communications director Paul E. Schurick said. "As we were being savagely attacked -- called a Nazi, a polluter, anti-children, anti-senior citizen -- we were able to go on the offensive with Kendel as an articulate spokesperson for Bob, saying: 'That's my husband they are talking about, and they've got it all wrong.'"

Now, preparing to step into her new job as first lady, she plays down her position as an adviser, perhaps mindful that even in the 21st century, some voters prefer political wives in traditional roles.

Her first priorities, she said, will be protecting the privacy of their toddler son, Drew, and "getting my family organized."

Eventually, she wants to find a way to help combat substance abuse, an underlying social problem in many of the criminal cases she handled as a public defender and prosecutor. "I'll be assisting in the bully pulpit," she said.

However she shapes her newest role, friends say, this much is certain: She'll make it fun.

"She is a great gal," Del. Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel) said. "There is nothing pretentious about Kendel. They'll be sitting in the Ram's Head on a Friday night having a beer with the troopers in the next booth."

Childhood friend Ann Hooper described her this way:

"She's always been someone who is extremely charismatic, extremely attractive to both men and women. We used to call her the mayor of Baltimore because it seemed there was nobody she didn't know.

"She's one of those people who, you walk in a room with her, and all of a sudden you become invisible. They just see Kendel and hear Kendel."

### **Ready for an Argument**

Maryland's new first lady, born Kendel Sibiski, has a no-holds-barred laugh.

"You've got to hear it to believe it," said longtime friend Susan Bancroft. "She'll look really pretty. She wants to make a nice impression. Then somebody will say something that tickles her -- and that's it. You never forget that big laugh."

She grew up in Lutherville in a middle-class family of tall blonds with larger-than-life personalities. She was an aggressive contender on the athletic field -- she co-captained a lacrosse team in high school -- and in school debates.

"She was like the star in social studies, always great at debating political issues," Hooper recalled. "She had me in tears one time in eighth grade. She was arguing pro-choice. I was pro-life. I really knew my stuff, but she just dominated."

In college, at the University of Delaware, she had more fun than she cares to remember. "The local taverns were part of college for me," Ehrlich said. "I was social."

After graduating from the University of Baltimore School of Law, Ehrlich became a public defender in Anne Arundel County and found trials a natural outlet for her competitive drive. "She was relentless in her determination," said former colleague Mike Grossfeld. "Her forte was probably arguing in front of a jury. She's very good at making people feel comfortable. Jurors liked and believed her."

### **The Man in the Mirror**

In November 1990, she went home to vote at her old elementary school. A legislator named Bob Ehrlich was there, shaking hands. A mutual friend introduced them.

Later, she spotted him working out at an Annapolis gym. He didn't notice her, but she watched him exercise. "I noticed that he kept checking himself out in the mirror," she joked. "I thought, boy, I really don't like that guy."

Eventually, the politician not only noticed her, he pursued her in a romance that he unselfconsciously described as "really hot."

She liked everything about him except his job. Once she realized that being a politician's girlfriend meant attending endless bull roasts on summer Saturday nights -- instead of heading for the beach -- she dumped him. "It was one of those nights we had been to three events," she said.

"The last one was a Republican event in the city [Baltimore], so there were 10 people and 100 balloons." Afterward, "I cried and said: I'm sorry, you are terrific, but I can't do this."

Before long, he showed up at her door with a list of top 10 reasons she should reconsider, including his observation that, whether she knew it or not, she was a political natural. They negotiated the terms of their rematch. "Two lawyers is not pretty," she said.

By Christmas 1992, they were engaged, and he was soon eyeing a seat in Congress. "He tells the story that we were watching C-SPAN and I said to him, 'Now, let me get this straight. If you win your seat and then you die, do I automatically get your seat?'" she recalled. "He said, not only did he sleep with one eye open after that, he was convinced I'd become this political animal."

They married in 1993, about two months before he declared his candidacy for the 2nd Congressional District seat. She moved to his below-ground bachelor condominium apartment, which she called "the Cave."

He left his law practice to campaign, and they lived off her modest public defender's salary. That was the fun part.

Winning was tougher on her, at least at first, she said. The byzantine machinations of life in Washington, where people define themselves by their jobs and everyone has an agenda, were a dark mystery to a woman accustomed to making and trusting lifelong friends.

They struggled to afford the Cave plus a place to sleep near Capitol Hill. "In the beginning, we didn't know how to figure it out," she said. "We got a real hole-in-the-wall apartment. Even Bob couldn't stand that, and he can stand a lot."

She became a prosecutor in Harford County in 1997, juggling that with the demands on a congressional spouse. Shifting her focus from her career to her husband's became easier once she gave birth to their son, Drew, although she hasn't ruled out some day running for a judgeship.

"I have adopted the line that women can have it all, but not all at the same time," said Ehrlich, who is on leave from a part-time job at Comcast Cable Communications.

### Campaigning Hard

The Ehrlichs have enjoyed an easy domesticity, friends say, sharing, among other things, a passion for sports. One afternoon before the election -- a rare last window of quiet before their lives changed once again -- Kendel drove Drew, now 3, to a driving range so he could practice whacking golf balls.

"His father likes [professional golfer] Phil Mickelson, so I taught him to say, 'Phil chokes on Sunday,'" she said. "Great. His father went to Congress, and I taught him to say, 'Phil chokes on Sunday.'"

She laughed at herself and went back on the campaign trail to help her husband capture the governorship.

When a key congressional vote on Iraq kept Bob Ehrlich from attending a packed disabilities forum with Democratic opponent Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Kendel stood in. Talking with reporters afterward, she challenged some claims the opposing camp had made about her husband.

Back in his office, Bob Ehrlich telephoned to debrief his wife and was clearly delighted with her toughness. "You said *'liar'?*" he teased her. "Good thinking, a nice neutral term. . . . Good, babe. Good job. I owe you."

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